

UNRAVELING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT BY STUDYING MUNICIPAL PRACTICES

Vinitha M. Siebers, Gerda M. van Dijk and Rob van Eijbergen

ABSTRACT

Citizen engagement can take various forms and is receiving a great deal of interest, especially in municipalities, which are embracing citizen engagement and searching for ways to integrate it in their day to day work. In theory development, the concept of citizen engagement is captured with various terms covering numerous aspects. This leads to inconsistency and ambiguity and can lead to unproductive debates among those who organize it. Empirical research on how municipalities develop citizen engagement is still limited. This article aims at a deeper understanding of the phenomenon by exploring dominant patterns in the way municipalities organize citizen engagement, the role of those involved and practices that emerge. This article builds on empirical research in 4 Dutch municipalities, 1 Danish municipality and 1 South African municipality. It appears that in practice, citizen engagement comes with a complex dynamic. Organizing citizen engagement affects the entire municipality and can be seen as an intervention in the municipal organization and those involved.

Keywords - citizen engagement, municipalities, local practices.

INTRODUCTION

Citizen engagement is a much-discussed topic in democratic countries (English 2011; Irvin and Stansbury 2004; McLaverty 2017). It has become a buzzword in governmental spheres and is advocated as a way to increase effective decision-making and addressing complex challenges (Gidey 2017; King, Felty and Susel 1998; Nylen 2002; Irvin and Stansbury 2004). As Roberts (2004) suggests, the trend of citizen engagement will grow “as democratic societies become more decentralized, interdependent, networked, linked by new information technology, and challenged by ‘wicked problems’.” (p. 315).

Governments realize that they cannot create value and manage complexity in isolation (Bryson et al. 2014; Denhardt and Denhardt 2011; Moore 1995; Osborne 2006; Osborne 2010; Torfing et al. 2016; Stoker 2006). They need the resources, knowledge and ideas in civil society and thus need to be more responsive to citizens and the environment in

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which they operate. In doing so, they proclaim a different role for citizens. Citizens move beyond the role of voter or client and become co-creators who actively engage (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014; Newman et al. 2004; Michels and De Graaf 2010; Van der Steen 2016; Verhoeven and Tonkens 2018). Hence, governments advocate more interaction and collaboration with citizens, like a dialogue, co-creation or co-production (Bryson et al. 2014; Rose 2002; Torfing et al. 2016; Voorberg et al. 2015).

Citizen engagement plays a role particularly at the local level in municipalities, being closest to civil society (Graham and Philips 1998; Nabatchi and Amsler 2014). Municipalities actively invite citizens to participate, generate input or find creative solutions for problems they face (Gaventa 2002; Nabatchi and Amsler 2014, Newman et al. 2004; Rowe and Frewer 2000; Torfing et al. 2016). In doing so, municipalities aim to reap the benefits of citizen engagement such as enhancement of democracy, utilization of societal resources, improvement of social cohesion, safety or livability of communities, enhancement of public decision-making, and/or better acceptance of decisions (Held 1987; Mostert 2003; Irvin and Stansbury 2004; King et al. 1998; Lee 2014; Nylen 2002). In this article citizen engagement is defined as a process in which active involvement of the public takes place and citizens are involved in tasks and services of the local government (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014; Siebers 2020). However, what do we know about citizen engagement and the formal and informal rules that are necessary to organize citizen engagement as municipality (Cooper and Menzel 2013).

This article aims at a deeper understanding of citizen engagement by exploring patterns in the way municipalities organize citizen engagement, the role of those involved and practices that emerge. In this article we first address the concept of citizen engagement from various perspectives. Then we build on empirical studies in 4 Dutch municipalities, 1 Danish municipality and 1 South African municipality on citizen engagement practices. Comparative insights from already published papers are given to identify similarities and differences with regards to the mentioned research topics. Finally, in the discussion we reflect on recurring patterns in practicing citizen engagement and possible implications for practice and theory development.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT?

