Picturing local participation from the citizen's perspective The Eeklo Case.

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Last January we presented the results of the study into local citizen participation in Eeklo to the municipal executive committee and management team. Mayor, aldermen and civil servants confirmed the analysis of local participation in their town, as described in this study based on testimony from citizens. And they learned from the study - and thus in fact from the experiences of their own residents - that a lot of importance is attached to the town website, for example, and that it is frequently consulted. They also gained insight - to give another example - into the importance of the many informal contacts between the citizen and the municipality and the need to follow it up with a formal system for information exchange. They learned as well for example that it would be preferable not to stop the local police newspaper, in contrast to the intentions of the local police. Hence the researchers concerned argue that local analysis (preferably together with local players) should be used as a basis and preparation for reforming local participation. And higher authorities (on a regional, national or European level) need to support local authorities in their local analyses.

In this paper we report on the design of a research instrument to chart the situation regarding local participation, together with the local council. We have taken three steps in the design process. Firstly we searched the literature for a sound theoretical basis in order to gain a picture of local participation from the point of view of the citizen. Secondly we set about the data collection so that it is geared to the facilities of local councils (in Flanders). Thirdly we conducted a test in a small Flemish town, Eeklo. From all this we can draw a few conclusions that are relevant for the higher authorities on a Flemish or European level.

1. Measuring participation generates participation?

As part of the Flemish sustainable development policy, the Centre for Sustainable Development (CSD) and the Centre for Local Politics (CLP) of the University of Ghent (UGhent) have drawn up an instrument to study the situation regarding local policy participation in Flemish municipalities. The Sustainable Development Coordination Unit (SDCU) of the Staff Service of the Flemish Government wants to make this instrument available to local councils, who themselves want to study policy participation in their own municipality. In this way the Flemish Government will support the local councils in reforming local policy participation. This aim fits in with the conviction that better communication between the citizen and council can help bring about greater participation of citizens or organisations from civil society in a local sustainable development.

Right from the start of the study it was clear that, in studying local policy participation, we had to start with the needs of the individual citizen, whether or not organised in civil society. We argue that

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citizens attach importance to policy participation on the basis of their own need to participate.[2] This need relates to a range of different phenomena, covering participation in all aspects (work, home, education, leisure) of society (local or otherwise). The involvement of citizens in the local community can be seen in the desire to be informed about the government of this municipality, to wanting to participate in discussions about policy. A distinction is frequently made in the literature between social participation in the community versus participation in policy (for the administration of this community). In this study we focus on the component regarding policy participation. We expect that this study will result in an understanding of local participation, as seen from the position of the citizen. Finally, on the basis of this understanding we can make suggestions that should enable the local council to make communication with the citizen and civic society proceed more smoothly.

2. Approaching local participation on the basis of citizenship and involvement

2.1 Local citizenship

The debate on participation fits in with the wider debate on the crisis in representative democracy. This crisis can be seen in the declining participation in political parties and established local institutions (advisory bodies, hearings, enquiry procedures). Some authors, such as Kalk and De Rynck (2002), ask whether this disengagement is not related to a form of local parliamentary democracy being worn out. They see more benefit in involving politics in the initiatives of citizens and society. This fits in with the interactive decision-making model of Pröpper and Steenbeek (1999). It is a way of conducting policy in which a government involves citizens, social organisations, companies and/or other authorities in policy at the earliest possible stage in order to prepare, determine, implement and/or evaluate policy in open interaction and/or cooperation with them. Interactive policy creates the space to enable the citizen to participate in policy.

In order to study the reality of local participation, we used the concept of 'urban citizenship' (Denters, 2004). This argues that citizenship relates to the relationship of citizens with the specialised political-administrative apparatus of the municipality, in brief local policy. According to Denters, it is within these relationships that we must place citizen participation. He argues that the relationships contain two essential aspects, i.e.: (1) *civic-mindedness*, reflected in attitudes and competences, and (2) *citizen participation*, translated into behaviour or activities. According to Denters, the attitudes and competences of citizens (as elements of civic-mindedness) will largely determine the quality of urban citizen participation.

