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Citizen participation as an organisational challenge in local government

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Abstract

Purpose – This study observes the organisational environment of fostering citizen participation in the context of local government. Creating systems of influential citizen participation requires the consideration of organisational prerequisites. This study asks which organisational elements contribute to successful citizen participation in local government.

Design/methodology/approach – The data consist of interviews with 14 key actors who work for the city of Helsinki. The interview content was subjected to abductive content analysis and reflected in the analytical framework based on previous literature on citizen participation. The analysis complements and adds insights to the existing literature.

Findings – This study illuminates three crucial elements of influential citizen participation: organisational structures, organisational culture and adequate resources. Additionally, the results revealed management to be a crucial enabling element. The findings highlight the importance of seeing citizen participation as an issue of governance and as a systemic part of the administration requiring intentional management efforts.

Originality/value – The study illustrates the key elements (structures, culture and resources) that should be considered when creating an influential citizen participation system. Additionally, the empirical analysis highlights the importance of management, which has been understudied in previous studies concerning citizen participation.

Keywords Citizen participation, Local government, Public organisations, Interactive governance

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Local governments are increasingly developing new methods and organisational models of citizen participation (e.g. Falanga, 2020; Bennett *et al.*, 2022), including a range of participation activities and allocation of resources for organising citizen participation. Generally, the purpose is to enhance participatory administrative activities. The success of these models is linked to the organisational environment.

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In public administration research, citizens are considered the focal actors of governance – for example, in discussions on new public governance (NPG) and public value (e.g. Osborne, 2010; Osborne *et al.*, 2022). However, the issues of democracy and participation are understudied by administrative theorists, despite these issues being at the heart of the public nature of public administration (Nabatchi, 2010). Therefore, crossover research linking citizen participation to organisational conditions is needed.

This article approaches citizen participation as an organisational challenge in the local government context. We understand citizen participation from the viewpoint of participatory democracy: citizens taking part in public planning and decision-making themselves instead of delegating sole power to representatives in elections (Nabatchi and Amsler, 2014; Arnstein, 1969). To be more precise, participation is observed here from an institutional perspective. Local governments are seen as institutions in which new emerging forms of democracy appear in tangible form because they represent the closest institutional level to the daily lives of citizens (Kurkela, 2022; Smith, 2009). Furthermore, local governments are venues in which the connection of representative and participatory forms of democracy is essential to observe (Pratchett, 2004).

In practice, citizen participation can be understood as face-to-face participation (e.g. citizen forums, citizen juries and citizen councils) or online participation (e.g. surveys) (Nabatchi and Amsler, 2014). Participation can be directed at wider governance issues, such as local government strategies, or to more specific questions, such as small-scale questions about the city planning of playgrounds or parks. Participation may relate to long-term processes or single activities.

The City of Helsinki, the capital of Finland, has created a participation and interaction model that aims to make decision-making more citizen-centric and introduce opportunities to utilise its residents' expertise and knowledge. The intention is to invite residents and stakeholders to develop the city, its neighbourhoods and its services. City has incorporated the principles of participation into the administrative rules of the city, so they guide the activities of the entire city organisation. Helsinki's participation and interaction model offers an interesting case for studying how to organise citizen participation, as, in the Finnish local government context, this model is relatively extensive, ambitious and well-resourced. Moreover, the model is designed as part of the city's management reform, indicating the efforts made to cement citizen participation in organisational activities (see Jäntti *et al.*, 2023).

The case of Helsinki is an institutional attempt to enhance democracy and openness in relation to society and local communities. However, participative methods and channels may contradict certain rationales that have traditionally guided public organisations (Kurkela, 2022). Citizen participation attempts – such as models of citizen participation – may also leave organisational structures and culture untouched. An organisation aiming to develop genuine opportunities for citizens to participate must pay attention to shaping organisational conditions (Kurkela, 2022). The literature indicates that the development of citizen participation requires changes to institutional culture and attitudes (e.g. Edelenbos and van Meerkerk, 2011; Torfing *et al.*, 2019), renewal of the organisational structures of participation (e.g. Fung, 2006) and distribution of a range of organisational resources (e.g. Bingham *et al.*, 2005; Yang and Pandey, 2011; Smith and McDonough, 2001; Bryson *et al.*, 2012).