The concept of citizen engagement is captured with a variety of terms covering numerous aspects (Adler and Goggin 2005; Nabatchi and Amsler 2014; Rowe and Frewer 2000). Examples are public participation, public engagement, stakeholder involvement, co-creation, co-production, political participation, civic engagement, deliberative democracy, or participatory democracy (Arnstein 1969; Carpini et al. 2004; Creighton 2005; Nabatchi and Amsler 2014; Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015; Rowe and Frewer 2000).

A distinction can be made in terms referring to the behavior of the citizens by emphasizing ‘who’ is involved. For example, the public in public participation, which implies the general population of a certain area, the stakeholders in stakeholder involvement as those with an interest in governmental issues, the citizens in co-creation as problem solvers or expert stakeholders for complex issues or the citizens in political participation as eligible voters or activists.

Other terms refer to the process of citizen engagement and emphasize the level of interaction between the relevant organization and the citizens. For example engagement, which mainly focuses on bringing individuals together in order to tackle issues, or deliberative or participatory democracy, which implies a specific “mode of communication during citizen engagement” (Nabatchi and Amsler, 2014, p. 65), or co-production in which citizens actively engage by jointly raising resources to achieve better outcomes (Creighton 2005; Van Dijk and Van Loon 2019; Loeffler and Bovaird 2016; Nabatchi and Amsler 2014; Sørensen and Torfing 2018).

There is a plethora of academic writing on citizen engagement from various perspectives (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014). Firstly, there are studies that focus on the importance of citizen engagement by addressing reasons to initiate it. These studies reveal that societal developments such as globalization, individualization, and complexity of the environment are frequently an impulse to set up citizen engagement (Andrew and Goldsmith 1998; Fischer 2000; Gaventa 2002; Fung 2007).

Secondly, there are studies that focus on the effects of citizen engagement by mentioning advantages of it. Irvin and Stansbury (2004) show that citizen engagement is often organized to exploit its advantages as stated before, such as improving social cohesion, safety or livability of communities. This is confirmed by other studies revealing that citizen engagement is often used as a tool to manage the complex problems that municipalities face such as budget cuts and/or trust issues (Cooper, Bryer and Meek 2006; Gaventa and Barrett 2010; King et al. 1998).

Thirdly, there are studies revealing criteria contributing to citizen engagement by evaluating various forms of engagement, like those of Callahan (2007) and Rowe and Frewer (2000) which show that representation of participants, transparency, amount of influence of participants, and availability of resources facilitate citizen engagement.

Fourthly, there are studies focusing on the features of citizens in citizen engagement itself. These studies demonstrate that often Caucasian, middle-aged, male and highly educated citizens are the ones who engage. Furthermore, these studies reveal that the amount of influence that citizens have during citizen engagement is limited. Often the role of citizens is limited to information provider or deliverer of input when engaged in governmental decisions (Hurenkamp et al. 2006; Michels and De Graaf 2010; Tonkens and Verhoeven 2018).

Fifthly, studies exploring working processes of citizen engagement attempting to reveal guidelines that support local governments in the organization of effective citizen engagement. It appears that the context and setting, municipal size, political culture, motivation of those who engage, and features related to the design process such as choice of methods and objectives are important in organizing citizen engagement (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014). The studies of Bryson et al. (2013) and Fung (2006) demonstrate that a clear understanding of the problem, outcomes, goals, analysis of the stakeholders involved, establishment of legitimacy of the process, inclusiveness of the process, effective leadership, and adequate resources, communication, rules, and structures are guidelines for organizing citizen engagement. Various studies reveal conditions for success or lack of suc-

cess of organizing citizen engagement being the application of the right institutional designs, facilitative leadership or highly motivated employees (Brandsen et al. 2018; Drakiewicz et al. 2015; Loeffler and Bovaird 2018; Sørensen and Torfing 2018).