Based on the concept of urban citizenship, we have drawn up a working definition for this study into local policy participation in Flemish municipalities. Local citizen participation comprises all of the interactions between citizens and local policy, both individual and collective. Individual local citizen participation comprises all of the attitudes and behaviours of the citizen with respect to local policy. Collective citizen participation comprises all of the attitudes and behaviours of citizens in certain positions of civil society with respect to local policy. This definition is shown schematically in the diagram below.

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[2]   MAX-NEEF M., ELIZALDE A., HOPPENHAYN M., (1991); Human scale development: conception, application and further reflections, Apex Press, New York.
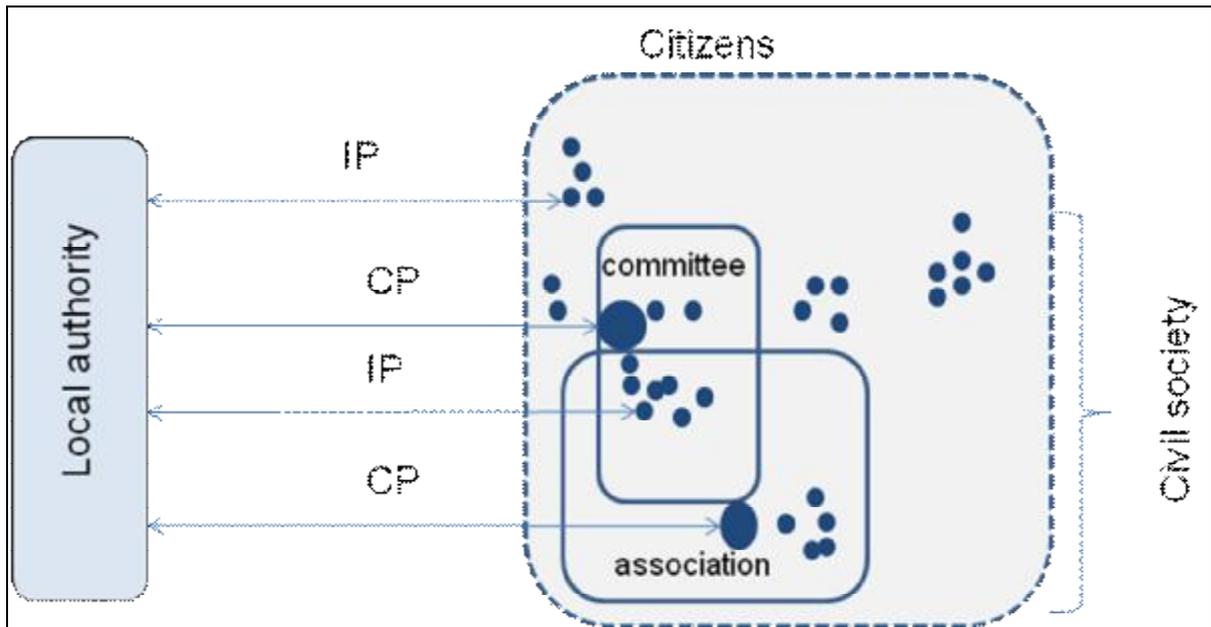
Diagram 1: schematic representation of local citizenship

The diagram illustrates how citizens can participate locally in two different ways. In the diagram the citizens are presented by dots. A first way (individual participation) to interact with the local authority is by maintaining direct contact with local policy (IP). This can involve the exchange of information (e.g. information distribution by the local authority, questions or comments by the citizen to the local authority), or by a certain form of participation in decision-making. In a second form of interaction, the local council enters into relationships with citizens who represent associations or committees: collective participation (CP). The council here is in a relationship with a group or a community that is generally represented by one or more key figures. All of the groups, associations and committees together are called civic society. The extent to which these groups have been formalised by articles of association or by adopting a legal form is of secondary importance.