This study applies interactive governance forms as a lens to reflect on citizen participation in the institutional context of local government. From an administrative perspective, the development of participatory local government organisations is connected to the shift from traditional governing and representative democracy to interactive modes of governance. Interactive governance can be seen as a response to the decline of formal representative and structured forms of participation (Boedeltje and Cornips, 2004; Røiseland and Vabo, 2016). These responses attempt to reconvene the public audience and opposing political views and parties in a shared discussion (Edelenbos, 2005). Paying

attention to the interaction levels in citizen participation and observing civic and stakeholder engagement, self-organisation and civic initiatives is at the heart of interactive governance (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk, 2016).

In contrast to the discussion on citizen participation – which concentrates on the role of citizens and has a strong link to participatory democracy and equal opportunities (e.g. Arnstein, 1969) – interactive governance views a broader collaboration and interaction of different stakeholders as elements of the policy process (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk, 2016). Therefore, acknowledging new interaction levels is multifaceted and raises questions of legitimacy, fairness and competence. Moreover, the new levels may lead to tension between representative democracy and elected political institutions, challenging local government and traditional governance perceptions of participation (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk, 2016; Hendriks and Lees-Marshment, 2019; Boedeltje and Cornips, 2004; Røiseland and Vabo, 2016).

This article aims to identify key organisational elements of citizen participation to extend the understanding of enabling influential citizen participation in a local government context. The participation and interaction model adopted by the City of Helsinki is an example of an institutional arrangement effort to incorporate citizen participation into a public management system. This case offers an interesting empirical context for studying the organisational challenges of institutionalised citizen participation in public administration. This study addresses the following research question: Which organisational elements contribute to successful citizen participation in local government?

We first provide an overview of the literature on citizen participation from institutional and organisational viewpoints to identify potential organisational elements that are integral to organising successful citizen participation. This is followed by a section that presents the analysis, methods and empirical research data and describes the citizen participation model of Helsinki. The third section presents the results categorised under the three key organisational elements of citizen participation. Finally, the discussion and conclusion sections address the study's findings on how the identified elements contribute to successful participation in local government organisations.

Key elements of citizen participation in local governments

Citizen participation from institutional and organisational perspectives

The institutional and organisational aspects of citizen participation have been relatively widely studied in previous research (e.g. Bingham *et al.*, 2005; Callahan, 2007; Edelenbos, 2016; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Smith, 2009; Torfing *et al.*, 2019). For example, they have stressed the institutional design of local government that enables the engagement of actors and supports more collaborative decision-making (Torfing *et al.*, 2019; Ansell and Gash, 2008; Aulich, 2009). Institutional embeddedness is also central to enhancing citizen participation (Edelenbos *et al.*, 2010; Edelenbos, 2005). This means building interconnections between institutions and citizen participation (Edelenbos *et al.*, 2010). By contrast, the literature on participative organisational culture has emphasised that a key element is mutual trust between citizens and administrators (e.g. Edelenbos and van Meerkerk, 2011; Edelenbos and Klijn, 2007; Callahan, 2007; Yang, 2005; Moyson *et al.*, 2016).

However, local government organisations as environments in which participation is implemented and the organisational settings for successful citizen participation are less studied phenomena. In the following section, based on previous literature, we address three premises for citizen participation – structures, culture and resources – to illustrate the institutional and organisational viewpoints of organising citizen participation in local government.

Structures for citizen participation

One literature stream approaches citizen participation as establishing participation systems, instruments and forums that involve citizens in planning and decision-making processes (e.g. Michels and de Graaf, 2010, 2017; Cuthill and Fien, 2005; Nabatchi and Amsler, 2014; Bryson *et al.*, 2012). Systems, instruments and forums can encompass different forms and methods of participation, such as citizen juries and workshops, e-participation or entireties combining instruments, such as participatory budgeting (e.g. Michels and de Graaf, 2010, 2017; Nabatchi and Amsler, 2014). The design of participatory processes attracts expectations of transparency, accountability, inclusiveness and equity. It has been argued that standardised and equitable manners are needed to ensure the involvement of citizens from different socio-economic and age groups (Cuthill, 2001; Turnhout *et al.*, 2010). Additionally, designing citizen participation activities requires strategic thinking in the management of the organisation (Marino and Lo Presti, 2018).