These five research perspectives on citizen engagement show that much is already known about the phenomenon and at the same time illustrate that citizen engagement is an umbrella term, meaning that different terms are used for the same phenomenon but all can come under that heading also indicated by Nabatchi and Amsler (2014). In addition, there are also disadvantages to citizen engagement. It is suggested that citizen engagement can be time-consuming. Effective citizen engagement requires capacity and staff that contains the knowledge and skills to implement citizen engagement properly (Lawrence and Deagen 2001; Irvin and Stansbury 2004). It can slow down decision-making processes or lead to incorrect decision-making. For example, it might be that only those who have the time and resources participate or those who are strongly influenced by a decision engage. This can result in misrepresentation of the community and result in poor decision making (Echeverria 2001; Smith and McDonough 2001). Moreover, it can lead to higher expenses and, if done poorly, citizen engagement can lead to negative outcomes such as less trust (Gaventa and Barrett 2012; Lowndes et al. 2001; Siebers et al. 2019). This leads to a number of challenges in practicing citizen engagement.

The first challenge is that the process and design of citizen engagement varies within local governments. Different classifications and definitions are used for citizen engagement, which makes it difficult to put the pieces together. It is suggested that these differences lead to inconsistency and ambiguity about the concept and can lead to debates among those who organize it and hinders them in determining how and when citizen engagement works (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014; Roberts 2004).

A second challenge that builds on the first one is that the thinking about citizen engagement is fragmented. This reinforces the debates about citizen engagement (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014). A third challenge is how to measure outcomes and effectiveness of citizen engagement. Citizen engagement is often portrayed as a solution for complex problems, while empirical evidence for this assumption is lacking. Part of the problem is the absence of a clear framework to compare different forms of citizen engagement (Fung 2006; Irvin and Stansbury 2004; Rowe and Frewer 2000). Moreover, as a fourth challenge, there are only a few studies on how citizen engagement is organized from a municipal perspective (Lowndes et al. 2001). Much of the research reported is dominated by quantitative methods like survey research and scarcely involves deeper qualitative studies or meta-analyses across these studies. Although these studies give valuable information on citizen engagement and the application of it, there is still little knowledge about how the process and context of citizen engagement changes or influences the set up of citizen engagement by local officials (Callahan 2007; Nabatchi and Amsler 2014; Roberts 2004).

These challenges make it difficult to connect the theoretical knowledge to the existing practices and to fill the gaps to improve the practice of citizen engagement (Nabatchi and Amsler 2014). There is a need for more insight in the process of organizing and the experiences of local actors involved (Callahan 2007; Carpini et al. 2004; Fung 2006; Fung 2015; Lowndes et al. 2001; Nabatchi and Amsler 2014; Roberts 2004; Rowe and Frewer 2000).

WORKING PRACTICES OF MUNICIPALITIES: EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

This article concentrates on the working practices of municipalities and the different municipal actors¹ that are involved in citizen engagement: the municipal council², the executive board of mayor and aldermen, the bureaucracy³ and the civil society. We follow the definition of citizen engagement as “a process in which active involvement of the public in a public decision takes place and citizens are involved in tasks and services of the local government” (Ekman and Amnå 2012; Elelman and Feldman 2018; Nabatchi and Amsler 2014; Siebers 2020). This definition includes also concepts like co-production or co-creation (cf. Loeffler and Bovaird 2016; Sørensen and Torfing 2018).

This article builds on the findings of empirical research on the citizen engagement practices in 4 Dutch municipalities (Siebers 2019; Siebers 2020), 1 Danish municipality (Siebers and Torfing 2018) and 1 South African municipality (Siebers 2018). These empirical studies have all in common that they are based on a qualitative approach (in this case: case studies). The reason for this approach is that the purpose of the studies was to gain insight into the day-to-day practices of citizen engagement in municipalities and also to shed light on the experiences of the main actors that organize it. As such, the focus laid on mapping citizen engagement on municipal level. This also means that in all studies the same actors are used on the basis of the same inquiry. During the case studies semi-structured interviews were performed addressing in each study specific aspects of citizen engagement considered important (Cooper et al. 2006; Siebers and Torfing 2018). These aspects were the why, how, what and whom of citizen engagement. Examples of questions are: Which reasons led to organizing citizen engagement (why), what activities are used in your municipality to organize citizen engagement (how and what), or what impact does citizen engagement have on your role or the role of other relevant actors (whom)? Subsequently, the data was coded via Atlas.ti and analyzed to reveal similarities and differences (Strauss and Corbin 2014; Yin 2009). In addition, in all studies relevant documents that are found on websites or provided by the relevant actor were used. A limitation is that the qualitative nature of the studies implies that the results cannot be generalized to other municipalities.