In the framework of this study into local participation in Flemish municipalities, we are primarily interested in the groups that interact with the local authority, and have a special interest in local public decision-making. In this sense, this study is rather targeted at political citizen participation, as defined by Denters in his background study in 2004.

2.2 An instrument for local participation data…

Before developing an approach to study 'local citizenship', we did a search of the foreign literature. National and international comparative surveys into the political attitudes and behaviours of citizens (the *Nationaal kiezersonderzoek* (National Voters Study), the *Sociaal-Culturele verkenningen* (Sociocultural Surveys), the 'Citizen Survey', the 'Audit of Political Engagement', the Eurobarometers, the European Social Survey, etc) have a great many limitations when it comes to describing municipal citizenship (Dezeure, e.a., 2008). In the first place, these studies are predominantly targeted at the national level and are thus generally not representative on a local level. Moreover, they frequently only cover a few aspects of citizenship. Hence, this material is generally not very useable for answering questions on citizenship in the context of local communities.

In the Netherlands the search for data on local citizen participation often comes up against the problem of the limited availability of data. A few large cities (such as Maastricht, Eindhoven and

Amsterdam) themselves conduct research into citizenship and participation. In Rotterdam, the local information service set up a postal survey from which a perception monitor is produced. In 2007 a research module into participation was coupled to it (Rotterdammers on citizen participation 2007, COS).

The literature from the UK is interesting, because recently there has been a lot of movement in the area of participation, both in the practice of instrument development and in the study of local participation itself (Lowndes & Wilson, 2001, Margetts, 2002, Vancoppenolle & Brans, 3003, Coleman, 2004). Everything points to a centrally driven development of a set of measuring instruments, such as the 'democratic innovation index', 'participation index', 'CLEAR auditing tool', 'national indicators for local authorities and local authority partnerships'. From the first search these policy evaluation instruments appear to be situated in the *new public management*, and rather having a policy evaluation function. In addition, with its 'Citizen Survey', conducted in 2001, 2003 and 2005, the British government gauged a wide range of subjects relating to citizenship and participation.