Ideally, citizen participation will be linked to the governance of public organisations (Edelenbos *et al.*, 2010) to ensure citizens have genuine opportunities to influence public decision-making (Font *et al.*, 2017; Fung, 2006). However, informal citizen participation processes often run in parallel or are an "add-on" to formal decision-making processes (Edelenbos, 2005; King *et al.*, 1998). Interaction elements play a key role in creating a functioning organisation in terms of embedding citizen participation. Trust, informal networks and boundary-spanning activities are necessary to overcome bureaucratic silos (Torfing *et al.*, 2019). The relationship between participatory and representative democracy might be challenging, but synergy can be found that can benefit both sides, thus improving opportunities for more collective decisions, especially at the local level (Fung, 2006; Prachett, 2004). For example, Sørensen and Torfing (2019) introduce the idea of hybrid democracy, which integrates the potential of both representative and participatory democracy systems by combining the merits and limiting their problems. In the local government context, there is a risk that these two systems are not connected; therefore, cooperation and interaction both inside the organisation and at the interface of citizens and local government is seen important (Edelenbos and van Meerkerk, 2011; Torfing *et al.*, 2019).

Culture of citizen participation

The participatory methods literature stresses the importance of a professional culture and customary habits of planning and producing services (Tuurnas, 2015). The approach is connected to adapting novel ways of thinking and working and motivating people to move towards more responsive decision-making (Cuthill and Fien, 2005; Cuthill, 2003; Smith and McDonough, 2001). Expectations for citizen participation emphasise a shared dialogue, openness and different forms of knowledge (Bäcklund, 2007; Edelenbos *et al.*, 2011; van der Molen, 2018; Torfing *et al.*, 2019).

A collective mindset on the value of participation has also been acknowledged. That mindset values and supports democratic ideals, such as promoting fairness, equity, a sense of community, role of civil society and deliberative forms of interaction (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000; King *et al.*, 1998). A participatory culture also highlights the responsibility of public organisations to empower employees and citizens and organisation's role as a collaborator, communicator and public interest channel (Denhardt and Denhardt, 2000). Valuing citizen participation means focussing on the attitudes of civil servants and encouraging them to include citizens in government decision-making (Pedersen and Johanssen, 2016).

Citizen participation might alter actors' traditional roles and relationships; therefore, it is connected to discussions on the evolving roles and identities of different actors. In principle, citizen participation includes the assumption that it will be accompanied by the

reorganisation of power structures to ensure that participation process has sufficient influence (Arnstein, 1969; Bryson *et al.*, 2012). Citizen participation tends to move power, responsibility and resources closer to the interface of administration and civil society (Torfing *et al.*, 2019). For example, frontline managers and citizens are connected via democratic structures, and, at least in principle, even leadership can be delegated to citizens or private stakeholders (Torfing *et al.*, 2019; Pedersen and Johanssen, 2016; Bryson *et al.*, 2012). The enabling role of civil servants highlights their roles as mediators or boundary spanners operating between networks and different interests to build relationships with citizens and public institutions (Callahan, 2007; Edelenbos *et al.*, 2011; Edelebos and Van Meerkerk, 2011; van der Molen, 2018; Torfing *et al.*, 2019).

New forms of interaction and participation and dealing with a range of different stakeholders challenge the role of political leaders (Sørensen and Torfing, 2018). For political leaders, it can be difficult to distribute power and responsibility when citizens actively participate in public service delivery processes instead of merely being passive taxpayers (Torfing *et al.*, 2019).

Resources for citizen participation

It is widely acknowledged that citizen participation and influential democratic innovations require resources. The resource perspective on citizen participation emphasises the *human and financial resources, knowledge resources* and *expertise* necessary to effectively organise participation. Planning and implementing participatory methods can be costly and require effort and time (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). Expertise is a central resource of public organisations for developing participation, as the implementation of participation methods significantly affects outcomes (Yang and Pandey, 2011). Organisations need staff, who plan, develop and apply a range of methods and have sufficient knowledge and training concerning citizen participation (Yang and Pandey, 2011; Smith and McDonough, 2001).

The elements of successful citizen participation: an analytical framework

To help summarise prior research, we created a synthesis of the elements needed to organise successful citizen participation (see Table 1). Three main categories enabling citizen

Category	Organisational elements	References
Enabling organisational structures	Institutional design of participation processes	See, e.g. Torfing *et al.* (2019), Cuthill (2001), Cuthill and Fien (2005), Nabatchi and Amsler (2014), Michels and de Graaf (2010)
	Citizen participation's institutional embeddedness to decision making	See, e.g. Edelenbos *et al.* (2010), Edelenbos (2005), Font *et al.* (2017), Fung (2006)
Supportive organisational culture	Collaborative professional culture	See, e.g. Tuurnas (2015), Edelenbos *et al.* (2011), Cuthill and Fien (2005), Cuthill (2003)
	Collective mindset towards the value of participation	See, e.g. Denhardt and Denhardt (2000), King *et al.* (1998), Moyson *et al.* (2016)
	Evolving roles and identities of actors	See, e.g. Torfing *et al.* (2019), Bryson *et al.* (2012), Pedersen and Johannsen (2016), Sørensen and Torfing (2018)
Adequate organisational resources	Human resources	See, e.g. van der Molen (2018), Yang and Pandey (2011)
	Financial resources	See, e.g. Irvin and Stansbury (2004)
	Knowledge resources and expertise	See, e.g. King *et al.* (1998), Smith and McDonough (2001)