As mentioned earlier, the four articles are based on a qualitative approach. More specifically, case studies are used to explore citizen engagement as a phenomenon in depth in its own context. The case studies help us to gain insight into the way different municipalities organize citizen engagement by focusing on the experiences of the involved actors being municipal council, executive board of mayor and aldermen, bureaucracy and civil society. As such the case studies approach is seen as suitable for a deeper understanding of citizen engagement and the way municipalities organize it by investigating patterns (Baxter and Jack 2008; Dubois and Gadde 2002; Eisenhardt 1989; Yin 2009). The studies were performed over a period of three years: November 2015 to November 2018. The municipalities studied had the following common features. Firstly, the municipalities are defined as mid-sized (between 25.000 – 100.00 inhabitants) or large (100.00+ inhabitants). Secondly, all municipalities are active in citizen engagement and look for on-going attempts to improve this: and thirdly, the municipalities vary in strategies to organize citizen engagement. Although the chosen municipalities are located in different countries

and differ on terrains such as the state of democracy, the functioning of government and the political culture, the countries share vigor on the terrain of citizen engagement (Democracy Index 2017). More specifically, these countries are known for their increased attempts to improve deliberative and participative components in their government throughout the years (Varieties of Democracy 2018a and b). Furthermore, it is important to mention that the municipalities in the Netherlands are part of contract research in which the examined municipalities commissioned the authors to investigate the implementation of citizen engagement. For the selection of the Danish and South African municipality, the author was further advised by two scientists who have been studying citizen engagement for years - Prof. Dr. Jacob Torfing and Prof. Dr. Erwin Schwella. From this perspective, the empirical studies contain an interesting variation to elaborate on and explore dominant patterns on how municipalities organize citizen engagement.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDIES: SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The studies by Siebers (2020, 2019, 2018) and Siebers and Torfing (2018) demonstrate that the municipalities studied, define and practice citizen engagement in their own specific way. When looking closer, the following recurring patterns can be distinguished:

Pattern 1 motivation for citizen engagement

The municipalities studied have various motivations, emphasizing different areas. Motivations mentioned to initiate citizen engagement, are to manage the societal problems and changing context in which the municipalities operate such as to deal with individualization, decentralization, cut downs or different demands of the civil society (Siebers 2019, p. 133). Another motivation is to utilize the knowledge and expertise of the civil society. It is suggested that municipalities “build up on the same motivation in the sense that they want to find a solution for the problem at hand” (p. 197). More specifically is suggested that the “municipality could not alone solve the problem without the knowledge and wisdom of the civil society” (Siebers and Torfing 2018, p. 196). Furthermore, municipalities organize citizen engagement to strengthen the relation between the community and municipality by giving citizens opportunities to express their needs (Siebers 2018, p. 237). An interesting observation was that besides different motivations among municipalities, there were also discernible differences in motivation among council members, board members and civil servants. This was demonstrated in three cases (Siebers 2019).

It appears that when municipal actors have a clear shared motivation this leads to a shared approach to organize citizen engagement. When municipal actors do not have a clear shared motivation for citizen engagement, there is also no shared approach for organizing it. Different ideas arise and municipal actors organize and apply citizen engagement in their own way leading to different manifestations of it. Therefore, it can be concluded that it is important to identify and cultivate a shared motivation for organizing citizen engagement within municipalities. For example, municipalities that organize citizen engagement with a motivation focused on utilizing expertise and knowledge perceive participation as an opportunity to develop innovation in collaboration with the community. The organization of citizen engagement emphasizes this by choosing forms that realize this, such as

a dialogue session or a co-creation process. Municipalities that organize citizen engagement aiming at managing societal problems organize citizen engagement by accentuating the problem or issue and try to create new solutions with the community. At the same time, when actors of the municipality differ in their motivation for citizen engagement, there is also no clarity about its organization. Different ideas emerge and the municipality searches for its own way to organize citizen engagement.

