

Citizen participation in local policy in the Netherlands: A case study of the new city hall in Den Helder

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Abstract

While citizen participation is increasingly being acknowledged as being important when decisions are being made that affect the public, the extent to which citizens actually have an influence remains questionable. Studies have shown that citizen participation is being applied by local governments in the Netherlands but also show that citizen participation is mainly limited to informing and consulting citizens. This article is a case study of a project that is being contested by local residents. The Dutch city of Den Helder is one in decline, with people continuing to leave the city and no prospects of growth. The local government of Den Helder has therefore decided to intervene. One of the planned interventions is the construction of a new city hall in the city center. This plan, however, has come across a lot of resistance among local residents, claiming that they have not been involved in the decision-making process. The local government argues that they have taken the necessary steps related to citizen participation.

Keywords: citizen participation; government participation; place attachment; social license to operate

Introduction

Citizen participation is widely seen as being vital to democracy, especially when decisions are made that affect the public. Decision makers, especially at local government level, are continuously challenged by the question of to what degree citizens should be involved in policy (Michels, 2010). In the Netherlands, however, citizen participation has not been acknowledged as being of significant importance to democracy (Michels, 2006). Instead, the majority of politicians and academics in the Netherlands believe that involving citizens in the decision making processes will continue to be more of an instrument to improve democracy (Michels, 2006). Even though citizen participation has risen on the political agenda since the 1960s, decisions still are to be taken from above. Some believe that giving citizens too much of a voice in the decision-making processes of the local and national government might lead to an 'erosion of the primacy of the representative institutions' (Michels, 2006). Yet citizens no longer simply agree with the decisions made by governing bodies that represent them. Citizens are increasingly becoming more politically involved and want their voices to be heard when decisions are being made that affect them. Therefore many of the decisions made by the government today are being contested because they lack the involvement of citizens, this being especially the case at the local scale. While signs show that citizen participation is increasingly being adopted by local governments, many still question how much influence citizens really have in policy making (Michels, 2010).

This article presents a case study of a project affecting the public that is being contested by local citizens. This case study focusses on the Dutch city of Den Helder, particularly the decision of the local government to replace the current city hall and construct a new one in the city center. Local citizens, mainly located in the proximity of the planned site of construction, oppose the idea because they feel neglected by the local government for not being properly involved in the decision-making process. Despite these concerns, the local government argues that they have taken the necessary steps in involving the citizens and that the decision to construct a new city hall on the planned location is therefore legitimate.

The purpose of this case study is to find out how the local government of Den Helder has involved citizens in their policy making and if the resistance to the planned intervention, the intended city hall, could be attributed to a lack of citizen participation. The data supporting this article has primarily been collected through in-depth interviews with different actors involved in the planning-process of the new city hall, including the deputy mayor, a local government official, and the project leader of BV Zeestad, the independent development agency in charge of implementation of the plan. Two of the most profound opposing parties have also been interviewed, consisting of a group-interview with six residents and an in-depth interview with an influential resident from Julianadorp, who not only opposes the idea but also has a broad knowledge on citizen participation, specifically of methods used by the government that only appear to let citizens participate, but in reality do not at all. A lawyer from Den Helder has also been interviewed to have a better understanding of regulation related to citizen participation.

Description of Den Helder, the Netherlands

Maritime Identity

The city of Den Helder is the northernmost city of the province North-Holland, excluding the island of Texel. The city is well known for its naval harbor, the largest of the country, and fishing fleet. The maritime identity of the city dates back to the 9th century when inhabitants of Huisduinen, a village now part of the municipality of Den Helder, used the surrounding seas to catch whales. In the centuries that followed fishermen started to settle in the nearby village of Den Helder, ultimately shifting the economic activity of Huisduinen to Den Helder. In the 17th century, the Republic of the Seven Provinces used Den Helder as a naval base due to its good accessibility to the open waters. The naval harbor of Den Helder remains the largest of the country still today (Gemeente Den Helder, 2013).

Declining population

The golden ages have passed, however, as the city is struggling due to the current economic crisis. Jobs have been lost and people are leaving the city leading to deterioration of neighborhoods and also to the image people have of the city. Dutch historian, Maarten van Rossem, for example, calls Den Helder “one of the most miserable places in the Netherlands” (RTVNH, 2013). Statistically, he is right. Den Helder ranks 411th out of 418 municipalities in a study done by Elsevier when looking at best municipalities to live in (Elsevier, 2011).

With the prospect of more budget cuts to the Defence department, the city will most likely continue to suffer. In 2010 more than a third of the labor force in Den Helder worked for the government, including the navy, but not including any indirect navy-related activities or services. Budget reductions in the Department of Defence is one of the reasons for the population decline of Den Helder (Deetman & Mans, 2010). As of May 2013, approximately 56,800 people live in the municipality of Den Helder, consisting of the city itself and the nearby villages of Julianadorp and Huisduinen. This is the lowest population in almost fifty years. In comparison, in 1984 there were almost 64,000 inhabitants (see figure 1) (CBS, 2013).

