

# Arguments for involving the public in water management: evidence from local and regional water plans in the Netherlands

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## Abstract

Public participation has become increasingly important in the water sector. However, the question remains as to what exactly is meant by participation. This paper explores the different ways that participation is understood in local and regional water plans and visions in the Dutch water sector. Partly driven by the key role played by participatory water management under the European Water Framework Directive, citizens' engagement has become an important aspect in the plans of authorities across the board that are involved in water management. The study concludes that the most dominant view on participation is very narrow, with a strong focus on clarification and on raising awareness. According to a second, less dominant view on participation, it is stressed that the role of participation is to produce information, knowledge, and expertise to support policy making. As a consequence, power relations between government and the public remain very much top down, with very little room for bottom-up ideas.

*Keywords:* Communication; Policy support; Public participation; Social learning; Water plans; Water policy

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## Introduction

Public participation has become increasingly important in the water sector. Public engagement is considered to improve the quality of decision outcomes, generate legitimacy in the process, and solve water-related conflicts (Glucker *et al.*, 2013; OECD, 2014). For the past twenty years, all World Water Forums have highlighted the critical role of multi-actor partnerships, participatory approaches, alliances, networks and dialogues, and the need for multi-stakeholder platforms to support the effective management of water resources and services (OECD, 2015). Also, public participation requirements in the European Water Framework Directive (WFD) make it incumbent upon member states to inform and consult the public and to encourage the active involvement of all interested parties in its implementation.

The increasing attention to public engagement in the water sector has followed a general paradigm shift; modern Western governments at every level are increasingly seeking to involve the public in their steering efforts (Torfing *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, an idea that is gaining prevalence in the public

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administration literature is that, due to increasingly complex policy challenges and the changing capacity of governments to pursue collective interests, government by the hierarchical state is slowly being replaced by what is called ‘governance’ in inter-organizational networks and communities (Kickert *et al.*, 1997; Rhodes, 1997; Pierre, 2000; Pierre & Peters, 2000; Kjaer, 2004; Sørensen & Torfing, 2005; Teisman *et al.*, 2009). Engaging the public in policy decisions allows policy makers to tap into wider sources of information, perspectives and possible solutions, and improves the quality of decisions reached (OECD, 2001; Edelenbos, 2005; Michels & De Graaf, 2010).

In the Dutch water sector, too, driven in part by the key role played by participatory water management under the EU WFD, citizen engagement has become an important aspect in the plans of all the authorities involved in water management (Frijns *et al.*, 2013). However, the question remains as to what exactly is meant by participation. Previous research among professionals involved in participation in environmental governance revealed varying and potentially conflicting rationales for participation, with instrumental and legalistic rationales dominating (Wesselink *et al.*, 2011). Some suggest that public participation is too often seen as a virtue, thus underestimating its instrumental aspects (Van der Heijden & Ten Heuvelhof, 2013). Also, the diffuse wording in international and European policy may allow for variations in the interpretation of what participation in fact entails (Aggestam, 2014, p. 64).

This paper seeks to unravel what exactly is meant by participation in official water plans. Water plans lay down how and why the public should be involved, and thus implicitly reveal how participation should be understood. The present paper adds to the existing literature on participation in the water sector, first by developing an analytical framework based on different strands of literature that distinguishes three lines of argument for participation. Subsequently, this framework is used to explore the different ways that participation is understood in local and regional water plans in the Dutch water sector. The central question of this paper is: what are the dominant views on and arguments supporting public participation in local and regional water plans in the Netherlands? The Netherlands combines a strong tradition of consensus democracy and corporatist interest representation with an open attitude towards more direct forms of dialogue and public participation (Duyvendak & Krouwel, 2001; Denters & Klok, 2005; Michels, 2011), and is therefore an interesting case to study the sort of arguments that are used in promoting participation in water management.

This paper starts with an overview of three of the main lines of argument for participation discussed in the literature, with a focus on the water sector. These arguments are derived from different theoretical sources, notably literature on communication, public administration, and deliberation. Three types of arguments will be briefly discussed: the awareness and responsibility argument, the policy and support argument, and the social learning and innovation argument. The second section provides some background about the Dutch case and explains how the empirical research was conducted. The third section presents the arguments that are being used in Dutch water plans and policy documents in a local and regional context. The paper concludes with a summary of the main findings and some thoughts about the implications of these for the future debate about participation in the water sector.