Source(s): Author's own creation/work

Table 1. Summarising existing literature on successful citizen participation in public organisations

participation are *(1) enabling organisational structures, (2) a supportive organisational culture* and *(3) adequate resources* for organising citizen participation.

First, enabling organisational structures encapsulates the processes necessary to organise influential participation. This involves an institutional embeddedness in decision-making and the design of the channels and methods of participation (e.g. Torfing *et al.*, 2019; Edelenbos *et al.*, 2010, 2011). Second, a supportive organisational culture plays a significant role in the development of a participative organisational culture (e.g. Cuthill and Fien, 2005), including professional culture, a collective mindset supporting the idea of participation and an evolution of the identities of different actors. Third, adequate organisational resources bring together concrete elements that enable the organisation of participation: human resources, organisational knowledge and expertise and financial resources.

The abovementioned categories offer an analytical framework to construct a picture of the key elements of organising citizen participation at the local government level. We use this frame to analyse these elements and to understand how citizen participation can be enabled in the empirical context of local government in Finland. Moreover, the framework, together with empirical results, offers an analytical tool to complement and add insights into those elements and enrich the existing literature.

Methods

Context

The empirical context of this study is Finland's capital and the largest city, Helsinki. Finnish local governments play a strong role in the welfare state. They are the primary organisers of public services, their self-government is protected by constitutional law, and they have the right to levy taxes (Vakkala *et al.*, 2021). Despite their relatively high level of autonomy, there is an imbalance between a heavy task load and inadequate financial resources – a challenge for the exercise of self-government (Jäntti, 2016).

In Finland, local councils are also responsible for enabling citizen participation. Local governments have played an active role in promoting citizen participation, particularly in recent decades. For example, the Land Use and Building Act (132/1999) and the Local Government Act (410/2015) have required them to organise citizen participation. Finnish local governments have thus introduced a variety of tools to promote citizen participation. There have also been attempts to systemise citizen participation as a crosscutting activity in local government organisations by creating different kinds of models of participation or introducing citizen participation programmes (Kurkela, 2022).

City if Helsinki has a long tradition of enhancing citizen participation through organising forums and piloting participatory methods in city districts (Päivänen *et al.*, 2002; Högnabba, 2014). As a continuation of developing and improving opportunities for citizens to participate, the city has developed a participation and interaction model that aims to improve citizen-centricity and offer more participation opportunities by promoting citizens' expertise and knowledge (City of Helsinki, 2020; Jäntti *et al.*, 2023).

The key principles of the citizen participation and interaction model of Helsinki are as follows: (1) utilising individual and community knowledge and expertise, (2) enabling citizen-initiated activities and (3) creating equal opportunities for participation. The model is reflected in the city's municipal operations across the city's units to offer a more diverse range of opportunities for citizen participation and influence on decision-making. To ensure effectiveness and entrench the aims of the model, each city division has its own participation plan, and its progress is regularly monitored and reported. Moreover, the principles of participation have been integrated into the administrative rules of the city at the strategic level and thus guide the actions of the entire organisation.

In the Finnish context, Helsinki's participation model is well-resourced compared to other initiatives at the local level. From the outset, the model has employed a team manager, seven borough liaisons working in different city districts and three business liaisons to ensure grassroots cooperation with local businesses, as well as a manager and technical project manager to foster participatory budgeting. Additionally, citizen participation experts work with different units of the organisation. They are not directly employed to support the model, but their work is closely connected to the implementation of its aims (City of Helsinki, 2017).

The model has already been presented in different kinds of evaluations (City of Helsinki, 2021). For example, the model has had success in organising citizen participation initiatives more systematically and extending the range of participation channels to reach citizens, including, for example, deploying participatory budgeting as a flagship initiative. As addressed challenges, a lack of ownership, detachment from other organisational activities and barriers to ensuring that citizens enjoyed inclusive and equal opportunities to participate in processes are pointed out in evaluation (see Jäntti *et al.*, 2021).