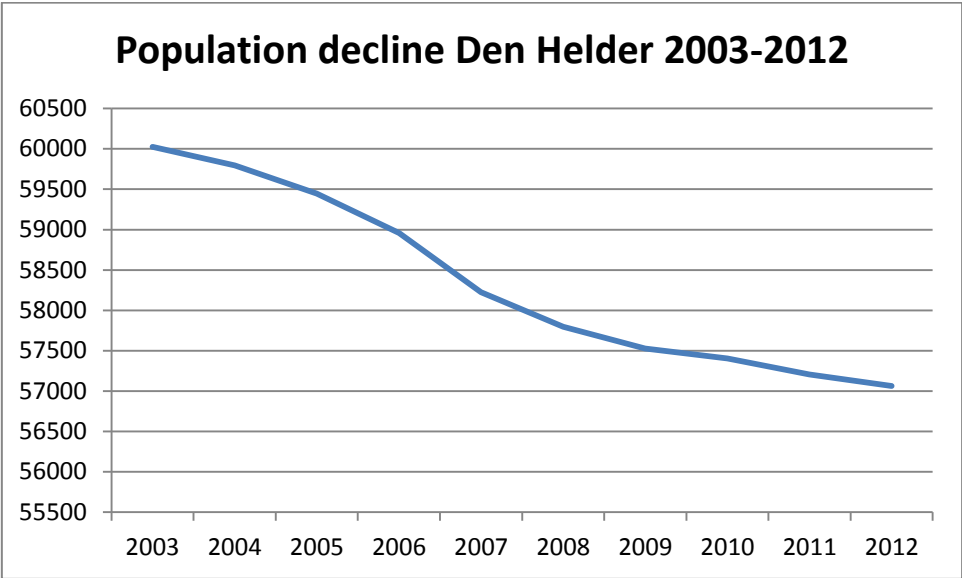


Figure 1. Population decline Den Helder 2003-2012 (CBS Statline, 2013)

The declining population is one of the main issues the city is currently dealing with (Gemeente Den Helder, 2013). According to a study done by the planning ministry (VROM) in 2010, the population of the city of Den Helder is expected to decline even further if the local government does not intervene, no economic growth is to be expected and the living environment will continue to suffer under pressure of the declining population (Deetman & Mans, 2010).

Administrative quagmire

Government interference in public spaces in Den Helder has never been easy. Administratively the city has struggled for years, falling from one political crisis to the other. Only recently the city gained the attention of national news channels when the city council agreed to pay the mortgage of one of the houses of the then Mayor who was living in Rotterdam, resulting in a wave of protests against the council. Most illustrative of the administrative quagmire is that there have been four Mayors in a timespan of only five years (Zembla, 2010). The local government has the stigma of wasting a lot of money on plans that never really become reality, creating a gap between citizens and their democratic representatives (Interview David Cools). The people of Den Helder have lost their trust in the local government, resulting in a low percentage of people voting at elections. In 2006, the voter turn-out was historically low with only 48%, one of the lowest percentages in the country (Zembla, 2010).

Development plan

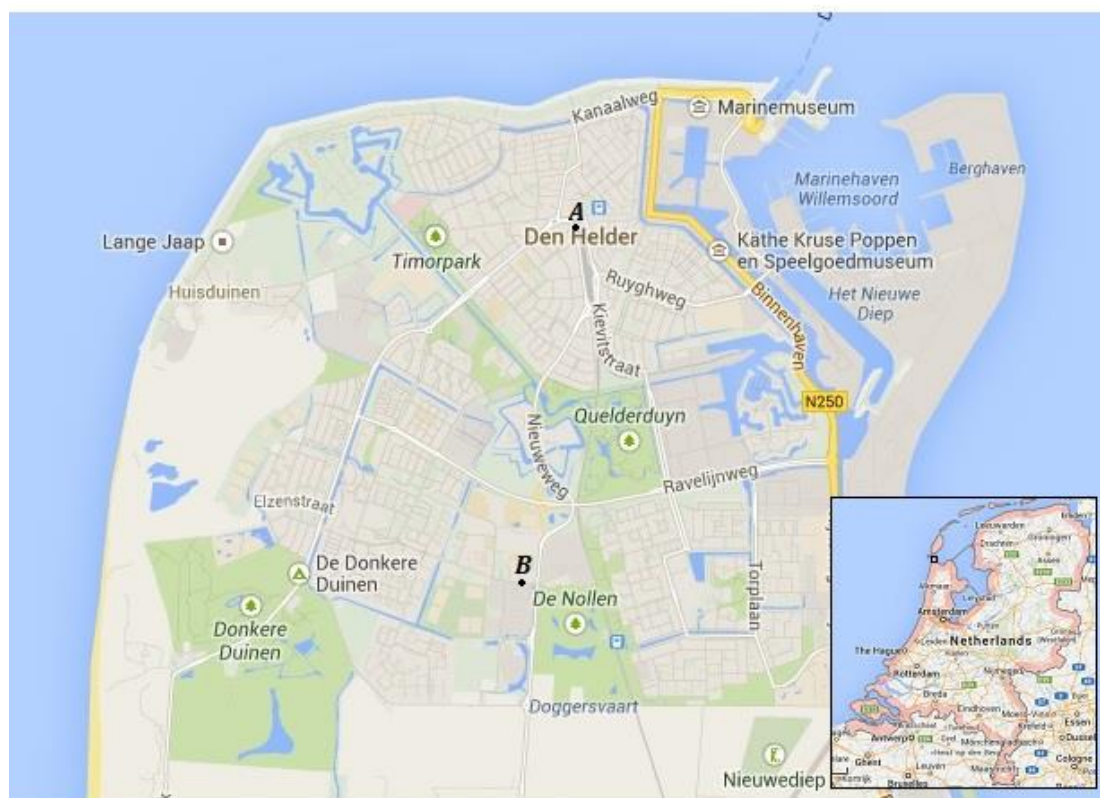
Despite the political struggles, the VROM study in 2010 urged the local government of Den Helder to continue with plans to invest in the city center, and to improve both the living and working environment of the city. According to the study, these plans could trigger economic growth and put Den Helder back on the map as an attractive place to live in (Deetman & Mans, 2010). The decision of the local government to create plans to address the problems the city is dealing with dates back to 2007. That year the municipality of Den Helder collaborated with VROM, the Department of Defence and the province of North-Holland to create plans to revitalize the city center. The collaboration resulted in a development plan for the city center which was adopted by the city council in 2008. This development plan is not a concrete plan, but rather a vision that the local government wants to carry out in developing the city center of Den Helder. The aim of the city development plan was to address the many concerns the city had then, and for the large part still has, dealing with issues such as a reducing population and overdue maintenance of housing. The plan also hoped to reinstate water as the most important element of the identity of Den Helder. Residential streets, shopping streets and the typical Dutch canals are among things that should be given a make-over in realizing this vision (BV Zeestad, 2013). Ultimately the developments in the city center should result in Den Helder becoming a more compact city by intensifying the use of space, reducing the many open spaces the city center currently has. BV Zeestad, an independent development agency, was created to both develop and implement the plans (Interview David Cools).