In the foreign literature we do not find a ready-made answer to our question on the approach to measuring local citizenship. Hence we rather use the design of the town monitor (Block *et al*, 2004) as a basis, with which the quality of life and sustainability of Flemish towns are measured. The purpose of this research instrument is to provide an understanding of local participation for all players involved in the local political community, so that they can communicate with one another and learn from each other. This research instrument contains environmental characteristics that show the developments of local citizen involvement, and does not serve as an evaluation instrument for local information, communication and participation policy.
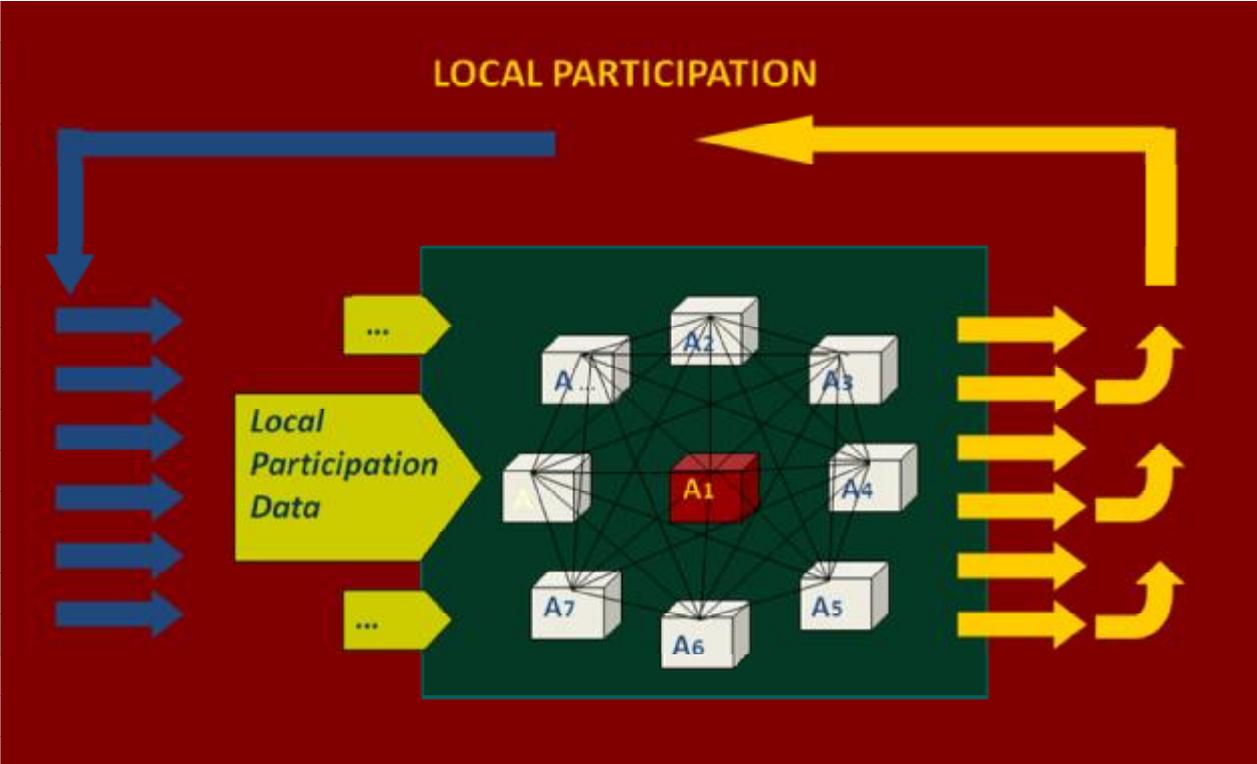

Diagram 2: Purpose and function of 'local participation data'

2.3 …with two sets of characteristics

The research instrument sheds light on local participation relating to civic-mindedness (attitude and competences) and participation (behaviours or activities), of both the individual citizen and those citizens from civil society who are involved in the local decision-making process. In practice, the attitude and behaviours of individuals will take on different forms to those of the representatives of organised civic society. On account of the distinction between individual and collective local participation, we decided to work with two sets of characteristics.

To further operationalise the concept of citizen participation, we adopted a needs approach, for which we drew inspiration from the 'human scale development' (Max-Neef, 1991). This needs approach also explains why people do not participate in policy (Brady, Verba and Schlozman, 1995) or why the so-called participation elite make a hobby out of it (Verlet and Reynaert, 2004, Stouthuysen, 1999). A citizen can have different needs to participate in the policy of the local community: from collecting information, to actively thinking about policy, and to helping in firm actions to implement policy. Depending on these needs, the citizen can gradually exhibit levels of civic-mindedness (attitude) or citizen participation (behaviour). Before these needs for information on and/or contact with the local council can arise, a number of preconditions first have to be satisfied, such as the presence of involvement or confidence.

Based on these findings on the needs of the citizen in relation to policy participation in the local community, we can determine the broad outlines of both individual and collective local citizen participation as follows:
* *Individual local citizen participation* relates to the following attitudes and behaviours of the citizen with respect to the local authority:
    o Involvement, pride and confidence as preconditions for participation
    o Information requirements, access and search
    o Extent and quality of the contacts with the local authority
    o Active involvement in the local community and policy
* *Collective local citizen participation* relates to the following attitudes and behaviours of civic society with respect to local policy:
    o Confidence in, means of checking (access to information), support by and attitude towards the local authority as a precondition for local participation
    o Extent and quality of the contacts with the local authority
    o Quality of the collaboration with the local authority

2.3.1 Characteristics for individual participation

We have developed 15 characteristics for individual participation and clustered them around four levels of participation: the *preconditions for participation*, *information*, *contact with the local authority*, and finally *active participation (getting to it)*. Thus a limited number of characteristics crystallise the concept of individual local citizen participation.