Pattern 2 working methods

The studies show that in all cases the municipalities apply a range of working methods to establish citizen engagement. Citizen engagement does not exist in a single form and there is not one dominant method. Siebers (2019) mentions methods like dialogue, interactive decision-making, information meetings, voting, advisory councils lunches with the mayor, consultation hours, neighborhood focused working (p. 136). Siebers and Torfing (2018, p. 198-199) suggest that methods like meetings, workshops, games and guided tours, dialogue, or branding campaigns are applied. Whereas Siebers (2018) show that meetings between community and municipality, dialogue or discussion sessions are central (p. 238). All these working methods for citizen engagement have a strong focus on exchanging views and ideas with civil society. However, it is interesting to observe that the methods mentioned are predominantly positioned at the middle level of the so-called participation ladder of Arnstein (1969). This position is characterized as informing and consulting. Only in a few cases the methods mentioned, were positioned at the higher level for example dialogues. This level is characterized by partnership: mobilizing citizens to develop shared solutions by taking the various perspectives into account (Van Dijk & Van Loon, 2019). Nevertheless, the methods share a common denominator. The working methods facilitate an interactive governance process, in which civil society exchanges views and ideas (Siebers 2019, p. 136; Siebers 2018, p. 238; Siebers and Torfing, 2018, p. 198-199).

Next to these working methods a number of municipalities introduced new institutional arenas in order to guide and direct the above-mentioned activities by focusing on the process of it (Siebers and Torfing 2018; Siebers 2019). These arenas offer a space in which municipal officials can work together by, for example, jointly defining problems, jointly developing working methods or organizing citizen engagement in a coordinated and structured way (Torfing et al. 2016, p. 805). The attempt of municipalities to govern the process of citizen engagement can be seen as meta-working methods. More specifically it can be seen as a structure that helps to govern the process of citizen engagement. Examples are: a committee of irregularities, an informal advisory committee or a third party. As such, it is important to ensure both applicable working methods, as well as developing an environment which facilitates these methods.

Pattern 3 Organizational culture

The working methods emerging are rooted in the organizational culture of a municipality. It is shown that the way municipalities organize citizen engagement is, reflected in the existing culture in the bureaucracy of that municipality (Siebers 2020). A bureaucracy with a dominant hierarchical culture characterized by an internal focus, formal structures

and procedures and a need for stability (Cameron and Quinn 2006), the desire prevails to establish clear procedures, structures and directions for citizen engagement (Siebers 2020, p. 168). In such case the motivation for participation focuses particularly on solving societal problems and the methods focus on exchanging views and ideas (Siebers 2019).

A bureaucracy characterized by a dominant family culture with features like shared values, an internal orientation and attention for employees or an adhocracy culture with features like creativity, flexibility and an external orientation to the society (Cameron and Quinn 2006), is also more inclined to organize citizen engagement in line with these characteristics (Siebers 2020, p. 170-171). In that case, the organization of citizen engagement corresponds to a combination of characteristics that are found in a family culture such as a focus on values and an internal orientation to the municipality by creating a shared view on citizen engagement among municipal actors as well as an adhocracy culture through a focus on innovation, creativity and an external orientation to the civil society, respectively (Siebers 2020, p. 170-171). The municipality adopts a role that fits with this: a motivation that emphasizes the utilization of knowledge and expertise and processes of co-creation (Siebers 2019; Siebers 2020).