The planned intervention: City Hall Den Helder

Numerous locations within the city center have been identified as targets in need of developments. These targets include important streets for shopping, the public library, the city theater, parks but also the area surrounding the train station of Den Helder. This particular area is one of the key targets in realizing the wanted outcome of the development plan: intensifying the use of space by

reducing open spaces. One of the proposed elements in intensifying the use of space in this area is the construction of a new city hall, which was adopted by the city council in October 2012 (BV Zeestad, 2013). This decision was, according to the local government, well-grounded and based on a few good reasons and presumptions. They believe the current city hall no longer meets the requirements of being a suitable city hall and was only a temporary solution when moving to that building in 1987 (Gemeente Den Helder, 2013).

The geographical location of the current city hall also plays a part in the decision to construct a city hall in the city center, as it is located on the outskirts of Den Helder (figure 2). As the deputy mayor explains: “A city hall should be in the center of the city” (Interview Pia Bruin). The local government believes that a city hall could serve the public better when located in the city center based on accessibility but also on positive direct and indirect economic effects (Interview David Cools). According to David Cools, project leader for BV Zeestad, it is believed that the spin-off effects of a city hall in the city center could be much higher than currently is the case. The current accommodation costs the municipality of Den Helder more than 2 million euros a year. This money could, according to a feasibility study, also be used to build an entirely new city hall with the certainty of having a good accommodation for the next 40 years at least. An option also considered by the local government was to improve the current accommodation. This, however, would only guarantee the working staff a good accommodation for 15 years (Asselbergs & Feijten, 2012).



A = City Center and proposed site of construction
B = Current City Hall

Figure 2. Map of Den Helder including current city hall location and proposed site of construction

Also problematic are the high costs of energy of the current city hall that are described by the local government as being 'out of this time'. Apart from the high costs, the excessive use of energy in the current city hall is far from being sustainable (Gemeente Den Helder, 2013). In an era of transition towards more green ways of energy consumption and production, sustainable forms of energy systems are becoming increasingly more important worldwide, The Netherlands being no exception. The national government tries to stimulate the use of sustainable forms of energy in order to reduce the high levels of carbon dioxide emissions (Rijksoverheid, 2013). The potential of energy savings in buildings is something the European Union has done extensive research on. According to a study by Ecorys (2012), public buildings such as a city hall, when renovated, could save up to 30% on energy costs. The current city hall has an 'F' rating on the European energy label, having high costs primarily due to heating. This means the city hall, when renovated, could possibly decrease energy costs by as much as 30%. However, the local government opted not to renovate but to build a new city hall instead. Energy use in the new city hall would be rated with an A on the energy label because, as assured by the local government, sustainable forms of energy use will be applied to the building (Gemeente Den Helder, 2013).

The reasoning for moving the city hall is not just based on the condition of the current city hall but should also be largely seen in line with improving the living and working environment of the city center. One of the most important objectives of the development plan is to reduce open spaces, and the area surrounding the train station of Den Helder is such a location in need of developments. According to BV Zeestad, this area 'lacks security and shelter' and 'does not serve any purpose' (Interview David Cools). The train station is experienced by many travelers as being unsafe. A city hall, in combination with the train station, will create the necessary volume needed to intensify the use of space in the city center in that area while at the same time create a secure environment for travelers (Interview David Cools). Figure 3 illustrates the current situation and the wanted outcome after construction of the city hall: intensifying the use of space. This will improve the vitality of the area as the most important gateway to Den Helder (BV Zeestad, 2013).

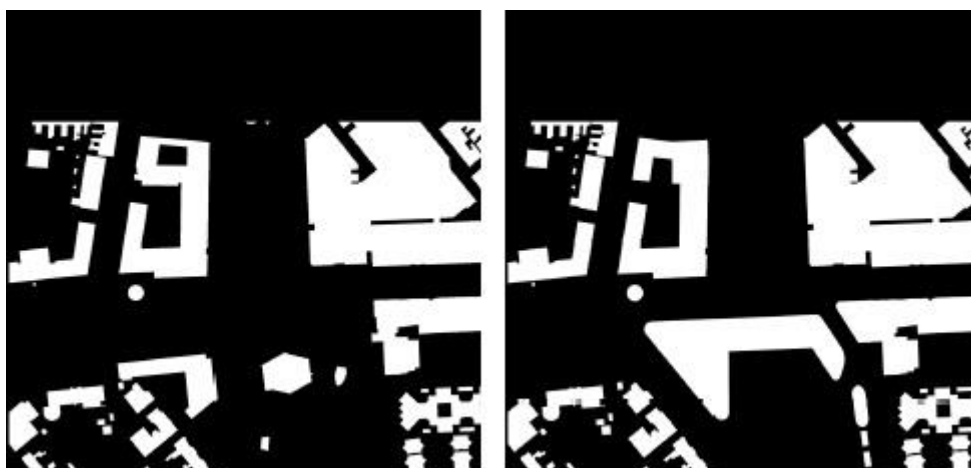


Figure 2. Build environment of train station area
Current situation (left) and planned situation (right) (BV Zeestad, 2013)