As the capital of Finland, the City of Helsinki offers an interesting case for enabling citizen participation, as city's model illustrates the development efforts that have taken place in Finland recently. Moreover, being well-resourced and ambitious, it can also be seen as setting the model example for other Finnish municipalities by being active in different networks that promote citizen participation (Jäntti *et al.*, 2023).

Research data

The qualitative interview data for this study consist of 14 interviews. Interviewees included high-ranking civil servants, citizen participation experts, the mayor and the deputy mayors of the city. The interviewees were selected based on their central roles and extensive experience, which gave them an unrivalled understanding of organisational rationales and participation activities in the City of Helsinki. Interviewees had different political backgrounds or organisational units, and they were all willing to elaborate on the system of citizen participation. Thematically-oriented interviews were conducted in the autumn of 2019 as part of an academic evaluation study concerning the reform of the management system of the City of Helsinki (see Jäntti *et al.*, 2021).

The interviews consisted of multiple themes generally related to reforming the management system. The theme of citizen participation was systematically discussed with every interviewee. The interviews prompted discussion of the general practices of citizen participation, its goals and entrenchment and how they connected to the management system. Moreover, the interviewees were encouraged to introduce new viewpoints to the discussion. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Interviewing organisational actors illuminated citizen participation in local government organisations and its links to other organisational activities. The process was aided by eliciting the interpretations, expectations and needs of professionals working on citizen participation at different organisational levels. These viewpoints could not have been captured, for example, by accessing city administration documents or through citizen surveys. The strength of the data lies in the richness of its insights, which offer opportunities for interpreting elements of successful participation from an organisational perspective. Analysis of the data revealed also some more general insights related to citizen participation that were not only about the City of Helsinki, offering a broader perspective on citizen participation. A potential limitation relating to the data might be that not all interviewees were familiar with hands-on participation. However, the informants had tacit or experimental knowledge of city development and strategies. Some of the interviewees had extensive knowledge of participatory practices and related issues.

Abductive qualitative content analysis

The data were subjected to abductive qualitative content analysis (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012). Since we aimed to complement and add insights to the previous theoretical discussion on citizen participation, instead of testing or comparing these elements (as in a deductive approach), the abductive approach was considered relevant for this study (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008). In practice, existing theoretical notions drive our analytical question. The analysis focused on how these elements were expressed in the data and supported the development of citizen participation. Unlike an inductive analysis rooted in empirical observations, an abductive analysis allows a reflection on empirical data and its remarks in previous theoretical discussions. The abductive analysis helped us reveal the potentially altered conditions and new dimensions concerning the elements of participation (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012).

In the first phase of analysis, the transcribed data were coded according to an analytical question: What do the interviewees talk about when discussing the requirements of citizen participation, and how do they describe the organisational elements needed for citizen participation? First, in analysis, we concentrated on the practical elements that were seen as enabling citizen participation in the organisation. Second, we observed articulated needs and requirements for successful citizen participation. In practice, these issues could be lacking or still evolving, but they were seen to have enabling potential for well-functioning citizen participation system. Therefore, the identified enabling elements also have a counteractive side: If the elements that are seen as enabling citizen participation are lacking, it would have a hindering effect on the operation of the citizen participation system.

To strengthen the reliability of the study, researcher triangulation of the four authors was applied. The data were shared, and all authors coded their parts of the data individually using Atlas.ti software. The process identified 307 codes. After the initial coding phase, we reflected on the codes assigned to ascertain if and how they represented the different organisational elements (structures, culture or resources) of the analytical framework. In addition, as new dimensions, we found that management and interaction were important dimensions that seemed to cut across the categories of the analytical framework, thus complementing and offering insights into it. All codes within the main categories were divided into subcategories. Ultimately, all the themes arising from the empirical data were reflected in the original analytical framework.

Results: elements of successful participation

Organisational structures

The results show that a variety of structural issues are considered important in enhancing citizen participation. These organisational structures concern the systems, instruments and forums of citizen participation.

In the case of Helsinki, *the institutional design* incorporates managing a special organisational unit targeting participation within the city executive office and hiring experts in citizen participation. This has aided to create new participatory initiatives, such as participation opportunities in different city districts and strategies for citizen participation in organisational divisions. Additionally, institutional norms, such as laws concerning participation and administrative rules and principles, may steer how the structures of participation are organised and support the ongoing expansion of citizen participation. Whereas national law imposes obligations and provides guidance on organising participation (e.g. Finnish Local Government Act, Land Use and Building Act), administrative rules and principles delegate the responsibility and leadership of participation to certain actors (in Helsinki, to the mayor and deputy mayors).