### **Three lines of argument**

In the literature on participation, participation is widely regarded as vital to policy making. However, there is less agreement on what public participation exactly entails in relation to existing government

institutions, what its goals are, and how these should be achieved. Below, three types of arguments are discussed, each of which emphasize different aspects of participation: the awareness and responsibility argument, the policy and support argument, and the social learning and innovation argument.

#### *Awareness and responsibility*

Governments need the involvement of the public (*participation*) in addressing water management issues. But, policy measures in this area will be effective and accepted by the people only if the people are *aware* of the seriousness of the problems and fully support the measures that have to be taken. The central claim of this first argument is that the public therefore needs to be convinced of the seriousness of the problem and the measures that have to be taken. Participation in this context has a narrow meaning and refers to the process of becoming engaged, rather than taking up an active role.

Communication is seen as the main instrument to involve the public and to enhance awareness (Hartley, 2006; Khan & Gerrard, 2006; Russell & Hampton, 2006). A successful communications programme will require policy makers to define and identify the aims of communication, to organize early and continuous communication, and to listen to stakeholders and seek clarification (Khan & Gerrard, 2006, pp. 196–197). Although many authors emphasize the need for communication that is in interaction with citizens and other stakeholders, respecting each other's views and options, communication programmes are often designed as top-down, one-way instruments with a dominant focus on clarification and explanation (Sefton & Sharp, 2007; Winnubst, 2011).

Experiences with participation in implementing the WFD in the Netherlands and other countries show how one-way communication as an approach to public participation can sometimes lead to an information overload and, as such, might even form a barrier for involvement. Article 14 of the WFD requires member states to ensure public participation (Behagel & Turnhout, 2011). This article mentions three forms of public participation: information supply, consultation, and active involvement, but leaves a wide margin of discretion to the member states as regards the interpretation thereof. Past experience with involving the public in the implementation of the WFD in the Netherlands has shown that consultation is limited and that there is a strong focus on information supply. Not only did citizens receive an overload of information through websites, newsletters, and brochures (Van der Heijden & Ten Heuvelhof, 2013), the websites mainly provided information and almost no opportunity for citizens to respond or interact. Other stakeholders were also confronted with huge amounts of information, mostly in the form of documents that were written in a highly technical and legal language, which made for difficult reading for many parties. Similar complaints about information that was too technical, bulky, or unorganized emerged in a study on the implementation of the WFD in twenty countries (De Stefano, 2010) and in studies in Germany and the Czech Republic (Van der Heijden & Ten Heuvelhof, 2013, pp. 184–185).

Another aim of communication is to cause a change in attitudes, which ultimately should lead to behavioural change. Awareness alone is not enough. The ultimate goal is for people to feel a desire to take more *responsibility* for their own environment, and thus contribute to policy goals in the area of water and environment. However, as social psychological research has shown, it is no mean feat to bring about a real change, not only in attitudes, but also in actual behaviour. The failure of the awareness campaign on water conservation in the metropolitan area of Barcelona to change the behaviour of the population living in houses with gardens and swimming pools is just one example that shows how difficult this can

be (March *et al.*, 2013). Water communication campaigns sometimes appear to be successful in raising awareness but fail to affect the attitudes and behaviour of people.

### *Policy and support*

Central to the second argument is the instrumental function of participation. The argument runs as follows: in order to achieve *support* for policy decisions, the ideas, suggestions, and views of the public have to be taken into account (*participation*). Engaging the public in policy decisions allows policymakers to tap into wider sources of information, perspectives and possible solutions, and improves the quality of the decisions reached (OECD, 2001; Edelenbos, 2005; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Based on work by Blackstock & Richards (2007) and Stirling (2006), Wesselink *et al.* (2011) have formulated the following definition of what they call the instrumental rationale of participation. They write: ‘effective participation makes decisions more legitimate and improves results. It aims to restore public credibility, diffuse conflicts, justify decisions, and limit future challenges to implementation by ‘creating ownership’. Policy goals are not open for discussion; only the details are (to a lesser or greater extent). It hereby supports incumbent interests’ (Wesselink *et al.*, 2011, p. 2690).