The initial plans of 2008 would include a city hall covering a total space of 9250 m² spread over a maximum of seven floors, a parking garage with 160 spaces, 4300 m² of office space and 78 new

houses. This could only be realized by demolition of the current train station, with permission of the NS, and demolition of the old post office located just to the left of the train station. If construction had commenced in 2011 as planned, it would have been completed by 2012 (BV Zeestad, 2013). However, due to citizen resistance and other struggles within the local government, as at the end of 2013 construction has yet to begin.

Citizen resistance

Despite some urgency and necessity, the plans were greeted with mixed feelings by citizens. According to deputy mayor, Ms Pia Bruin, the general feeling among the Den Helder public was positive towards construction of a city hall in the city center (Interview Pia Bruin). Local residents, however, were not so optimistic. Most resistance comes from two streets adjacent to the planned construction site: Boerhaavestraat and Beatrixstraat (figure 4).

Residents from Boerhaavestraat argue that they have not been involved in planning of the city hall from the beginning. They feel neglected by the local government and fear that the city hall will be built against their strong wishes. The local government, according to these citizens, did not even start to involve citizens till after the city council rejected the first proposal to build a new city hall (Interview Residents). According to the council, the direct effects of building a new city hall on that location, specifically the proposed parking options, would lead to 'unwanted circumstances' for the local citizens. The city council passed a motion on the 9th of July in 2012 stating that involving people living in the proximity of the planned construction site should therefore be a requirement in the planning process of the new city hall (Gemeente Den Helder, 2013).

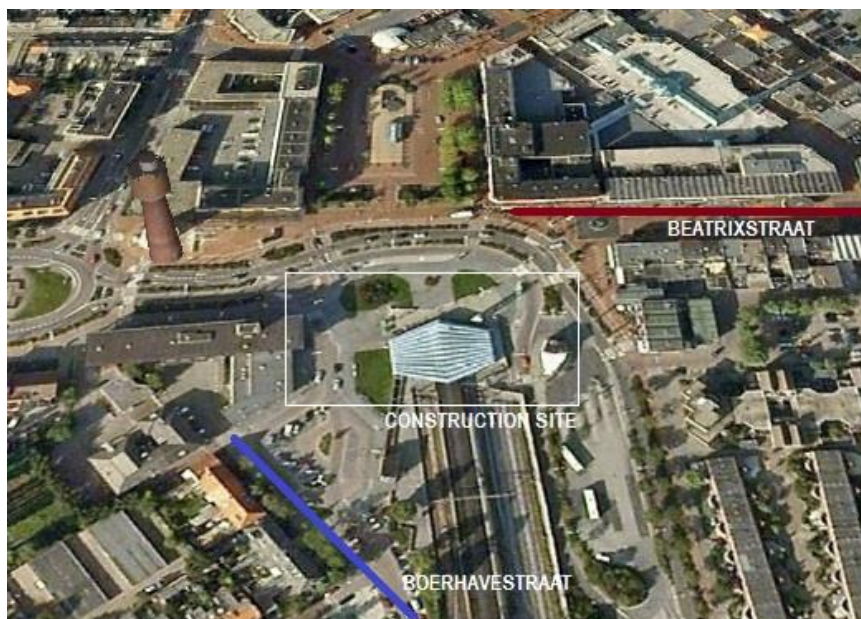


Figure 4. Local resident resistance to planned intervention in Den Helder

While citizens and the city council agreed that citizens should be better involved in the planning process, the council did agree with the plans for building a city hall on this particular location. On the 29th of October 2012, the council finally adopted the plans to construct a new city hall. Local residents continued to challenge the local government, including a referendum, and eventually brought their case to court. They still believed that the necessary steps related to citizen

participation were neglected by the local government. While the motion of the 9th of July clearly stated that residents living in the proximity of the planned construction site should be consulted, residents claim that no action has been taken by the local government or BV Zeestad to involve them in the planning process. Some residents go as far as saying that the citizen participation applied by the local government is based on lies. Henk van Kuijk, an influential resident from Julianadorp, stated: "They say we did not want to talk. That's not true. We want to talk about things that matter, such as the motion of the 9th of July" (Interview Residents). Not just citizens oppose the plan, opposition within the city council is also large. Plans for financing the project were only narrowly adopted by the city council with a margin of just one vote. The city council is not the only governing body divided on the project. Some officials working for the local government believe that the current city hall does not need to be replaced and that citizens should have been involved better (Interview Official).

Citizen participation: from a passive to active role

But what is citizen participation exactly? How could and should citizen participation be applied? It is important to have an understanding of the term 'citizen participation', as there are many different definitions and forms. According to Reddick (2010), citizen participation is the process of providing citizens the opportunity of having a voice in public decisions. This process is often also described by different terms, such as public participation or community involvement. Even though they indicate the same process, their meaning differs from that of citizen participation. Citizen participation differs from public participation because the latter also includes the media and other nongovernmental groups in the participation process (Callahan, 2006). According to some, community participation refers to the involvement of groups, while citizen participation is more about participation of individuals (Haus et al., 2005). To most, however, citizen participation is also about individuals participating as a group (Callahan, 2006). Peeters (2012: 5) defines citizen participation as 'a way of policy making where citizens, individually or as a collective, get the chance to directly or indirectly exert influence on developing, implementing and/or evaluating policy'.

