KEYS TO USER PARTICIPATION

Action- and evaluation research into the introduction- and implementation process of user participation in field experiments in the GA²SW project: Summary

Sylvie Van Dam
UAntwerpen

In collaboration with:
Peter Raeymaeckers - UAntwerpen
Laura Van Cauwenbergh – emino
Annemie Bylemans – emino
Inneke Verbakel – emino
Suzy Bertels – Kopa
Diane Moras – Recht-Op
Karen Van Riel – Recht-Op

Keys to User Participation: Summary

Sylvie Van Dam – Mei 2021 – UAntwerpen

GA²SW: A project of experimenting in the field, exchange, action & evaluation research

GA²SW is an ESF project in which various (transnational) partners collaborate to exchange best practices in order to learn about methods and tools of user participation. The focus of the partnership was on developing tools for user participation in the counseling of people at a distance from the labor market. In the Flemish context, three testing grounds were set up in a collaboration between organizations that work on forms of job counseling - emino Team Mechelen, Kopa Antwerp vzw and Casa / Activering De Link - each with support from experts from Recht-Op. In these field experiments, various forms of user participation were developed, implemented and evaluated.

User participation is primarily about users or clients "*being able to, wanting and being able to do*". In a widely disseminated and accepted definition, user participation means: *"The early involvement of users in policy formation and quality improvement, whereby problems are identified and solutions that influence the final decision explored in openness and on the basis of equality and mutual debate."* (Edelenbos, 2013 in Moyson & Frederix, 2013). At the end of the project, we asked stakeholders in the project what user participation means to them. Their view appears to be very much in line with this vision, although primarily focusing on the process as on working with the users on an equal basis.

User participation is doing things together with the client! (Recht-Op emino)

That the entire team is aware of what user participation is and has daily reflections about it, that it is in the body, mind and heart of everyone, that it is not necessarily about actions. (Recht-Op Kopa)

To be involved in change in an organization and to think along, better still, make decisions. (Recht-Op Casa)

Through action and evaluation research by UAntwerpen, we helped develop forms of user participation in a first phase. These forms of user participation were developed on the basis of trial and error with techniques in the field experiments, transnational exchange with best practices from home and abroad, a literature study and an online survey about participation models that are currently applied in Flemish social work organizations. We gained inspiration from the exchange with practitioners and researchers from the partner countries. We learned, among other things, that focusing on user participation implies a change in mentality, the integration of a reflex or attitude to continuously apply the perspective of user participation. Therefore, a researcher cannot simply 'impose' a method from the literature. A method is rather to be developed or chosen from within the field of practice. This, together with the finding that there are numerous models and techniques of user participation, led us to the conclusion that we invited all partners to think about appropriate forms of user participation, each from their own expertise and background – and to choose, develop and refine them. We developed a set of tools, a kind of toolbox with many potentially suitable tools (techniques) of user participation that can be chosen and implemented according to the context and the users. We have provided the toolbox with a number of principles derived from lessons learned from the literature and the exchange with practitioners and researchers.

Those involved in the three field experiments started a real process of introducing user participation and then set to work with a number of user participation interventions that they had selected or developed in that exchange. We took part in working visits, introductions, consultation moments, activities, etc. of the project, in order to monitor progress and to strengthen the substantive exchange and exploration.

We then evaluated these models in the practice of the three field experiments for their contribution to and the effectiveness of supporting vulnerable people – on the basis of document analysis, focus groups, a survey and in-depth interviews. We applied a broad focus in the evaluation of these forms of user participation. We didn't just want to know what works, but rather: "what works, for whom, under what circumstances and why?". To answer that question, we use the CAIMeR model (Blom & Morén, 2010; Pawson, 2013), studying the Context, Actors involved and Interventions of user participation. In this way we try to find out which Mechanisms or working principles help explain which Results those interventions lead to.

Mechanisms that explain what works, for who, in what circumstances

The first part of the research showed that different expectations existed in the various field experiments regarding what the interventions of user participation would bring about in the these experiments and in the broader organization. We have translated these assumptions into working principles – or mechanisms – to support the analysis of the focus groups.