The main instrument to involve the public and to make use of these wider sources of information, perspectives, and possible solutions, is to let citizens and stakeholders participate in policy making. There are a wide variety of mechanisms and techniques available for engaging the public. Arnstein (1969), for example, developed a ladder of participation which categorizes participation according to the level of involvement of participants in the decision-making process. In water, the *User’s Guide on Assessing Water Governance* (UNDP Water Governance Facility, 2013) provides a similar typology. The role of citizens and stakeholders ranges from ‘lower’ forms such as consultation and giving advice to ‘higher forms’, such as co-production and partnerships, and decision-making power.

Participatory policy making operates on the premise that citizens and stakeholders take an active role in the policy process (Michels, 2012). In water-related decision making, as in other areas of decision making, the concepts of interactive policy making, governance networks, collaborative processes, or co-production are used to indicate the involvement of stakeholders, citizens, experts, and bureaucrats in policy making. Different techniques are mentioned, such as interviews, focus groups, workshops, stakeholder meetings, or ‘kitchen table conversations’ (De Graaff *et al.*, 2009; Edelenbos *et al.*, 2011; Van Buuren *et al.*, 2012; Van Meerkerk *et al.*, 2015).

Flood risk management in the Netherlands provides a good example of a change towards a more collaborative governance logic in which governmental actors, working together with private and societal actors, look for integral solutions to water challenges in which they try to combine water safety with other values (Van Buuren *et al.*, 2012). This new policy approach was driven by the river floods of 1993 and 1995, and meant a cautious transition from hierarchy and the dominant position of the water authorities to network coordination and a stronger role for the provinces and municipalities in water management. A study of the Noordwaard case shows how this was done: through interactive meetings, provinces, municipalities, and regional stakeholders were asked to give advice about the future plans for the Noordwaard. Although the process started as an open interactive process, it became more closed when the managers from the process failed to secure the support of the government managers of the central government.

The case shows that while interactive policy making may lead to suggestions for improving decision making, it may also be problematic due to differences in interests and orientations (also Edelenbos *et al.*,

2011). Furthermore, interactive policy-making processes may fail due to several other reasons, such as a lack of urgency felt by citizens and stakeholders (as was the case in a participatory watershed management process in Omaha in the USA; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004) or when the outcome of the process is likely to be ignored.

### *Social learning and innovation*

Central to the third line of argument is that participation should lead to better and *innovative* solutions. In order to achieve these solutions, those affected by a collective decision should *participate* in the production of that decision (Dryzek & List, 2003). Participation in this context refers to the involvement of a diverse group of people who engage in dialogue with experts and political leaders. This participation rationale aims to increase the breadth and depth of information and thereby the quality of decisions; it ignores power issues, and makes it possible to change policy goals (Wesselink *et al.*, 2011, p. 2690).

Equality and mutual respect are necessary conditions to contribute to social learning and innovative solutions. Social learning is assumed to be an exploratory stepwise process where actors experiment with innovations until they meet constraints and new boundaries (Pahl-Wostl, 2009, p. 358). It is viewed as essential for developing and sustaining the capacity of different authorities, interest groups, experts, and the public to manage complex problems (Pahl-Wostl, 2002, 2009).

Dialogue and deliberation are considered to be the main instruments for social learning and for giving voice to a diversity of opinions (Dryzek, 2000). Deliberation involves discussion and the exchange of arguments, that is, dialogue rather than debate. A deliberative process assumes free public reasoning, equality, mutual respect, and the inclusion of different interests. In the water sector, different instruments have been used to foster dialogue. To give some examples: Kallis (2006) reported on scenario workshops, mediated modelling, and social multi-criteria evaluation in water resource planning in Southern Europe; Abels (2007) discussed the working of so-called participatory Technology Assessments, including consensus conferences and citizens' forums; and Davies examined the Decision Theater, such as the WaterSim model which was used to support the dialogue between stakeholders in water governance in Phoenix (Davies *et al.*, 2012, p. 353).

Several authors have asserted that deliberation and dialogue are successful in fostering social learning and innovative solutions in response to complex and continuously changing problems (Huitema *et al.*, 2010; Hajer & Huitzing, 2012). They suggest that the greatest opportunities for learning arise in settings where multiple actors collectively discuss problems, potential solutions, and the effects of measures (Huitema *et al.*, 2010).

An analysis of participatory processes in European river basin management showed that the participants not only obtained a better understanding of the issues at stake, they also came to know and appreciate each other's perspectives as a result of the participatory process (Mostert *et al.*, 2007). Empirical research on the aspect of policy learning of the citizens' juries that examined water management in the Dutch part of the Rhine basin, however, shows that the level of policy learning may differ between the jury participants and policymakers; the researcher found that the jurors underwent high levels of learning, while relatively low levels of policy learning occurred among the policymakers (Huitema *et al.*, 2010). Fear of losing control over the decision process by the institutions of representative democracy was a clear factor that inhibited learning.