Pattern 4 actors involved

Citizen engagement requires specific behavior and attitudes of the actors (municipal council, board of mayor and aldermen, bureaucracy and civil society) (cf. Siebers 2019, p. 136; Siebers 2018, p. 237). For example, some municipalities indicate that facilitative, pro-active, innovative or value driven behaviors and attitudes are important (Siebers 2019; Siebers and Torfing 2018). Other municipalities reveal that behavior focused on core tasks and outcomes is important (Siebers, 2019) and yet another municipality mentions that being flexible, open, creative and adaptable is of importance (Siebers, 2018). It is interesting to observe that when municipal actors have a well-defined motivation to organize citizen engagement this is also reflected in a matching behavior and attitude of the actors in citizen engagement (Siebers 2019).

Pattern 5 leadership

The importance of leadership for organizing citizen engagement is recognized in all case studies (Siebers 2019; Siebers 2018; Siebers and Torfing 2018). Although the kind of leadership that is required varies among the municipalities. This can be transformational leadership, aimed at leaders who encourage and inspire their followers. For example, by having a vision, encourage, pro-activity or emphasizing values (Siebers 2019, p. 138; Siebers and Torfing 2018). Innovative or integrative leadership aimed at bringing the right stakeholders together and stimulating innovation (Siebers and Torfing 2018): or learning leadership, which goes “beyond a strong vision and encouragement of citizen engagement”. This kind of leadership is about identifying problems that exist and finding appropriate solutions (Siebers 2018, p. 238 -239). At the same time, it becomes clear that leadership does not only take place at an individual level. More specifically, Siebers (2019) and Siebers and Torfing (2018) indicate that a mayor plays an important role in exercising leadership for citizen engagement. They also reveal the importance of the city manager⁴, the management team and the councilors. Furthermore, Siebers (2018) shows

that leadership can be traced back to a third party that operates independently from the municipality, for example an external advisor. As a result, it seems that organizing citizen engagement requires leadership that activates the entire system of both horizontal and vertical relationships. This means that leadership takes place in a system of relations—the collective. The decisions, interactions and actions of individuals are embedded in this collective and determine leadership. As such, certain contexts determine how leadership is formed, by whom it is executed and whether it is singular or plural (Ospina 2017, p. 281). This means that leadership for citizen engagement is not embedded in one person only and can differ between municipalities. Additionally, in the case of unclear leadership, the actors within that municipality strive for a clear definition of the leadership that is necessary and a search for ways to concretize such leadership behaviors emerges (Siebers 2019; Siebers 2018).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATION FOR MUNICIPAL PRACTICES

This article aims at a deeper understanding of citizen engagement by exploring dominant patterns in the way municipalities organize citizen engagement, the role of those involved and practices that emerge. In doing so, the article supports both academics and practitioners by providing insight into the way in which local governments organize citizen engagement.

A closer look at the patterns described shows that organizing citizen engagement involves different levels, namely (1) the individual human behavior and (2) the system (Torfing et al. 2016; Rowe and Frewer 2004; Wang and Wan Wart 2007). Human behavior includes motivation, leadership and actors involved. The system refers to ‘system aspects’ and includes organizational culture and working methods. The patterns also illustrate that there are differences between and within municipalities at these levels. This is illustrated by the observation that different motivations for organizing citizen engagement lead to different working methods. When the motivation for participation focuses on the management of societal problems, we see general working methods that facilitate the exchange of views and ideas on municipal matters (Siebers 2019). When the motivation for citizen engagement focuses on knowledge and expertise, the organization of citizen engagement is also consistent with that by providing working methods that put this motivation central, such as co-creation (Siebers and Torfing 2018). Furthermore, if the motivation for citizen engagement focuses on the needs of civil society, the working method serves this. In this case citizen engagement is organized via a third party that helps to strengthen the relation between the municipality and community. Siebers (2018) reveals