Internationally, the trend of more citizen involvement in policy making started in the 1960s (Michels, 2010). In The Netherlands and other countries, this period was marked by the end of pillarization, a system in which society was divided into different segments based on religious beliefs or ideologies. Within this system, citizens attained a very passive political role, hardly concerned or aware of actions by the 'elite authority'. Social movements in the 1960s, however, changed the role of citizens to a more active one. A growing awareness among citizens in societal issues triggered citizens to become more politically independent. This increased the desire of citizens to participate in decision-making processes by the government, nationally and locally (Michels, 2010). In a decentralized country such as The Netherlands, participation at the local and regional level received most attention. In the last twenty years, local governments have become emancipated, meaning they no longer simply do what they are told by the national government. This has resulted in more local and regional plans, increasing opportunities for citizens to become involved (Hajer et al, 2010).

The transition to a more active role of citizens resulted in increasing opportunities for the public, worldwide, to be involved in policy making. Environmental and social impact assessments have included opportunities for public participation based on three important reasons. First of all the competence of the final decision increases when local knowledge is included. Second, including the

public in the decision making process also increases the legitimacy of the project. Third, public participation is important for democratic governments when decisions affect the public (Webler et al, 1995). In Sweden, a trend has also set in which public participation in environment assessments has moved away from a passive to a more active role. Urban water management in the United States of America moved away from the DAD approach, decide-announce-defend, being replaced by the POP-approach, public owns project. The public is increasingly becoming more sophisticated and demanding, making it vital for the planners to earn the public's trust by sharing data and building up support to implement the plans (Walesh, 1999). Woltjer (2002) also suggests that participatory planning is mostly effective in generating public support, as shown in Dutch infrastructure planning. However, citizen participation could also be used as a means to limit resistance from the public towards decisions made by the (local) government. According to Devine-Wright (2011) citizen participation could create greater acceptance among the public, specifically on the local scale. Creating acceptance through citizen participation could then possibly grant local governments 'a social license to operate'. According to Pike (2012) a social license to operate is the 'acquisition and on-going maintenance of the consent of local stakeholders to specific local projects'. This means that when having a social license to operate one will have ongoing approval and acceptance from the local community and other stakeholders (The Social License To Operate, 2013).

The importance of theory on this subject matter should not be underestimated. As citizen participation continues to be a trending topic in public policy, theories help in increasing the quality of the practice of citizen participation (May, 2007). There are numerous ways to involve citizens in policy making. Arnstein (1969) proposed a 'Ladder of Citizen Participation', including eight different types of participation and non-participation, ranging from manipulation, in which citizens do not participate, to citizen control. These different types of citizen involvement are about the degrees of power citizens have during the planning process and provides a mode for the, as Arnstein explains, "nobodies" to become "somebodies" (Arnstein, 1969). This model, however, contains a hierarchy, meaning that the top of the ladder is more desirable and socially acceptable than the bottom. John May has therefore proposed the 'Star of participation'-model, containing five equally valid options; supporting, acting together, deciding together, consultation and information (May, 2007). The international association for public participation (IAP2), one of the leaders in public participation, has also created a model that is increasingly being adopted by countries worldwide. Similar to the other models, it includes five options of public participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower. Among core values of the IAP2 is the belief that the public, when being affected by a decision, has the right to be involved in the decision-making process (IAP2, 2013).

Citizen participation in The Netherlands

Internationally, a trend has set in of more citizen involvement in the planning processes of projects (Michels & de Graaf, 2010) In most of the West European countries, citizens have become more actively involved in policy making such as forms of collaborative governance, advisory committees and other methods of inclusion (Michels & de Graaf, 2010). The more active role of citizens should, according to Michels & de Graaf (2010), not be exaggerated. Even though citizens have become more involved in policy making, this role is mostly limited to giving just information. From the point of view of local governments, the information provided by citizens could be used as a tool to improve policy making without giving citizens too much power in what is eventually going to be decided, this being also the case in the Netherlands. Citizen participation in the Netherlands is therefore mostly

informative leaving the vertical decision-making model of the government intact (Michels & de Graaf, 2010).

Even though the role of citizens might be limited to being informative most of the time, this form of citizen participation does increase the quality of a democracy. The importance of citizen participation has also been acknowledged by the national government of the Netherlands. In 2009 the department of Binnenlandse Zaken en Koninkrijksrelaties, or the Department of Interior in English terminology, and ProDemos, home of democracy and rule of law, started monitoring the activities of municipalities in The Netherlands related to citizen participation. The purpose of monitoring these activities was to get an idea of how citizens were being involved in policy making of local governments (Peeters, 2012). The study made use of the ladder of participation as discussed by Edelenbos and Monnikhof (2001) to address the role of citizens in the decision-making processes of local governments. This participation model includes five levels of participation; informing, consulting, advising, co-producing and self-control. The methods used by the local governments are described in table 1. The most used form of citizen participation are consultation sessions. Almost all of the 135 municipalities organize these sessions in which groups or the larger public are invited to discuss policy, being mostly informative. Other popular forms of citizen participation are theme meetings, meetings with city, village or neighbourhood residents and surveys (Peeters, 2012).