The interview data highlighted the *institutional embeddedness* of participation. The channels of citizen participation are often led from the top down (from the central administration to different divisions and units), and there might be large-scale flagship initiatives, such as participatory budgeting in Helsinki.

Developing citizen participation either in smaller or wider projects may bring a wide amount of new knowledge, experiences and ideas and, in the end, a much hoped for versatility to citizen participation activities. At the same time, the data show that citizen participation is an issue for the whole organisation, covering all divisions in multiple forms and employing different types of civil servants. Project-connected development may cause challenges in terms of embeddedness and continuity, and for that reason, a systematic approach to development is also important.

> It (connection of participation and interaction model and administrative model of the organisation) has brought a collective working method and systematic approach to preparation work and monitoring [. . .] Of course, there is variation between different divisions since they produce different kinds of services. There is also the freedom to apply the principles of citizen participation.

Moreover, a systematic approach is needed so that citizen participation is not dependent on the motivation of a single actors. Participation requires structures closely connected to the governance system of the city, its service planning and development activities. This is connected to issues such as transparent accountability, regular evaluation and reporting of development activities.

In addition to the institutional design and embeddedness viewpoints, the data highlight that the structures of citizen participation should be led strategically. Moreover, there should be ownership concerning the development of participation. Therefore, building structures of citizen participation demands strong support from management, especially from public managers but also from political leaders. In practice, this might mean introducing and processing new structural solutions and allocating adequate resources, such as working time, to devise and plan participation activities. Additionally, in terms of entrenchment of participation throughout the whole organisation, managers at all levels of the organisation are focal actors.

Cultural aspects

The data offer multiple elements that are connected to the city's current institutional collaborative culture. The participation structures do not, for example, ensure a shared understanding of underlying democratic values. The data show that traditions, attitudes, values and different forms of knowledge and accessibility are all associated with the creation of influential citizen participation.

The benefit of a *collective mindset* concerning the ideal of participation is recognised. The overall societal climate concerning participation influences an organisation's desire to promote participation. At the same time, attitudes towards the role of citizens seem to be changing and broadening compared with the traditional, representative system's narrow role as a voter. Traditions concerning the methods of participation are also changing: Participation is now more versatile, inclusive and deeper.

A participative culture requires a rich understanding of democratic values, such as inclusion. That requirement is expressed as the opportunity for citizens to be heard, appreciating the equality and accessibility of participation processes and valuing the voice of marginalised groups.

In the data, organisational traditions are important in planning the system of citizen participation. Organisational traditions may promote change and link to questions about how

the role of civil society is understood or how citizen participation is organised in different units of the organisation.

The need to reinforce the *professional collaborative culture* and attitudes of putting citizens at the centre of public services and seeing participation as ordinary work in the organisation is recognised. The essential aspects of citizen participation are the two-way flow of information and the appreciation of citizens' expertise, such as knowledge concerning their living environments or local communities. However, when it comes to inclusiveness, citizen participation should not require any previous knowledge or expertise.

Inclusive ideals of citizen participation and expectations of a collaborative culture affect the roles of *civil servants and managers* within an organisation. As seen in the data, attitudes towards acting at the interfaces of organisation, dialogue with citizens and understanding participation as a part of everyday work affect the self-identity of civil servants and local government managers. In Helsinki, the role of the mayor and deputy mayors is especially focal, and they are also seen as faces of the wide organisation: ". . . and we have gained good backing from the mayors. They have clearly taken a leadership role in this."

The data raise the importance of public managers and political leaders, such as mayors, as focal actors in reinforcing organisational culture. This role can be described as enhancing a culture that supports the idea of engaging citizens. For the personnel, it is important to sense the management's strong support for participation activities and that the management is setting an example. When management seeks to create a culture that supports engaging citizens, it has a responsibility to communicate the value and advantages of citizen participation and democracy.

Variety of resources

Resources can be seen as a separate set of elements that influence enhancing and entrenching participation. Organising and implementing comprehensive participation initiatives, such as participatory budgeting in Helsinki, tend to be resource-intensive. First, citizen participation initiatives require *financial resources*; therefore, cost efficiency becomes a central element. In the context of participation, this means that quality is assessed in relation to the financial resources used.

Second, as noted previously, adequate *human resources* are crucial for a successful model of participation that delivers citizen involvement at all levels of the organisation. A key resource for advancing citizen participation in the City of Helsinki is the participation experts, who work both in the central administration and in the divisions of the city organisation. The data indicate that organising participation requires time to be allocated and anticipatory management of available work capacity to avoid over-burdening these staff members.