Preconditions for participation		
	1	Pride in the town and neighbourhood
	2	Involvement with the local community
	3	Confidence in the local authority
Information		
	4	Experience with the distribution of information on the town
	5	Need for information on the town
	6	Quality of the information on the municipality, neighbourhood and street
	7	Search for information
Contact with the local authority		
	8	Experience with contributing to the town or neighbourhood
	9	Need to contribute to the town or neighbourhood
	10	Quality of the contact with the local authority
	11	Preparedness for more active participation
	12	Assessment of the usefulness and effectiveness of the say of the citizen
Active participation (getting to it)		
	13	Active involvement in the town or neighbourhood
	14	Preparedness to be actively involved in the town, neighbourhood or street
	15	Engagement in the local community

Table 1: List of characteristics of individual participation

2.3.2 *Characteristics of collective participation*

In addition to the individual citizen, we also identify the *civil society*. We have developed 7 characteristics and clustered them around two levels of participation: the *preconditions for participation* and *contact with the local authority.* In addition to this limited set of characteristics, the quality of the collaboration with the local authority is investigated through 10 propositions.[3]

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[3] The method of propositions was previously used for the *network indicators* of the town monitor for livable and sustainable Flemish towns (Block e.a., 2004).

Preconditions for participation		
	1	Access to information
	2	Confidence in the local authority
	3	Means of checking the local authority
	4	Support of civil society by the local authority
Contact with the local authority		
	5	Nature of the relationship with the local authority
	6	Assessment of the interest of the local authority in the subject of groups.
	7	Assessment of the effectiveness of participation
Quality of the collaboration		
	8	Extent of consultation in the collaboration
	9	Involvement of players in the collaboration
	10	Information exchange in collaboration
	11	Determining priorities together in collaboration
	12	Setting firm actions in collaboration
	13	Distribution of work in collaboration
	14	Conflict-resolving capacity of the collaboration
	15	Coordination in the collaboration
	16	Evaluation of the results of the collaboration
	17	Communication of the results achieved from the collaboration

Table 2: List of characteristics of collective participation

3. Data collection

3.1 In search of representative data

As part of this study we checked a lot of existing data sources[4] for their usability to see whether they could be used here, so that we would not need to do a primary data collection ourselves. However, we had to conclude that we could not use the existing data sources to provide representative data for the study into local participation. We also rejected the alternative, i.e. setting up a representative survey per town or per municipality, as an unfeasible option in view of the facilities of the Flemish local councils. We thus ended up with the option to chart local citizenship using qualitative research methods.

We examined whether qualitative research could be a valuable alternative. According to the qualitative research approach, valid scientific knowledge can be produced with a limited number of

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[4]   For various reasons, most sources turned out not to be suitable for adding substance to the indicators of a measuring instrument for local participation. We refer in this respect to the local statistics of the the Flemish Government, the city monitor, the ten year Socioeconomic Survey, the *Survey of sociocultural shifts in Flanders (SVC),* done annually by the Study Department of the Flemish Government of the Ministry of the Flemish Government, or the *International Social Survey Programme* (ISSP), an international programme that develops different survey modules that have been applied in Flanders.

in-depth interviews, certainly for use by local councils (and other players) who are sufficiently aware of the context in which the local participation in a certain municipality is situated. In relation to this paper, we argue that this qualitative research approach can yield sufficiently credible insights for local councils who want to reform their own citizen participation. We are aware that we are distancing ourselves from the statistical representativeness of the collected data. We are also distancing ourselves from terms such as 'indicator', 'barometer' or 'monitor' to avoid further confusion. In this paper we thus speak consistently of interview guides over various aspects or characteristics of local participation.