All arguments for participation are somehow linked to the idea of achieving legitimacy. In the first line of argument, participation and awareness are seen as necessary conditions for a better understanding

of government policy and support for policy goals and measures. According to the second line of argument, participation through delivering ideas and suggestions improves results and enhances the legitimacy of decisions, that is, ensures these are more broadly supported by the public at large. The third line of argument is premised on the idea that opening up the policy process to new and different visions and perspectives may lead to innovative views and solutions that make policy more legitimate in the long run.

The different lines of argument are summarized in [Table 1](#), which shows the goals, main instruments, and the relation between public participation and government.

### Empirical research: background and methodological approach

The Netherlands combines a strong tradition of consensus democracy and corporatist interest representation with an open attitude towards more direct forms of dialogue and public participation (Duyvendak & Krouwel, 2001; Michels, 2008; Michels, 2011). The Dutch struggle against water is often even seen as the basis for what has become known as the ‘polder model’: policy making with a strong emphasis on cooperation and consensus seeking.

Water management in the Netherlands is highly decentralized: provinces and municipalities have a broad responsibility, while regional water authorities are responsible for a number of specific tasks. Regional water authorities, also known as water boards, are functional administrative bodies in which residents, companies, landowners, and environmental agencies are represented, and whose history dates back to the thirteenth century. It is often claimed that these were the first Dutch democratic organizations (Dicke & Meijerink, 2006). Roles and responsibilities for water management were last updated in the 2009 Water Act. Regional water authorities, of which there are twenty-four, manage the regional water systems to maintain water levels, water quality, and wastewater treatment. The twelve provinces supervise the regional water authorities, develop groundwater plans, and draw up regulations. The municipalities, 408 in total, are responsible for the sewerage collection systems, urban drainage, and storm water collection in urban areas (OECD, 2014, pp. 30–33).

The European WFD (2000) was aimed at streamlining legislation and creating a single system of water management. It also stated that member states must inform and consult the public, and it encouraged the involvement of interested parties in its implementation. The 2011 Administrative Agreement on Water Affairs (*Bestuursakkoord Water*) of the Union of Local Governments (Vereniging Nederlandse Gemeenten), the Dutch Water Authorities (Unie van Waterschappen), and the Interprovincial Dialogue

Table 1. Arguments for participation.

	Relation of government–public participation	Goal ( <i>why</i> )	Instrument ( <i>how</i> )
Awareness and responsibility	Top-down	Change in awareness and responsibility	Communication
Policy and support	Top-down with some room for bottom-up ideas	Information and support for policy goals and measures	Consultation and co-production
Social learning and innovation	Equal relations	Innovative views and solutions	Dialogue

(Interprovinciaal Overleg), emphasizes the shared responsibility of governments at all levels for the management of the water system and requires provincial governments, regional water authorities, and municipalities to develop a water plan. The National Water Plan provides for the main elements of the national water policy, but has no mandatory impact on regional or local water plans. The Delta Programme, which was first introduced in 2010, aims to promote coordination. It was designed in cooperation with the central government, the provinces, regional water authorities, and municipalities, and serves as a tool to mitigate segmented working methods and scattered responsibilities between the different levels of government (OECD, 2014, p. 126).

The main water problems confronting local and regional governments or likely to confront them in the near future are addressed in their plans and programmes, and include: flooding due to a large amount of precipitation and high groundwater levels, water nuisance problems (water on the streets), the risk of water shortages – a risk that may rise in the future owing to the changing climate – and the water quality of regional surface waters (OECD, 2014, pp. 51–71).

This study examines the views on participation that are expressed in official policy documents, such as water plans and vision documents of municipalities, provinces, and regional water authorities. Plans and visions on water policy and management published by (local or provincial) governments or regional water authorities and running at least until 2015 and explicitly addressing the topic of involving or engaging citizens were reviewed. All in all, forty-five documents were collected. To investigate the arguments used in these plans, it was important to select those subsections and phrases related to participation. In order to do so, a number of key words were used, such as public participation, citizen participation, involving citizens/the public, citizens/the public in combination with engagement, involvement etc., and citizens' initiatives in water. Note that public and citizens' engagement in this study refer to both individual citizens, residents, farmers, businessmen, fishermen, and their organizations.