Method of involving citizens	Municipalities using the method (in %)
Consultation sessions	98
(Theme)meetings	93
City, village, neighbourhood meetings	78
Surveys (written and digital)	73
Internet forum	25
No method(s) used	0,8

Table 1. Citizen participation methods used by local governments (Peeters, 2012)

The fact that only one of 135 the municipalities did not apply any form of citizen participation could indicate that no action by that local government required involving citizens. Dutch law prohibits local governments to not use citizen participation methods in local policy. In January 2007, the national government of the Netherlands adopted new regulation on citizen participation. An important objective of the Wet maatschappelijke ondersteuning (WMO), the law for social support for citizens, was to activate citizens and to increase their involvement in local policy (Ossewaarde et al, 2012). According Article 11 of the WMO, local governments should already involve citizens during policy preparation. Article 12 states that 'representatives of representative organizations' should also be asked for advice before plans of the local government administration are send to the city council for approval. According to article 150 of the municipal law, an ordinance by the local government is needed to establish a set of rules in relation to how residents and other stakeholders are to be involved in municipal policy. This means that local governments should clearly indicate how and when citizens are going to be involved in policy making (Overheid, 2013).

Some important conclusions related to citizen participation in municipalities in the Netherlands are shown by the ProDemos study. Municipalities increasingly adopt citizen participation in their policy documents. However, citizens have not become more actively involved in local policy. This is shown by a negative growth in the use of participation opportunities, such as a referendum. Also, almost

every local government uses some form of citizen participation with consultation sessions being the most popular form (Peeters, 2012).

Citizen participation in Den Helder

The research done by ProDemos on citizen participation included the municipality of Den Helder. Being one of the 135 municipalities, no specific conclusions were made to the municipality of Den Helder on its own. However, based on the general conclusion that citizen participation is on the agenda of local governments, one may assume that this is also the case in Den Helder. Even though research and regulation show that citizens continue to be more involved in local policy, the current state of affairs in Den Helder might show otherwise. At least so according to the citizens currently in dispute over plans of the local government to build a new city hall in the city center, and they have history backing them.

Politically, Den Helder has been struggling for decades. The gap between citizens and the local government is larger than ever, resulting in low election turn-ups but also in many disputes between citizens and their representatives. Many plans of the local government failed because they lacked the support needed from the people (Zembla, 2010). This did not go unnoticed within the national government. Therefore, the province Noord-Holland and the Den Helder municipality collided in addressing the inability of the local government to create sufficient plans. An independent development agency was created, tasked with creating and implementing plans. This development agency, BV Zeestad, was also tasked with involving citizens in the decision-making processes. Apart from some skepticism on the financing of projects, BV Zeestad was a necessary means to address the many problems the city is facing (Interview David Cools). Plans of BV Zeestad, however, also experienced a lot of resistance from Den Helder residents. In 2008, drastic changes to the living environment of a Den Helder neighbourhood were presented by the development agency, removing the parking places of residents in favor of new housing projects. Consultation sessions were used by BV Zeestad to inform and involve residents, but never did these residents have a feeling of being heard (Zembla, 2010). According to Arnstein (1969), informing citizens is often a one-way street, with the officials giving information to citizens whom in turn have few to no opportunities to give feedback. Influence from citizens is therefore slim, especially when plans are already in the final stages of implementation (Arnstein, 1969). The concerned residents in turn proposed an alternative plan that included keeping the new houses without taking away their parking lots. The city council did not approve of the plan, preferring the general interest over that of the residents and claimed it had taken every necessary step related to citizen participation. This was also the verdict of a judge in response to an appeal from 52 residents. Building started only days after the ruling, despite the concerns of the residents (Zembla, 2010). While this case proved to be legally legitimate, one may wonder how large the influence of citizens really is. Plans could be implemented by just organizing a few consultation sessions without really taking into consideration the concerns of the people. As Michels and de Graaf (2010) would then rightly argue, the role of citizens is often just an informative one.

Planning the new City Hall: methods of citizen participation

The situation described above is important because it is one small piece of a larger puzzle. The task of BV Zeestad is to realize the development plan of the city center of Den Helder, which is comprised of different segments, including the new city hall, all having different timelines (BV Zeestad, 2013).

Executing the plan could therefore also be seen as a learning process for BV Zeestad and the local government in involving the public. What went wrong or could have gone better in earlier segments of the development plan could be adjusted during implementation of other segments. Could this case then be described as just an incident or another precedent for what was to come? The methods of citizen participation used by the local government in relation to the new city hall are summed up in table 2. According to David Cools, two forms of citizen participation were applied: involving local residents and a citywide form of participation.

Date	Method	Topic
04-2011	Consultation session with local residents	Urban Development plan
04-2011	Open informative meeting with residents	Project information
05-2011	Consultation session with local residents #2	Urban Development plan
05-2011	Workshop with residents	Project design
06-2011	Consultation session with local residents #3	Urban Development plan
06-2011	Workshop with residents #2	Project design
07-2011	Workshop with residents #3	Project design
09-2011	Presentation project design impressions	Project Design
09-2011	Consultation session with local residents #4	Urban Development plan
10-2011	Public voting on project design impressions	Project design
01-2012	Consultation session with local residents #5	Urban Development plan
03-2012	Open informative meeting with residents	Project information
05-2013	Consultation session with local residents #6	Feedback Urban Development Plan
09-2013	Public voting on final project design	Project design
10-2013	Open informative meeting with residents	Project information
12-2013	Open informative meeting with residents	Project information

Table 2. Timeline Citizen Participation Methods Local Government (Gemeente Den Helder, 2013)

Citizen participation: Local residents involvement

Henk van Kuijk argues that history has been repeated and that the local government failed to properly involve citizens in the decision-making process of the new city hall. “After the Californiestreet situation [the case mentioned above] I told myself that this was not going to happen again. They ignored everything from the citizens” (Interview Henk van Kuijk). This is supported by the local residents of Boerhaavestraat who argue that they have had slim to no chance of participating. They are convinced that their concerns were not even being considered and that the only way to get answers to their questions and concerns was by going to court. “They say we have a voice. Sure, on tiles and flowerbeds. What is happening now is not participation”, argues one of the Boerhaavestraat residents (Interview Residents). Two moments in time are important when looking at how citizens were involved: before and after the 9th of July 2012. On that date, the city council agreed with the suggestion that citizens were not properly involved in the decision-making process.

