



"Join in and do more" in the municipality of Zoetermeer, the Netherlands

Interactive policymaking is knowledge, but no mean feat

When is it a good idea to involve inhabitants in the development of policy, and; perhaps just as important, when not to? And when you do, how do you organize it effectively? Ron Rutherglen, Eduard van Vloten and Kim van den Berg of De Beuk have given attention to these and other questions together with policy advisors and project managers of the municipality of Zoetermeer. This happened regularly during a three (separate) day long training course on interactive policymaking called *"Join in and do more in Zoetermeer"*.

Participation is not necessarily interactive

Actively communicating with inhabitants and stakeholders to hear exactly what is important to them is something many municipalities consider of paramount importance. This is often called 'participation' or investing in participation processes. But participation is not necessarily interactive policymaking.

Interactive policymaking means that people actually have influence on policy that is made. In the course, project manager Ron Rutherglen gives a lot of attention to this definition: "...together with the participants we look at the tangible meaning of working interactively, and at how to realise it in Zoetermeer. We talk about issues such as the "definition of the actually space for influencing policy and also the limiting conditions for that influence." The project manager of the municipality of Zoetermeer, Mieke Visch, shares Rutherglen's view. "It is about making a conscious choice between starting an interactive process or not. And about giving thought to the possibilities and limitations of an interactive approach, especially when larger projects have to be implemented."... "so it is not enough to suddenly decide when a project is almost finished: 'let's inform the people involved now, and organise a public meeting.'."

Change

While Zoetermeer is developing from a 'growth municipality' into a 'mature-management municipality' it has to deal with more and more complex projects within the existing town. The local council has to take several different stakeholders into account while doing this work. Working 'interactively' has gained ground recently and the local council has responded to that. One way to do that has been to gather information, experiences, and working methods together with a few other groups of committed people, and to place it all on the website "www.participatiewijzer.nl". This website offers a database of interesting and useable working methods, a checklist for designing an interactive process, and insights about important limiting conditions of such a process.

In 2005, the municipality developed a concrete strategy and policy on participation processes. Its aim is to develop a consistent interactive working method within the municipality. The course provided for the civil servants is part of that policy. Mieke Visch, trainee and policy officer in the field of relations between administration and citizens, sees *Join in and do more in Zoetermeer* as a big challenge to the organisation: "...we are trying to implement a change in our way of thinking and working, and this is a first step. De Beuk provided us with an approach in which this perspective of change was been emphasized. After the procedure of a call for tenders, the municipality chose De Beuk because this consultancy firm shares our view on interactive policymaking. Their approach is that it is not a couple of tricks, but a body of knowledge and skills which has to be implemented right across the whole breadth of the municipal organisation, and from top to bottom. This takes time and also asks for embedding the practice in the dynamics of the organisation. This approach was also confirmed by experience gained

with a similar project carried out in the city of Dordrecht. where consultancy De Beuk also arranged a course for policy officials."

Various groups

Over one year five groups of sixteen advisors and policy-making civil servants each follow the three-day course. The first group functioned as pilot group and its experiences were incorporated in the course evolution for the benefit of the other groups. Two trainers lead the training programmes. Participants come from every corner of the local council's organisation. Rutherglen states: "...in this way we can oversee the whole organisation and get a clear view of what working interactively means to the municipality. Participants run into each others working areas, interests and experiences in a positive manner, and together they make them their own positioning and needs and interests transparent for everyone involved."

Pilot participants Ineke van der Meer, policy officer Youth and Education, and Marcel Looijaard, manager of district Buytenwegh de Leyens, appreciated the diversity of participants in the group. Looijaard: ".....in this way you learn to understand and respect the dilemma's that your colleague's see themselves confronted with. That makes cooperation easier." An important condition for a successful process is the involvement of management and the political administration. Rutherglen: "...that was the case here from day one. Executive political administrators Patrick van Domburg and Pieter Smit were present during part of the programme." In addition, the training course provides separate programmes for administration, management, the communications department and the Council itself.

Experiences: the field of force

Both the 'internal (municipal) field of interaction' and the 'external (public and stakeholders) field of interaction' get a lot of attention during the trainings. The participants learn to analyse the realities and diversity of the field of interaction involved with their own processes. Policy officer Ineke van der Meer relates: "I found the analysis of the field of interaction significant, because it makes you think about people and the process beforehand. Who are the pivotal players and then later: how can I work this out well in the process? It is good to take time for that at the beginning of the process and not to rush through that phase." Trainer Eduard van Vloten says: "...the relevance of an analysis of the field of interaction often only shows up at the moment that you get to work on it. To be able to involve people, you have to know what motivates them. Their motivations need attention throughout the whole process."

Immediately into practice

Looijaard: "...in district/neighbourhood management I have a lot to do with the input of inhabitants. Up till now I dealt with that depending on the situation, and largely on the basis of my experience. The course gave me the structure and the tools which I can use well in practice." After the theoretical approaches of the first day the course links up mainly with the work-floor practice of the participants. De Beuk knows from experience that this brings the best results. The students of the course in Zoetermeer worked on cases out of their own working environment, either individually or in groups. Examples are the *Zoetermeer Town Vision 2030*, the *Cultural Axis*, and the regular plans for district/neighbourhood actions. Ineke van der Meer states: "...we could use the course in our own work right away."

All together, one voice

Internal cooperation and the tools necessary to apply the acquired knowledge in practice, are the main themes presented during the last day of the course. Rutherglen: "...cooperation and alignment between different fields and departments is important, because interactive policy demands an integral approach. Different departments must develop an interactive strategy together, and the municipality has to speak to the world outside with one voice. When that does not happen, different departments will get in each other's way. Then the environment will hear contradicting stories about how the local council handles certain issues." In each of the training groups a different officer of the communication department participates actively. The participants discuss with each

other the role of this department, and agree on how everybody can play a reinforcing role within the processes of the municipality. District manager Marcel Looijaard: "...an interactive route is a process which we need to carry out together with all the branches of the municipality, and the inhabitants, and the administration. We depend on one another to do it well and bring it to effective completion."

Kim van den Berg