Table 2 gives an overview of the types of documents and cases that were included in this study.

## Results: involving the people in addressing water issues

This section addresses the question of what the dominant views on and arguments for public participation in water policy in the Netherlands are by examining the arguments used in local and regional water plans and visions in the Dutch water sector.

Table 2. Documents and cases.

Document type	Number of documents	Examples
Local water plans	15	Den Bosch, Arnhem, Soest, Bergen, Castricum, Heiloo
Provincial water plans	5	Gelderland, Zuid-Holland, Utrecht
Water plans prepared by regional water authorities	8	Waterschap de Dommel, Stichtse Rijnlanden
Water plans resulting from a collaboration between a municipality and regional water authorities	14	Den Haag and regional water authority Delfland, Overbetuwe and the Rivierenland water authority
Other	3	Friesland, municipalities in Friesland, and the Friesland regional water authority

### *Awareness and responsibility*

We start with arguments that are related to the awareness and responsibility line of argument. These are by far the most commonly used arguments in the policy documents. They were employed in thirty-seven of the documents perused within the scope of this study. The use of this line of argument results in an interpretation of what participation should entail that is very narrow. Participation of the public is considered to be necessary for a sustainable water system. Participation and communication are often used in the same sentence; communicating with the people and giving them the relevant information are considered to be key elements of a communication and participation approach.

The main aim of a communication and participation approach is to raise awareness. Raising awareness refers to a number of different issues. Raising awareness first of all involves increasing knowledge about water and a water system. Citizens and interested parties should understand water issues, water risks, and water problems. Secondly, raising awareness refers to the public's knowledge and understanding of what to expect when policy measures are required to be taken (e.g. the Leischendam-Voorburg water plan). It should help to create understanding and support for policy measures and necessary investments (various water plans). And, thirdly, raising awareness refers to a change in attitudes. Dutch citizens take water security and quality for granted. As a consequence, they tend to ignore water risks and functions when they develop property, and show little concern about water pollution (OECD, 2014, p. 18). The policy documents reveal that local and regional governments in the Netherlands are aware of these risks and are attempting to change the public's attitudes towards water. They use phrases such as: 'water should be a more important aspect of daily life' (Dordrecht water plan; Ede water plan), and 'residents and companies should be more aware of their role in water management'. As one of the water plans notes, 'water should be part of everyone's mind-set' (Moerdijk water plan).

Communication is seen as an important instrument to involve people in water issues and to raise awareness. For this purpose, governments report that they use various traditional communication tools, such as information leaflets and letters, digital information on websites, and information meetings. Other tools are also mentioned in the water plans, such as water-related education programmes developed specifically for primary schools, a water campaign week with a large variety of activities such as a bicycle tour and special attention for water locations in the city (Dordrecht and Den Bosch), and a sustainable Delft day, where the different partners involved in water resources get together and meet (Delft).

But, as is stated in many of the documents, water awareness alone is not sufficient; it should be followed by a change in the public's behaviour with respect to water; the public should be encouraged to take greater responsibility for water issues. In the vision and plan documents examined within the scope of this study, several examples are given. The municipality of Katwijk and the Rijnland Water Authority want to encourage a more sustainable use of rainwater and are stimulating the use of water barrels (Katwijk and Rijnland water plan). Several governments (Rotterdam, Katwijk, Den Bosch) are promoting the construction of green or living roofs on private houses. Others are encouraging people to disconnect their downspouts from the existing sewerage system (e.g. Arnhem).

Communication is also used as the main tool to encourage people to take responsibility for their own environment. But here, communication is meant to activate people and may thus also take other forms. Projects that may inspire other people are presented in so-called inspiration books or on special occasions, where partners involved in water meet. Another example is a water barrel campaign,



aimed at encouraging people to use water barrels. Also, workshops and courses are organized in several cities to inspire and help people to design green gardens or to disconnect their downspouts.

### *Policy and support*

A second group of commonly used arguments relates to the line of argument that emphasizes that, in order to achieve support for policy decisions, the ideas, suggestions, and views of the public have to be taken into account. Participation in this context refers to a more active involvement of the public and may take many forms, such as consultation and co-production.

Sometimes this argument is formulated in very general terms of achieving water policy goals; participation through consultation or collaboration with (organized) citizens, farmers, and other interested organizations is seen as necessary in order to realize policy goals with respect to water, water quality, and the implementation of water policy measures (water plans Gelderland, province of Utrecht, Soest).