Before 9 July 2012, numerous consultation sessions with the local residents were organized as a method to involve these people. According to deputy mayor, Pia Bruin, these sessions were taking place in a harmonious setting with the local residents being actively involved (Interview Pia Bruin). During these sessions, details of the urban development plan were discussed, resulting in a few

adjustments to the plan. The initial idea to build a large parking garage close to the new city hall location was changed after complaints of the local residents. Instead, the parking lots will now be built on ground level and less in number. Other important elements of the plan that citizens were concerned about remained unchanged. The attitude of these residents towards the plan then changed from being cooperative to opposing the plan entirely. According to the local government, these citizens missed out on other opportunities to participate after refusing to go to new consultation sessions. The citizens, however, say that after the motion of 9 July, the opportunities to participate only lessened and felt that their only remaining option was to go to court and challenge the fact that the local government did nothing with their objections (Interview residents).

Would the opposing citizens have reacted otherwise if the city hall were to be built on a different location? Deputy mayor, Pia Bruin, believes so, stating: "Plans always trigger opposition. For some people a city hall in your backyard might be a problem". Project leader of BV Zeestad, David Cools, also believes that the resistance among local residents was primarily due to the fear of unwanted effects during and after construction, such as a limited view, noise and crowding of streets. They also believe that full support will never be gained from citizens living in the proximity of a construction site, support should be found in the entire city and that is exactly what the local government has tried to do. Because most of the opposition comes from citizens living in the proximity of the proposed site of construction one may conclude that the reaction of the local residents could be a case of NIMBY ('not-in-my-backyard'). This means that even though public support might be high throughout the city local opposition is triggered because of the belief they will be negatively affected by the proposed project (Devine-Wright, 2011). However, some researchers believe that local opposition could be attributed to traditional planning approaches in which there is not much room for citizens to be involved in the decision-making process. This has been the case for projects with high chances of opposition among locals, such as energy renewal projects. Devine-Wright proposes "analytic-deliberative methods" that involve citizens in the earlier stages of the decision-making processes of projects, reducing the negative responses of the public. He also believes that it is important for planners to figure out what the place means to the people and why they are attached to it (Devine-Wright, 2011).

Place attachment is the affective bond or link people have with specific places, both physically and socially (Hidalgo, 2001). The Boerhaavestraat residents clearly show a deep attachment to the future construction site. Especially the open structure of the city is something the residents deeply enjoy, stating: "Den Helder is about space, it is known for its low building profile and we want to keep that" (Interview residents). Apart from enjoying the openness of the location, the residents also feel attached to certain historic buildings that are planned to be destroyed in favor of a new city hall. This includes the old post office and the current train station. The latter was even considered to be nominated as a monumental building of the NS, the national railway company. The NS however opted to go along with plans of the local government to integrate a new train station in the new city hall. Because the NS did not want to renovate in the near future, it provided the city with a solution to the deterioration of the building and an unsafe feeling among travelers. Also important to feeling attached to a certain place is the idea of rootedness (Hidalgo, 2001). Most of the Boerhaavestraat residents feel physically attached to their neighbourhood, a place they have lived in for decades and that is now subject to change. According to Devine-Wright, planners should take this attachment of people to a certain place seriously when deciding to intervene. The residents of Boerhaavestraat feel

that the local government has failed in trying to understand what the place means to them and fear that their bond with the place will be negatively affected after construction.

Did the local residents have a say in what was going to be decided? Yes, but only minimal. Project leader, David Cools, admits that the local residents only played a minor role in the decision-making process, stating: “Building a city hall there was a given. The only thing we can do is consider the interests of the local residents and adjust the plan where possible, but only in the margins” (Interview David Cools). The role of the local residents remained merely informative. It is therefore important to involve citizens in the early stages of policy preparation. Research by Devine-Wright has shown that local opposition towards energy renewal projects could be limited when these residents are informed and involved early on. For the local residents, communication started simply too late. Henk van Kuijk believes that the problems could have avoided when a referendum was initialized by the local government, with the simple question if a new city hall is what the people of Den Helder want or not.

Citizen participation: citywide involvement

The citywide participation was a success according to BV Zeestad. Apart from informative meetings open for the public numerous workshops with Den Helder residents, including some locals, were organized to discuss the design of the new city hall. The result of this collaboration were three impressions of a city hall design on which the public could then cast their vote. The turn-up of voters was low, primarily because the local government failed to raise attention. The local government therefore decided to organize another voting on the city hall design (Interview Pia Bruin). Social media were used and each household of Den Helder received a letter to cast their vote on a website. The citizens of Den Helder were presented with three options which were based on the workshops but also on the consultation sessions with locals and other residents of Den Helder. These options included a design destroying both the train station and post office, a design keeping both buildings and a design keeping only the post office. To the disappointment of the opposition, the voting did not, however, include the option of no city hall at all. Another website was therefore created by the opposition including the option not to be build a new city hall (Den Helder actueel, 2013). The combined results of both websites are shown in table 3. A total of 8390 votes were cast by Den Helder inhabitants.