For the analysis of the results, we rely on Albert Dzur's work on democratic social work (Dzur, 2008, 2019; Spierts, Raeymaeckers, Cools, Mathys & Gradener, 2021). According to Dzur (2008, 2019), in democratic professionalism, decisions are made based on the exchange of arguments by involving all participants in a decision-making process. Central to this vision are (collective) action and the sharing of tasks and power (Dzur, 2019; Spierts et al., 2021). In the context of democratic social work, working principles are put forward as stepping stones for the professional in "*facilitating and supporting exchange between people with different perspectives, interests and possibilities*" (Spierts et al., 2021). These four working principles are interaction, agency, collectivization and shared power (Spierts et al., 2021). In the box below, we link the working principles based on Dzur (2008, 2019; Spierts et al., 2021) to the various assumptions that the exploring research generated and that were tested in the focus groups in the context of the evaluation.

Keys to User Participation: Summary

Sylvie Van Dam – Mei 2021 – UAntwerpen

Interaction

- Relation, equality, active listening, acting together, joint problem definition, taking people seriously, real dialogue, safe space, proximity
- >> Creating the feeling of being heard and welcomed by the client, in sincere dialogue

Agency

- Focus on action, daily participation and acting together, authority over institutions, freedom of action and concrete action options, ability and willingness to take initiative, targeted actions
- >> Feasible concrete actions to take together and thus integrate step-by-step into daily operations
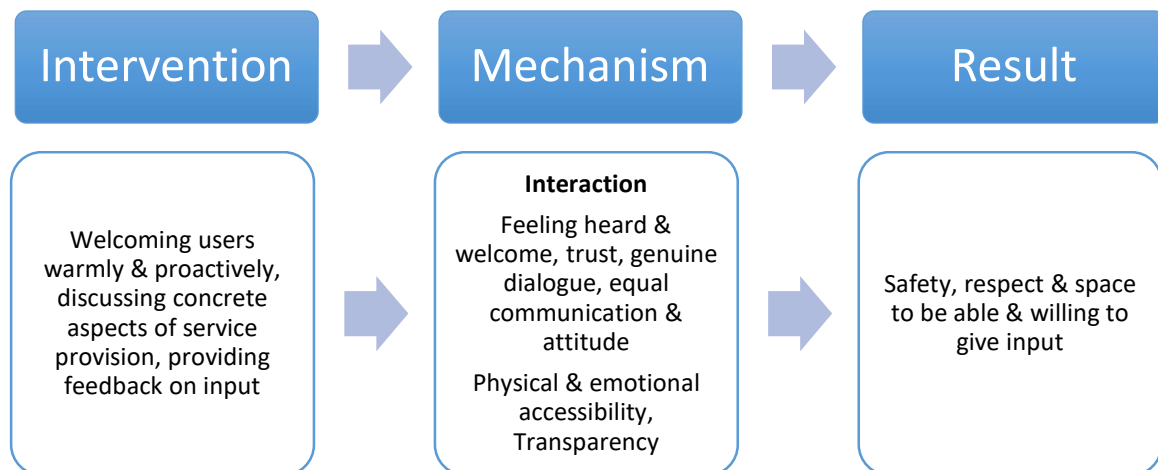
Collectivization

- Focus on the productive character of democracy by sharing tasks, shaping them, by doing, working together on shared social problems and promoting collective thinking and acting
- >> Higher quality services more tailored to and closer to the target group through reflecting together with users and adapting service provision

Shared power

- Real partnership, sharing tasks and involving decision-making, avoiding symbolic actions, attention for those with less power and socio-cultural resources, co-production, co-creation, collective, collaboration, room for questions and dissent
- >> Bringing about a sustainable change in mindset and culture of user participation in the organization, developing user participation as a reflex and being able to structurally affect the broader organization or policy
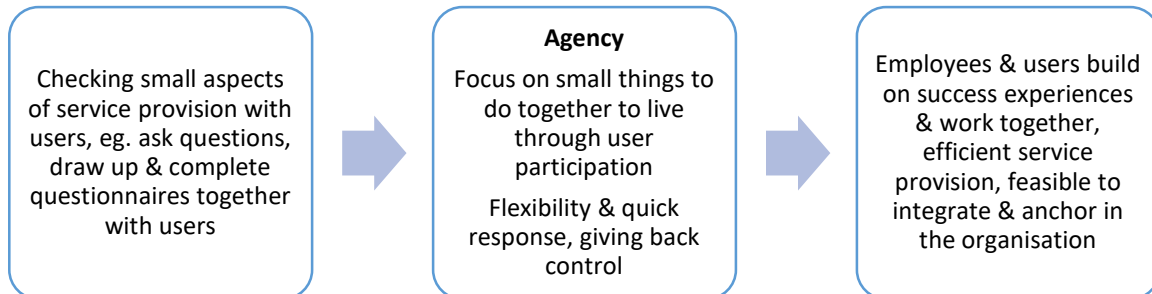
Based on the analysis of the interviews and focus groups, key figures from each field experiment, coaches from the three field experiments and experience experts from Recht-Op, we were able to structure our findings on the basis of the four working principles or mechanisms that try to explain why which intervention of user participation works for whom, in what circumstances. In what follows we briefly see these working principles. They indicate for each mechanism how and why an intervention leads to a certain result. We illustrate these mechanisms with quotes.