Third, *knowledge resources and expertise* were seen as focal resources. Organising and developing participation requires competencies and skills. Participation initiatives highlight the importance of the competencies of civil servants. These include interaction and project management skills and specific competencies to organise participation.

> . . . as long as the situation is like that, that participation and interaction are not very well-resourced, but we can think that it is part of everyone's working methods. Then I think that it is actually quite well-resourced. However, expertise and processes of how we do things [. . .] should be led more intensively.

The knowledge acquired from other stakeholders regarding citizens' needs and hopes is also seen as a resource that supports participation. This can mean, for example, benchmarking from other local governments, training done by experts and knowledge produced by citizens and NGOs. This resource, which comes from external stakeholders, requires well-executed interaction.

The data acknowledge the fair allocation of resources as an important element. Alongside the centralised coordination of citizen participation, resources are required to develop participation in different divisions, since participation is often expected to become part of the everyday work of civil servants. Management plays an important role in ensuring the supply of adequate resources where they are required, which may also require political leadership to acknowledge the importance of citizen participation.

Discussion

This study explored the organisational elements that are considered to contribute to successful citizen participation in local government. Based on previous research, we identified three key elements: organisational structures, organisational culture and adequate resources. This framework acted as an analytical tool to empirically observe, add insights to and develop these elements in the Finnish local government context. The results concerning the empirical case of the participation and interaction model in Helsinki show the practical aspects of the organisational challenges of citizen participation. Alongside the different methods and instruments of citizen participation, the study reveals the importance of ensuring functioning structures, reinforcing organisational culture and allocating resources adequately. From this viewpoint, the study enriches the notions of previous research. However, a new and value-adding perspective that this study brings to previous research is the importance of managers and management of interactive practices in supporting and enhancing citizen participation activities.

With regard to the elements introduced in the analytical framework, the results of this study first emphasise the importance of *enabling organisational structures* as an enhancing element of successful citizen participation. In many respects, the empirical results confirm the previous theoretical understanding. For example, institutional embeddedness is highlighted: Our results highlight the challenges inherent in connecting citizen participation to the city's governance system and ensuring it becomes linked in everyday work at different levels of the organisation (see Edelenbos, 2005; Edelenbos *et al.*, 2010; Jäntti *et al.*, 2023). In addition to previous research, the results of our study complement previous literature by revealing the relevance of norms, such as laws and administrative rules and principles, and of the formal delegation of responsibilities and leadership in developing the structures of citizen participation. The interesting notion in the results is the contradictory nature of the development of citizen participation, since the channels for citizen participation often tend to run from the top down, but at the same time, citizen participation is expected to be an issue for the whole organisation.

Second, the results illuminate several issues linked to an *organisational culture* that is supposed to support the ideas and initiatives of citizen participation. Issues such as the shared understanding of underlying democratic values, organisational attitudes, the adoption of novel ways of working and an appreciation of the knowledge produced by citizens are also present in the empirical case of this study (see Cuthill and Fien, 2005; Bäcklund, 2007; King *et al.*, 1998). In addition, our empirical data add to the notions of previous studies by pointing to the importance of traditions. Aside from societal understanding and expectations that affect organisational willingness to nurture citizen participation, traditions within the organisation play an important role in cementing a participatory culture.

Third, the results highlight the powerful impact of *adequate resources* in terms of building a local government organisation that enables successful citizen participation. The results advance the research field by highlighting that advancing participation requires sufficient personnel, time and expertise in addition to financial resources (see Bryson *et al.*, 2012; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Yang and Pandey, 2011; Smith and McDonough, 2001). The results also