Even more abstract terms, such as support or legitimacy and trust, are used as well to emphasize the relevance of participation and the involvement of interested parties. A few examples of how this is addressed in the water policy documents will illustrate this point. In the water plan of Haarlemmermeer and the regional Rijnland water authority, the participation of residents and interested parties is seen as a means to check their support for the vision and the barriers and solutions laid down in the water plan. In the case of the Arnhem water plan, the introduction of a citizens' platform was designed not only to bring in knowledge and creativity but also to contribute to the acceptance of and support for the policy developed by the water partners. The De Dommel regional water authority has indicated that it wishes to meet and talk with farmers; this should, according to the water authority, build more trust among this group (de Dommel water plan).

In almost half of the water plans in this study, it is stressed that the role of participation is to produce information, knowledge, and expertise to support policy making. Going through the policy documents, there are basically two reasons why governments would wish to gain information and knowledge from the public. A first reason is that government authorities want to have a clear and more complete picture of the situation and to identify barriers and opportunities. In order to do so, they want to share information with the public and to identify problems and solutions (examples are the water plans of Leidschendam-Voorburg, Bergen, Amersfoort, and Bommelerwaard). Citizens and organizations are asked to actively participate in contributing information about problems and solutions. Participation here usually takes the form of consultation. In some cases, citizens are consulted on an *ad hoc* basis. In other cases, first, consultations are held, in which experts and a panel made up of members of local interest groups take part, on the basis of which water plans are subsequently drafted (water plans of Katwijk, Stichtse Rijnlanden and Amersfoort, Bergen). Again in other cases, a more permanent form of consultation is chosen, such as a citizens' panel or a feedback group consisting of interested citizens (e.g. water plans of Hollandse Delta and Zeist).

A second reason is that government authorities want to cooperate with citizens, interested organizations, and the business sector in order to create better plans and more efficient solutions. Information, expertise, and ideas from different parties with different interests are seen as a basis for cooperation. Participation in this context may take the form of co-production or collaboration. In the policy documents, words that point to this type of participation are co-production, interactive processes of policy making, and participatory policy making. For example, the water plan of Leidschendam-Voorburg is a co-production between the municipality, regional water authorities, local residents, and local

and regional interest groups. At each stage of the development of the water plan, a public panel, consisting of members of neighbourhood platforms, residents' committees, the angling club, and environmental organizations could deliberate and give their suggestions, which were then incorporated into the water plan. However, it should be noted that although words such as collaboration and interactivity are used, the relation between government and the public often remains top-down, and the concepts used refer to consultation rather than to a more equal relation between government and other parties.

### *Social learning and innovation*

A third group of arguments relates to social learning and innovation, meaning that governments want to open up the policy process related to water issues and to create room for innovative views, ideas, and solutions. Knowledge and expertise here concern innovative plans and initiatives. However, in the official water plans, not much can be found to lend support to this idea. One of the few examples is the introduction of a think tank of citizens, as was the case in a district of the city of Arnhem. This think tank advises the city of Arnhem and the Rivierenland regional water authority, providing advice – both solicited and unsolicited – on all aspects of water that are relevant for the citizens of the city. Yet, although the official water plans may be relatively low on innovative plans and initiatives, this does not mean that there are none; indeed, some municipalities support bottom-up citizens' initiatives for innovation which, however, fall beyond the scope of this study.

In addition to all the arguments that have already been mentioned, two other arguments for participation are sometimes seen. One is that participation and collaboration in the area of water management will lead to the development of further collaboration between the partners; here, participation and collaboration have become a goal in itself (e.g. the Zaanstad water plan). A second argument has only a tangential connection with water policy. This is the alleged contribution of participation to the image of the city. Dordrecht, for example, claims that a participatory approach has put the city on the national and international map as an innovator in how to live with water. Hence, contributing to an improvement of the city's image of the city also became a policy goal.

The main findings are summarized in [Table 3](#).

## **Conclusion**

Public participation has become increasingly important in the water sector. Public engagement is considered to improve the quality of decision outcomes, generate legitimacy in the process, and solve water-related conflicts. In the Dutch water sector too, in part driven by the key role played by participatory water management under the EU WFD, citizens' engagement has become an important aspect in the plans of all the authorities involved in water management. But what exactly is the view on participation in these plans? In this paper, the different ways in which participation is understood in local and regional water plans in the Netherlands have been explored.