3.2 The design of interview guides

Based on the characteristics of local citizen participation, we developed two interview guides for qualitative data collection on local participation in Flemish municipalities on the basis of semi-structured interviews. To develop open questions for the interview guides, we drew inspiration from survey questions from research into citizen participation. We drew most inspiration from the following questionnaires[5]:

- *Study of local participation in Bruges, Ghent and Antwerp*[6], by the Centre for Local Policy of the University of Ghent (prof. Reynaert).
- *The Eurobarometer* of Eurostat, European Union.
- *Rotterdammers on citizen participation 2007* is a module added to the Omnibus Survey 2007 of Rotterdam, and was done by the Research and Statistics Centre of Rotterdam,
- The *citizenship survey* (UK) gauges a wide range of subjects relating to citizenship and participation, such as voluntary work, 'charitable giving', confidence and the feeling of being able to exert influence, etc.

4. Test in Eeklo

The Eeklo[7] town council was prepared to participate in the study. This was done after the research project was explained to the local council. In this explanation attention was paid to the expected results of the research into a number of characteristics of local participation.

4.1 Individual participation

4.1.1. Interview guide

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5   In addition the researchers also looked at the Liveability Monitor Ghent, 2003; HIVA, Liveability of the district, KULeuven, 1999; Ruston & Akinrodove, Social Capital Question Bank, British National Statistics, 2002; Research & Statistics Department, The state of the city of Amsterdam, Amsterdam Municipality, 2003; Research & Information Department, Citizen Survey Roosendaal, Roosendaal Municipality, 2001,

6   The CLP investigated whether something such as a participation elite also existed in Antwerp, Ghent and Bruges. This was based on the hypothesis that with the introduction of participation, no other categories of people in the field of politics are brought in other than those who had entered the scene much earlier through social or political participation. Researcher Dries Verlet only looks for active forms of political involvement. They are voluntary activities, so that compulsory activities (e.g. attendance requirement for elections) are left out of consideration.

7   Eeklo is a small Flemish town of around 20,000 residents. This town is located between Ghent and Bruges, in a rural area, the Meetjesland, close to the Dutch border with Zeeland.

For this interview guide we chose the approach of the semi-structured interview. We used a question protocol for this. It is a strong framework of a few core questions given to the interviewer. The questions are written out in full. Alongside the main questions there are a number of additional questions that can be considered under each main question, depending on the answer of the respondent. The instructions to the interviewer are that if the respondent starts on them spontaneously, he/she will or will not ask some questions. The respondent is also given enough space to tell his own story. The interviewer starts with roughly the same question in the same words for everybody.

The interview guide for individual participation consists of six parts, beside the introduction:
1. *Opening of the interview.* We start the interview by letting the respondents talk about their familiarity with the town and neighbourhood, their pride in the town, other subjects in which the respondent shows an interest, interest in local policy, etc. Some of the questions here are intended to bring out information to help the interview proceed more smoothly, not for incorporation into indicators.
2. *Questions on information.* The interview is guided slowly to the heart of the matter. They are questions that involve the respondents more in the subject by gauging their personal experiences with the subject. They involve actual behaviour and experiences. The interview is about the extent of information, the satisfaction with the information, etc.
3. *Questions on contact with the authority.* The interview here is about the experiences of the respondent with his contacts with the local authority, his attitude regarding participation, etc.
4. *Questions on active participation.* The questions revolve around the active involvement of the citizen: does he actively devote himself to the town and neighbourhood, and why or why not...
5. *Completing the interview with a few closing questions.* We want to gain an understanding of the weight attached to each of the subjects dealt with. The respondent is also given the opportunity to talk about things that he/she thinks were inadequately dealt with. We close with a few sociodemographic questions.
6. *Questions for the interviewer.* the interviewer is given the opportunity to describe the interview conditions, to describe the abilities of the respondent, etc. This is done after the interview, in the absence of the respondent.