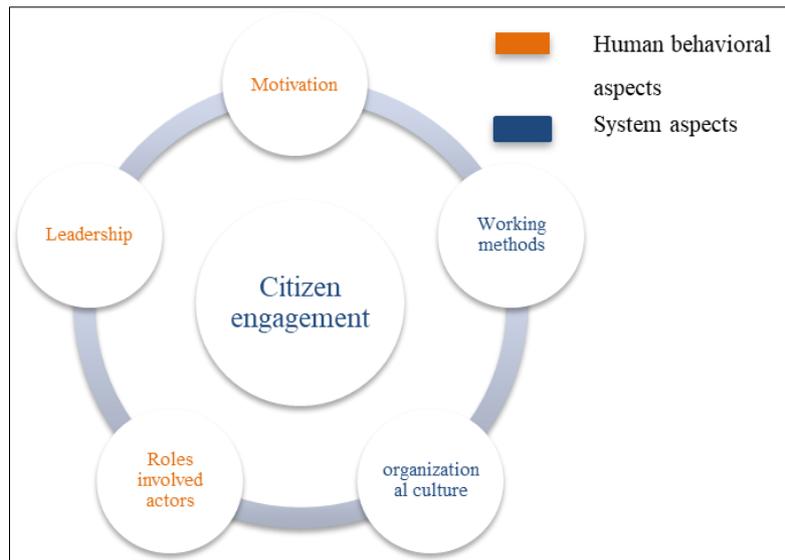
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that this relationship is crucial for setting up citizen engagement in this context. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that organizational culture plays a role in organizing citizen engagement (Siebers 2019; Siebers 2020). Moreover, it is demonstrated that citizen engagement asks specific behaviors and attitudes of municipal actors (e.g. facilitative, pro-active or innovative) and is accompanied with a variety in leadership. The more differences there are in the interpretation of these behaviors and leadership, the more diverse the set up of citizen engagement appears to be (Siebers 2019; Siebers 2018; Siebers and Torfing 2018).

Based on the recurring patterns it can be concluded that aspects human behavior of municipal actors and the system are entwined and interdependent (see Figure 1). For example, a clear motivation is important to initiate the desired working methods and the application of citizen engagement (Nabatchi and Leighninger 2015). Particularly within public organizations like municipalities, motivation has become increasingly important to develop activities that foster the management of changes and societal challenges (Ritz et al. 2016). Likewise, it is important to have leadership to promote the desired culture and motivation for citizen engagement (Sarros et al. 2008; Schein 1992). Public leaders like mayors, managers, councilors or city managers play an important part in this. After all, they are often the ones who are in charge of deciding which actions are taken and can either encourage or discourage the engagement of citizens within their municipality (Thomas 1995). In addition to that, public leaders are observed as key players in mobilizing various actors in co-creating solutions (Sørensen and Torfing 2018). Leadership in its turn can also help to influence the behavior of and interaction between different actors and can thus stimulate clarity in roles and fulfillment of these roles (Coursey et al. 2012; Torfing et al. 2016). Moreover, when applying working methods of citizen engagement, it is important to establish clear roles of those who facilitate these methods in order to implement them effectively (Hersey et al. 2007; Johns 1983). In particular, the corresponding behaviors that define these roles of civil servants are considered important for encouraging citizen engagement methods (Wang et al. 2007). Ultimately, these actors are vital assets of public organizations like municipalities and therefore have a major influence on the realization of activities within that organization (Ritz et al. 2016).⁵

Figure 1: Interdependency between aspects of citizen engagement.

With the complex environment in which local governments operate nowadays and the initiatives that emerge from civil society, local governments increasingly ask themselves how citizen engagement can be realized and what this means for the functioning of the municipality. This article reveals that there seems to be no clear way in which municipalities organize citizen engagement: it has its own dynamics, with its own irregularities leading to different variations of the same phenomenon. However, from the empirical studies aspects related to human behavior and the system are identified as being important. In practice, these aspects can be interpreted in various ways by municipal actors, concurrently different manifestations may develop at the same time. As such, those who initiate citizen engagement (e.g. councilors, aldermen and civil servants) also construct it and may in turn give rise to different manifestations that correspond to this construction. Citizen engagement starts with these actors and the way that they consider what suits the municipality and the extent to which they have a shared understanding of this. Furthermore, the patterns show that organizing citizen engagement is not dependent on one aspect but on the combination of several aspects. Hence, it can be concluded that there seems to be no "one size fits all" approach when practicing citizen engagement. Both human behavioral and system aspects are important in this and should be considered when setting up citizen engagement. Reflecting on this, organizing citizen engagement has an impact on the entire municipality and can be seen as an intervention in it; a municipality organizes citizen engagement in a certain way that is revealed in the aspects related to this. Against this background three major points can be formulated to consider from this research:

- First, local governments consciously and unconsciously form citizen engagement in their own and unique way.
- Second, citizen engagement is accompanied by a complex dynamic, which is caused by both human behavior and systems aspects. As a municipality it is important to take this into account and be aware that these aspects are constantly

changing. This requires constantly learning, adapting and developing as a municipality

- Third, organizing citizen engagement is not self-evident. As municipal council, executive board of mayor and aldermen and bureaucracy it is important to recognize the influence of citizen engagement on the entire organization and shape a clear and shared view of these human behavior and system aspects.

For practitioners the findings mean that in order to organize citizen engagement, municipal actors need to be aware of the aspects that help clarify the variety surrounding it.

Municipalities need to formulate these aspects clearly in a way that appeals to all actors involved and facilitate the creation of shared practices to citizen engagement. To do so, the actors, municipal council, executive board of mayor and aldermen, and bureaucracy need to collaborate and interact with each other and enter a continuous dialogue to realize and guarantee the implementation of these aspects within their own organization. This helps to overcome the aforementioned challenges, such as designing appropriate and clear citizen engagement processes which in turn can limit fragmentation and improve or influence the effectiveness of citizen engagement. Streamlining processes and generating designs about citizen engagement is important as it leads to municipal actors having a shared understanding of citizen engagement instead of a fragmented one. To do so it is important that municipalities find a way to build a citizen engagement infrastructure that facilitates a continuous process of developing citizen engagement. Such an infrastructure will counteract the challenge of effectiveness and result in more effective implementation of citizen engagement in practice. Potential infrastructures can include the creation of feasible spaces in which municipal actors can discuss and align their perception on the discovered human behavior aspects and system aspects in order to implement effective citizen engagement. Henceforward, appropriate infrastructures stimulate the operationalization of participation and thereby its effectiveness. In addition, municipalities need to ensure that this citizen engagement infrastructure educates and informs civil society about issues, connects citizens to local leaders and officials, addresses the applied working methods of citizen engagement, and makes room for deliberation, decision making and consistent action of citizens regarding municipal issues.

In conclusion, the aspects presented offer a referencing framework to understand and possibly describe the development of citizen engagement in practice and envisions differences in organizing it in local governments. It thereby helps scholars and practitioners to gain insight into the way that they organize it and allows them to study citizen engagement and the diversity that accompanies it critically. More specifically, it helps council members, board members, and civil servants to position themselves in the citizen engagement debate and reveals the complex dynamic that goes along with it. Especially, those actors who are confronted with different aspects that compel them to adapt to a situation in which citizen engagement is organized efficiently. Ultimately they are the ones who must work together to structure the way citizen engagement is created. Moreover, they need to continue to learn, reflect and if necessary adapt the current situation to the desired situation. In the end this can contribute to effectively realizing citizen engagement and accomplishing desired results like managing societal challenges or increasing citizens' trust.

NOTES

- ¹ In this paper the term municipal actors is used as an umbrella term for the main actors within the municipality: municipal council, board of mayor & aldermen and bureaucracy.
- ² In this paper the municipal council consists of the representatives that are chosen by the citizens. They can also be referred to as councilors or politicians on local level.
- ³ The term bureaucracy in this paper refers to the entity in which the civil servants work.
- ⁴ The city manager in this paper refers to the head of the entire bureaucracy.
- ⁵ It is important to note that the empirical studies do not point out how these aspects as shown in Fig 1 precisely relate to each other. For now, the studies show that these aspects matter and are entwined.

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