The findings in this study show that, in the policy documents in the Netherlands, the awareness argument is by far the most commonly used argument. As a consequence, the interpretation of what participation should entail is very narrow. The participation of the public is deemed necessary for a sustainable water system. Participation and communication are often used in the same sentence;

Table 3. Findings: goals, topics, and instruments of participation.

Goals	Topics	Instruments
Awareness and responsibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding</li> <li>• Expectations</li> <li>• Attitudes</li> <li>• Behaviour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Standard communication tools</li> <li>• Standard communication tools</li> <li>• Standard communication tools</li> <li>• Activating communication tools</li> </ul>
Policy and support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Water policy goals</li> <li>• Support and trust</li> <li>• Sharing information</li> <li>• Cooperation: better plans and solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different forms of participation</li> <li>• Different forms of participation</li> <li>• Consultation</li> <li>• Co-production and interactive policy making</li> </ul>
Social learning and innovation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovative views and solutions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think tank: solicited and unsolicited advice</li> </ul>
Other: Collaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation and collaboration</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Different forms of collaboration (not specified)</li> </ul>
Image of city	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Innovators on living with water</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Participation as an aspect of city branding</li> </ul>

communicating with the people and providing them with the relevant information are considered to be the key elements in a communication and participation approach. In this approach, there is a strong focus on explanation and clarification: the aim is to generate understanding for policy and measures and to achieve a change in attitudes and even in behaviour towards water issues. Thus, expectations about the effects of communication are generally considered to be high.

A second, less dominant issue is that of policy and support: in order to achieve support for policy decisions, the ideas, suggestions, and views of the public have to be taken into account. The role of participation is to produce information, knowledge, and expertise to support policy making. In this context, participation refers to a more active involvement of the public and may take many forms, such as consultation and co-production. Through consultations, citizens and organizations are asked to actively participate in contributing information about problems and solutions. Co-production and cooperation aim at creating better plans and more efficient solutions as government works together with citizens, interest organizations, and the business sector. However, although words such as collaboration and interactivity are used, they often refer to consultation rather than to a more equal relation between government and other parties.

The third line of argument, regarding social learning and innovation, is almost entirely absent from the water plans examined, although some municipalities support bottom-up citizens' initiatives for innovation. Power relations between government and the public remain very much top-down, with little room for bottom-up ideas.

Some authors argue that public participation may be considered a strategy that better fits pluralist systems of interest representation than corporatist systems. Pluralist systems have a more open attitude towards 'new' actors and organizations that have not been involved in policy making before (Van der Heijden & Ten Heuvelhof, 2013). As a result, they question the value of too much and 'forced' public participation in a corporatist setting such as the Dutch (Van der Heijden & Ten Heuvelhof, 2013, p. 186). Other authors, in contrast, emphasize that new forms of participation with a strong

focus on deliberation reflect the Dutch tradition of consensus and cooperation (Duyvendak & Krouwel, 2001; Denters & Klok, 2005).

The government-oriented approach of participation in local and regional water plans seems to confirm the idea that there is not too much room for participation in the Netherlands. The dominance of communication and instrumental arguments for participation shows that authorities seem to be aware that they need the participation of the people and, at the same time, fear public participation (Wesselink *et al.*, 2011). Participation is often merely a favourite word that is easily used by governments.

However, this is in sharp contrast with developments in participation at the local level in the Netherlands. Over the past decades, citizens have become more directly involved in policy making (Denters & Klok, 2005; Michels & De Graaf, 2010). Not only have municipalities gained experience with various forms of participatory and deliberative innovations, including citizens' forums and councils, they also increasingly encourage and facilitate bottom-up initiatives of citizens (Verhoeven & Tonkens, 2011; Boogaard *et al.*, 2016). In the dominant policy discourse about the relation between government and citizens, it is emphasized that governments should 'trust' citizens and provide opportunities for citizens' initiatives (WRR, 2012; ROB, 2012).

The government-oriented approach of public participation in the water sector seems to be the result of a historically grown institutional structure with powerful vested interests. This includes the strong position of the water boards, which function as a barrier to fundamental changes in the relation with the public. Furthermore, the fragmented responsibilities of different government layers and the strong dominance of engineers with highly technical skills and language may also have contributed to the narrow approach of public participation in the Dutch water sector.

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