4.1.2 Determination of target groups (population and samples)

The advantage of the qualitative research approach is that we can measure local citizen participation for different target groups. After consultation with the steering committee, we decided on six target groups per age category: people in their twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, sixties and seventies. This is a relevant selection criterion for the phenomenon of citizenship under study, because we argue that citizen involvement varies with age.

The population of each of the six target groups formed the basis on which we drew the samples. For each target group - however big the population - the Population Department drew three samples of 20 to 50 units, selected at random from the population. We determined the size of the sample on the basis of the expected response. The response level is highly dependent on the nature of the target group. On the basis of these samples we wanted an effective response of around ten interviews per target group. Only for people in their thirties were two random samples needed.

4.1.3 Training of the interviewers

The town of Eeklo organised a training session together with the researchers of the CDO-CLP. The internal coordinator (the information and communication officer) chaired the meeting and explained the importance of the study. It pointed out the importance of the assistance of the interviewers from various municipal services and volunteers.

In these training sessions the researchers prepared the participants for conducting interviews, according to the rules of qualitative research. During the training we paid attention to:

- The background and objective of the study.
- Presentation of the target groups to be interviewed.
- Presentation of the interview guide with the necessary attention to the main subjects relating to local citizen participation.
- The explanation of the interview guide as a specific approach of the qualitative research methodology.
- The purpose of the open questions and the approach of the open questions with additional questions, clarifying questions, summarising interruptions, repeating questions in relation to adjustments, etc.
- The attitude of the interviewer, as a participant in the interview, who is interested in the experiences of the respondents, and is open to them and respectfully accepts what the respondent says.
- The approach of the interview report.
- The practical organisation of the interviews (timing for the preparation and making contact, and conducting the interviews and dealing with the reports).
- Drawing the attention of the interviewers to the focus of the interview, i.e. the most relevant experiences of the respondent. The requirement is that the researchers respectfully deal with the experiences, perception, problems, expectations, needs and desires of the respondents concerned.
- Finally, the questions in the interview guide were systematically gone through using role playing techniques.

4.1.4 Conducting and analysing interviews

Finally seven civil servants of Eeklo set to work as interviewers. Six volunteers were also brought in from the senior citizen workgroup of the town department concerned. Some had experience of conducting interviews in relation to scientific research.

The interviewers conducted between two and six interviews. This number was seen as the absolute maximum for the volunteers and civil servants who took on this assignment alongside their regular work. Indeed, these interviews were often done after office hours. Finally 53 of the 60 specified interviews were completed. The interviews themselves proceeded quite smoothly. They generally lasted half an hour to one hour. The questions were understandable enough, and the interview guide was followed. The completed forms with the reports of the interviews were sent to the researchers of the CDO-CLP.

In the analysis we only used qualitative methods, examining whether the material collected from the interviews on individual participation fitted in with the main elements of theory. This analysis results in six pictures of local citizen participation in just as many target groups in the Eeklo population. Finally we draw a few conclusions about all target groups.

4.2 Collective participation

4.2.1 Second interview guide with open questions

The interview guide for collective participation proceeds partially in parallel with the interview guide for individual participation, and also consists of six parts, besides the introduction:

1. *Opening the interview*: the respondent describes the various associations he/she belongs to, the members, the contacts with other associations, the activities, the contacts with the local authority, etc.
2. *Preconditions for participation*: the interview deals with the relationship of trust with the local authority, how much they get to see decisions and the means for checking up on the local authority, etc.
3. *Questions on contact with the authority*: this concerns the relationship between civil society and the local authority, the say of civil society, etc.
4. *Propositions on the quality of the collaboration*: the quality of the collaboration between the local authority and civic society is charted through around 10 propositions, for example on the quality of consultations, distribution of labour, evaluation, communication, etc.
5. *Completing the interview with a few closing questions*
6. *Questions for the interviewer*

4.2.2 Selection of 12 key people

In order to outline the relationship between the local authority and civil society in Eeklo, we chose to work with privileged witnesses, people who are more or less 'central' in Eeklo civil society. They are people who can act as a mouthpiece for a group of citizens who have joined together in a committee or association. By placing these people centrally in the data collection, we can obtain a good picture of the group that they represent and the interactions of this group with the local authority.