Intervention	Mechanism	Result
Welcoming users warmly & proactively, discussing concrete aspects of service provision, providing feedback on input	**Interaction** Feeling heard & welcome, trust, genuine dialogue, equal communication & attitude Physical & emotional accessibility, Transparency	Safety, respect & space to be able & willing to give input

4

Keys to User Participation: Summary

Sylvie Van Dam – Mei 2021 – UAntwerpen

Because I was now going to pick people up at the door and could ask if they had easily gotten there and how they were doing, I suddenly found out a lot more about that person in a short moment.. (Kopa)

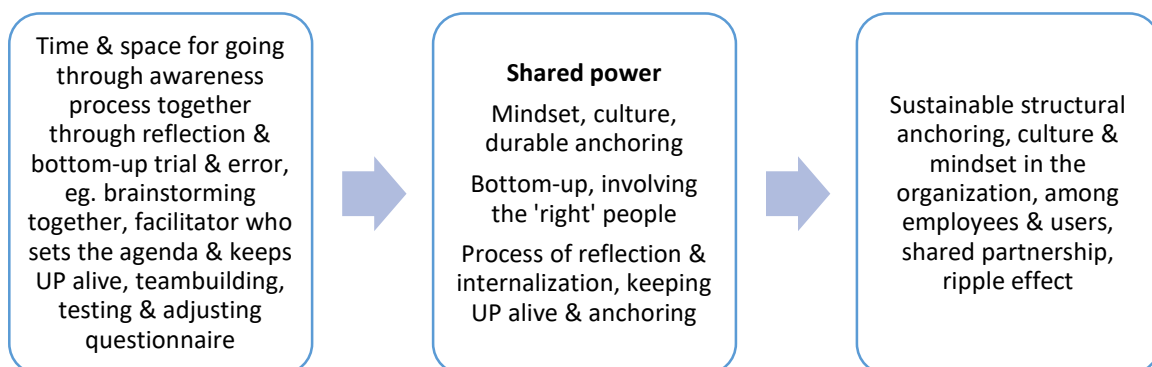| Checking small aspects of service provision with users, eg. ask questions, draw up & complete questionnaires together with users | → | **Agency**
Focus on small things to do together to live through user participation

Flexibility & quick response, giving back control | → | Employees & users build on success experiences & work together, efficient service provision, feasible to integrate & anchor in the organisation |

A focus on the feasibility of small actions is the ideal starting point! Afterwards you can discuss things in a larger context. It's also about being flexible! You can prepare many things, but the situation, the needs of the clients, etc. mean that you have to take small steps and then you can gradually change or adapt, that works better. (Kopa)

| Consultation about issues or changes in services, eg. consultation & joint decision on communication in the case of a corona situation, furnishing rooms, drawing up a vision | → | **Collectivization**
Time & space to act & think together, taking diversity into account, continuous critical reflection & questioning | → | Services that are closer to the target group, more tailored & quality improvement |

In the case of users with a weaker profile, you must get more out of them, even though it takes a lot of time, let them do more! You must also understand if it doesn't work, but try first. (emino)

It is important that there is a responsible person who realizes that there must be space and time for job coaches to also invest in user participation! And that they handle rules flexibly in order to be able to achieve this. (emino)

| Time & space for going through awareness process together through reflection & bottom-up trial & error, eg. brainstorming together, facilitator who sets the agenda & keeps UP alive, teambuilding, testing & adjusting questionnaire | → | **Shared power**
Mindset, culture, durable anchoring

Bottom-up, involving the 'right' people

Process of reflection & internalization, keeping UP alive & anchoring | → | Sustainable structural anchoring, culture & mindset in the organization, among employees & users, shared partnership, ripple effect |