Design option	Votes in %
Complete new construction, destroying old post office and train station	72%
Construction, keeping old post office destroying train station	8%
Construction, keeping old post office and train station	4%
No construction	16%

Table 3. Voting on city hall design (Boutkan, 2013)

While the results clearly indicate that the majority of the people of Den Helder support completely the new construction, it remains odd that the local government decided to not include the option of no construction. Citizens were therefore only consulted on details of the plan such as the design but had no say in whether or not the city hall should be build. Deputy mayor, Pia Bruin, however, believes that the general public of Den Helder is in a favor of the plans and that the process of

participation has had a significant contribution to the acceptance among people. Figure 5 shows the design the people of Den Helder voted on most.



Figure 5. Design of city hall as chosen by Den Helder residents (stadhuisdenhelder.nl, 2013)

Conclusion and discussion

Spatial planning in the Netherlands is a crossroad of many needs and interests of the different actors involved. The task of spatial policy is to prevent these interests from colliding with one another. Instead they should be fine-tuned to create, as much as possible, harmonious situations (Hajer et al., 2010). While local governments and citizens will most likely continue to struggle with one another, it is important to create political acceptance. BV Zeestad has played an important role in creating political acceptance through the process of citizen participation. Numerous methods of citizen participation were applied and even though local opposition remains, the general public seems to accept the plans of the local government to build a new city hall.

The case study of Den Helder raises some questions about how much influence citizens really have. The general interest of the Den Helder people was preferred over that of the local residents whom will be directly affected by the planned intervention. While some details of the plan were adjusted to their benefit, their role was only minor. Therefore the project did not have a social license to operate because the local government failed to create local acceptance. It resulted in the local residents going to court as a last means to fight the decision. However, the legal framework for citizen participation in the Netherlands will in most cases not be in favor of citizens. Regulation necessitates local governments in involving citizens, but do not clearly indicate how this process should take place (Overheid, 2013). This case study therefore also shows that citizens are dependent on local governments in how they are going to be involved (Barnes et al., 2007). The European Union has also recognized the shortcomings of regulation related to citizen participation. During a ministerial conference in November of 2009 in Utrecht, the Netherlands, numerous member states of the Council of Europe agreed on new regulation giving people the right to participate in decision-making processes of local authorities, including procedures the local governments have to abide by. These procedures include referendums, consultation and other methods of citizen participation (Overheid, 2013b). The regulation was ratified by The Netherlands on June the 1st of 2012 and is an important step in the direction of more citizen participation. This could possibly move citizens up the ladders of

citizen participation to having more influence in the decision-making process than just giving information, as discussed by Michels and de Graaf (2010).

While citizens in The Netherlands may often only play an informative role in the decision-making process, the importance of citizen participation should not be underestimated. Even when participation is only informative it does have positive effects on democracy. According to Michels and de Graaf (2010), citizens are becoming more engaged when involved in policy making. It also creates a mutual understanding between local governments and citizens, even when this understanding does not lead to more citizen involvement. Last, it increases the legitimacy of the decisions made by local governments (Michels and de Graaf, 2010). As the case study of Den Helder shows, even though local opposition is high, acceptance among the general public is great. But research has also shown that especially local opposition could be limited when these citizens are involved in the early stages of the decision-making process, something the local government of Den Helder failed to do. The process of citizen participation could certainly have gone better and could have created more acceptance among local residents as well.

Residents of Den Helder have until the end of January to file complaints related to the development plan of the new city hall. After this date the development plan will be ratified by the local government, meaning that building may commence in 2014. This means that the long feared consequences of construction will become reality for the local residents. It might also mean that the local residents may never really accept the new city hall and that their attachment to their neighbourhood may be forever altered. Involvement of citizens in the early stages of project cycles should therefore be a requirement to ensure acceptance among local residents and the general public. Even though citizen participation in Den Helder and other municipalities is still far from being where it should be, informing and consulting citizens already increases the legitimacy and acceptance of projects. Social impact assessments could be another solution to the negative responses of the public towards certain projects. According to Vanclay (2003), social impact assessments 'analyze, monitor and manage the unintended and intended consequences of planned interventions', such as policies and projects. By looking at the consequences of a policy in advance, social impact assessments could create more community engagement and therefore produce greater acceptance among those directly affected by the planned intervention (Vanclay, 2003).

However, signs of a transition towards another form of participation might be the biggest chance for citizens to become more involved in policy making: government participation. The Netherlands might be on the brink of this important transition. Each year on the third Tuesday of September, the Dutch national government, by means of King Willem-Alexander, presents its policy for the upcoming year. The role of citizens in society was also addressed during the presentation, stating that citizens should take more responsibility in bettering society with the national government taking on a more supportive role. Ultimately, society in the Netherlands should move away from citizen participation to the process of government participation: the government will participate, not the other way around. Self-control, self-reliance, and self-organization are terms associated with the role citizens take on in this form participation (Rijksoverheid, 2013a). Citizens could then position themselves on the highest ladders of citizen participation, creating and controlling policy with the support of the (local) government. This also means that municipalities will create less policy and when they do the role of citizens will be an important one. However, as this process is relatively new, more research should be done on the effects of government participation on citizens and how much influence

citizens could then really have. For the local residents in Den Helder, however, the shift to government participation is a little too late.

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