We note that the selection of key people meets the 'wider' definition of civil society: all groups of citizens come into consideration, thus not just those who are *one of the family* of the local authority (for example, member associations of town advisory bodies), but also temporary action committees that may be for or against a local plan.

The key persons were selected in consultation with the steering committee. A long list was first drawn up, that was then reduced to a shortlist in discussion with the research group. In this way, the selection was done on the basis of the knowledge of civil servants which often come into contact with civil society, through those key persons.

4.2.2 Interviews and analysis

Finally we conducted around 12 semi-structured interviews. They were all face-to-face interviews conducted in a familiar environment (generally at the home of the respondent). An interview lasted one to two hours, sometimes rather longer. We used an open questionnaire, an interview guide to structure the interview and ensure that all necessary subjects were covered. Sometimes, using additional questions it was possible to target a few subjects or experiences for each respondent depending on the interview. Each interview was recorded (audio), and then an extensive report was produced of it, containing many illustrative quotes. The relevant elements from the interview were

then linked to the various questions of the interview guide, in order to make the link to the indicators in the further processing.

Finally we should note that the description of the relationship of civil society with local authority is based on information from the one partner in the relationship. In spite of the possibility of one respondent *spicing up* his statements, or another holding back, the researchers believe that this gives a reasonably reliable picture of the relationship - or rather a picture of how the relationship is perceived by the representatives of civil society.

5. Conclusion

Meanwhile, we have explained the method and results in Eeklo and in Brussels. Mayor, aldermen and senior civil servants in Eeklo identified with the results of the study. They learned from the study and thus from their own residents. For example, they understood that residents attach a great deal of importance to the town website and consult it frequently. They got to know that the many informal contacts between the citizen and council are not systematically followed up. They learned that many residents are disappointed about the stoppage of the local police newspaper. The fact of recognising the description of the situation regarding citizen participation in their town in broad terms also makes them open to suggestions and learning a few things. Immediately after the presentation, the mayor announced that the council would work on the municipal website, formalise the information flow, and give the police feedback on the fact that many citizens are not happy about the local police newspaper no longer being produced. Civil servants from the various Flemish public services responded positively to the findings of the study. They recognised the qualitative research approach as providing added value. This approach also illustrates that fact that local participation is context related. And that was highly appreciated.

The reactions of the steering committee, and the Flemish and municipal players concerned, clearly show that this research has laid the basis for analysing the situation regarding local participation. The most important basic elements are the operationalisation of 'local citizenship' on the basis of the needs of citizens and civil society. As a result this approach to local participation fits in with a sustainability strategy that is also based on the needs of this generation (for information, a say and participation). The translation of the concept of 'local citizenship' into a dual set of characteristics of local participation is a basic element of this local study into citizen participation. Likewise the two interview guides. They are useful alternatives to a monitoring system that operates with quantitative data. Although they do not yield any representative figures, they produce credible knowledge of and insights into local participation, which go beyond the quantitative reflection of reality and are geared to the facilities of a local authority. They are questionnaires of an open nature, which, in contrast to the closed questions of quantitative research methods, enable the researchers to collect testimony from citizens and go deeper into local subjects, thereby sometimes leading to unexpected observations.

It goes without saying that we suggest municipality to analyse local participation before reforming it. Using this analytical instrument, councils can determine where they need to change priorities. If, for example, the preconditions for citizen participation are not in place, the council must take initiatives to foster the pride or involvement of citizens. And we will ask higher authorities to support studies of local citizenship by local authorities. For them it comes down to working with local authorities as equal partners in order to reform local citizenship and local participation.

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