Keys to User Participation: Summary

Sylvie Van Dam – Mei 2021 – UAntwerpen

Gradually, the awareness grew that the realization of actions is subordinate to the process. It is okay if actions cannot continue, because enough is already happening! Above all, we have to take user participation into account. But it is important to anchor that in the long term, you cannot leave that to the atmosphere, neither to the culture or people who are there now! (Kopa)

The aim was to involve users in drawing up the vision. But it appears necessary that user participation can really grow from the bottom up. A culture must first be created among users themselves before you can work on a more abstract level.
(Recht-Op Casa)

User Participation as a Process: Keys for introduction

The organizations involved within the GA²SW project went through an in-depth process through transnational exchange, field experiments, support by experience experts and scientific research to get to know user participation in depth, to develop tailor-made techniques and implement them in their own operations. The enterity was evaluated. What works, for whom, in what circumstances and why? All this with the hope of sustainable change and anchoring to involve the target group more strongly within the organizations and thus change and improve the organizations from within. Moreover, to inspire other organizations to get started with user participation in a substantiated and experienced way.

By means of concrete examples and practical experiences we were able to demonstrate why certain things do or do not work. The working principles based on Dzur (2008) give us a language and focus to introduce and anchor the process of user participation, not only to understand, but also to share it. These insights emphasize that it is a process – with various phases and a lot of room for experimentation, cooperation, permanent attention, reflection and support.[1]

---

[1] Bij de reflectie- en planningsfase traden de ervaringsdeskundigen op als gebruikers die initieel inbreng en feedback konden aanreiken over hoe zij als potentiële gebruiker de huidige werking van de betrokken organisaties in de proeftuinen ervaarden. Hier werden er brainstorms gehouden om na te denken over wat gebruikersparticipatie inhoudt of kan betekenen, welke dromen of verwachtingen coaches daarrond koesterden, en welke drempels ze dan zouden tegenkomen op weg naar de realisatie van die dromen. Telkens stelden de ervaringsdeskundigen van Recht-Op vragen bij deze ideeën om coaches te stimuleren ten gronde te reflecteren over hun motivaties en verwachtingen, de noden van gebruikers en de effecten van eventuele interventies. In de implementatiefase werden stilaan meer eigen gebruikers van de organisaties betrokken. De ervaringsdeskundigen van Recht-Op gingen mee in overleg nadenken over ondernomen acties, stelden vragen over de interventies vanuit eigen ervaringen en deden zo coaches meer stilstaan bij hoe (de perspectieven van) gebruikers bij elke stap van een traject betrokken kunnen worden.
During the reflection and planning phase, the hands-on experts acted as users who could provide initial input and feedback on how they, as a potential user, experienced the current operation of the organizations involved in the living labs. Brainstorms were held here to think about what user participation entails or can mean, what dreams or expectations coaches had about it, and what obstacles they would encounter on the way to the realization of those dreams. Each time, the experts at Recht-Op asked questions about these ideas to encourage coaches to reflect on their motivations and expectations, the needs of users and the effects of any interventions. In the implementation phase, more of the organizations' own users were gradually involved. The experiential experts from Recht-Op joined in consultation with them to think about actions taken, asked questions about the interventions based on their own experiences and thus made coaches think more about how (the perspectives of) users can be involved in each step of a process.

Thresholds and preconditions

The research shows the crucial and strongly determining role of the context and the various actors in the how, to what extent and why certain interventions of user participation work for certain users. Thresholds can almost completely undermine the chances of success of certain interventions, while preconditions can actually strengthen these chances. We can translate all difficulties into opportunities or necessities to get started with user participation in specific circumstances. For example, we think of the necessary time and space to experiment and grow; flexibility and anchored attention; a strong facilitator who permanently puts user participation on the agenda, keeps coaches and users warm and inspires and activates those involved; support by the team and the organization; an attitude of reflecting and acting together with the users.

From preconditions to keys

When we bring together the findings from the focus groups and interviews with the practical experiences of the field experiments and the insights from the transnational exchange, we have been able to deduce a number of key aspects about this introduction process of user participation. In this way we jointly arrived at a step-by-step plan and a model of keys or points for attention for the introduction and implementation of user participation. Although user participation in this project was applied in job counselling, we are convinced that they also work in other service organizations. In this way we hope to be able to offer inspiration to other organizations that may want to get started with user participation.

Introducing user participation thus requires a process involving everyone: users, coaches, executives and perhaps even external actors. This process does not always run smoothly, one can bump into walls of resistance and divergent expectations of those involved. User participation must therefore be real, sincere and continuous. There is no point in pretending, because easily shattered by the users themselves as soon as they realize that little or nothing is happening with their input. For example, a one-time moment of user participation makes just as little sense. Users can (and should) be involved in all steps of this process – if possible. Finally, if someone wants to get started with user participation, it is also appropriate to be aware of unforeseen effects and ethical issues that arise during that process. We can visualize the entirety in the figure below with keys for introducing user participation in an operation.

Keys to User Participation: Summary

Sylvie Van Dam – Mei 2021 – UAntwerpen

Central to this scheme is the main key, participation as a process. After all, introducing user participation is a process that requires a mindset and anchoring. We can start that process as a step-by-step plan to introduce and anchor user participation within an organization:

➢ Step 1: Start a dialogue, brainstorm about user participation.

➢ Step 2: Create (a) space for user participation & demarcate the context.

➢ Step 3: Determine actions: Say what you want to do and how.

➢ Step 4: Implement the actions.

➢ Step 5: Evaluate the actions and adjust when necessary, give feedback.

➢ Step 6: Perpetuate user participation and integrate it into your DNA

Thus, this process of instilling a mindset or culture of user participation in an organization is the main key. However, what the evaluation research teaches us – and this seems to us to be the most fundamental conclusion – is that it does indeed take a lot of time to realize that process, but above all, requires concrete action from below. It comes down to having users and coaches experiment bottom-up with and feel/taste what user participation is and can mean for them, and get to work with it. Only in this way can user participation grow and truly become a culture. Only by gradually establishing this culture and mindset/reflex can this really penetrate an organization, anchor in it, become part of it and seep through to higher (policy) levels.

So it's about doing it together! In this we recognize Albert Dzur's framework on democratic professionalism, which provides tools for democratic social workers (Spierts et al., 2021). The mechanisms – interaction, agency, collectivization and power sharing – demonstrate how and why certain interventions lead to certain results for specific users in which circumstances. User participation makes it possible to work in a generalist approach in specialist organizations that are

aimed at activating vulnerable groups to the labor market and thus better tailor their services to the needs of users.

Look into the future

The end of this project does not mean the end of the induction process of user participation in the organizations that were involved. User participation means anchoring and keeping it warm, and continuing to work on it actively. A seed has been planted in all organizations, people have been made warm and enthusiastic. They have tasted the effects of the importance and perspective of users. The organizations involved try to anchor user participation in all sorts of ways. In addition, in all organizations there are concrete plans to continue working on user participation. The small and large success experiences of working on user participation sparked new inspiration. And who knows, this story also inspired other organizations? So to be continued..

We also saw last year that you must be able to adapt flexibly to circumstances, you must be able to change. That may change at some point, but I am confident that we will be able to respond to that as well. Maybe it won't work the first time, but we'll keep trying! We should not think that we are inventing hot water, but we remain open to it, adopt the attitude permanently. We are doing well, we are doing a lot spontaneously, we have to keep going! (FG Kopa)

References

Blom, B. & Morén, S. (2010). Explaining Social Work Practice – The CAIMeR Theory. *Journal of Social Work,* 10(1): 98-101 https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017309350661

Dzur, A. (2008). *Democratic Professionalism: Citizen Participation and the Reconstruction of Professional Ethics, Identity and Practice*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Dzur, A. (2019). *Democracy Inside. Participatory innovation in Unlikely Places.*

Edelenbos, J. & Monnikhof, R. (1998). *Spanning en interactie, Een analyse van interactief beleid in lokale democratie.* Amsterdam: Instituut voor Publiek en Politiek.

Moyson, T. & Frederix, J. (2013). *Werkboek gebruikersparticipatie*. Provincie Oost-Vlaanderen.

Pawson, R. (2013). *The Science of Evaluation: A Realist Manifesto*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Spierts, M., Raeymaeckers, P., Cools, P., Mathys, E., & Gradener, J. (2021). Democratisch Sociaal Werk: Van Theorie naar Werkzame Principes. In Raeymaeckers, P., Gradener, J., Van Dam, S., Botman, S., Driessens, K., Boxtaens, J., & Tirions, M. (eds.). *Denken over Sociaal Werk*. Leuven: Acco.

Van Dam, S. (2021). Sleutels tot Gebruikersparticipatie: Een actie- en evaluatieonderzoek naar de introductie- en implementatieproces van gebruikersparticipatie in proeftuinen binnen het GA²SW-project. Antwerpen: UAntwerpen/emino.