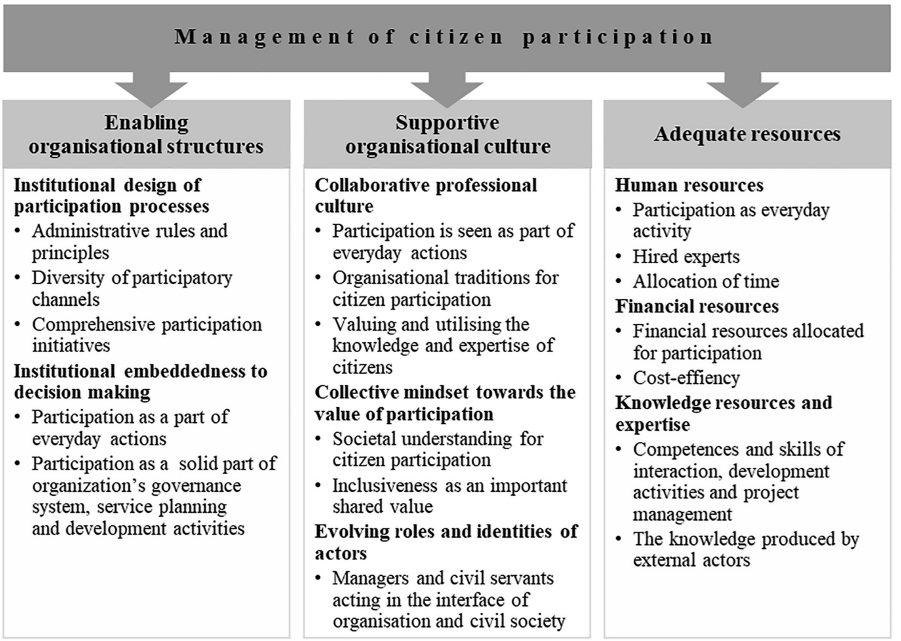
complement previous literature by signalling the importance of functional and equitable resource allocation and understanding the different stakeholders as resources for organising participation.

Finally, in addition to the elements of structures, organisational culture and resources, our study identifies management of citizen participation as key issue. Management of citizen participation can be seen as managing the administrative and operational aspects, such as organisation's practices and processes. Therefore, the role of public managers and political leaders (such as mayors in the case of Helsinki) is highlighted as an enabler of citizen participation. As far as we can discern, the existing literature does not operationalise the significance of managing the entity of citizen participation. Our study shows that management is a key cross-cutting element with the potential to build well-functioning citizen participation. It is involved in the issues of local government organisations' structures, culture and resources (see also Tuurnas *et al.*, 2019). Management at all levels of the organisation seems to play a crucial role in ensuring an operative participatory system. As a concrete action, management support means, for example, enhancing new structural solutions and the strategic guidance of participation. Moreover, management is needed to allocate adequate resources, such as working time, for participation activities (see Bryson *et al.*, 2012; Jäntti *et al.*, 2023). Support and intentional management efforts from political leaders and public managers can also be meaningful in terms of culture, for example, by communicating the shared understanding of democratic values, reinforcing the participative professional culture and appreciating the work done to enhance citizen participation. From the viewpoint of personnel, getting support from management for citizen participation activities is considered an important element.

Nevertheless, successful interaction between different actors at all organisational levels supports the enabling of participation, as it plays a key role in bridging civil society, intra-organisational cooperation and networks utilising different forms of expertise. Therefore, the ideals of citizen participation also challenge the work of managers by adding expectations of new interactive skills and their role at the interface of a local government organisation within civil society (see Torfing *et al.*, 2019). In the context of Helsinki, the role of the mayor and deputy mayors acting at the interface and representatives of the organisation and civil society was highlighted (see Wallmeier and Thaler, 2018). The results of this study complement previous research and highlight the ideal role of managers as meta-governors of citizen participation that build interactive and participative forms of governance to complement traditional governance by managing, facilitating and directing it in line with comprehensive policy goals (see Torfing and Triantafillou, 2011).

The ideals of citizen participation challenge local government organisations while raising the fundamental and self-reflective question of who public organisations are created for. This question also highlights the *public* features of local government and the overarching question of the legitimacy of public organisations (Nabatchi, 2010; Fung, 2015).

The study adopts a critical perspective by introducing a wide variety of enabling organisational elements, including tangible actions and more abstract ones. Each of these elements supports the promotion of citizen participation across the local government organisation, and the more effectively they are realised, the better the opportunities will be for the success of the citizen participation system. Additionally, these elements have a counteracting effect. This means that if some of these elements are not taken into account, it has a hindering effect on the success of the citizen participation system, at least to some extent. For example, the lack of management in the issues of citizen participation undoubtedly has a hindering effect. Figure 1 combines the theoretical viewpoints and empirical notions of this study.



Source(s): Author's own creation/work

Figure 1. Synthesising theoretical perceptions with empirical interpretation

Conclusion

In this study, we argue that citizen participation as part of local government activities should be seen as a wider issue of the governance system. In addition, an influential participation system requires a fundamental rethinking of ideals and operational potential at the local level. This means administrative solutions entrench citizen participation in the administrative system instead of paying only attention to singular instruments and processes.

Finally, this study enriches the discussion concerning citizen participation, especially from institutional and organisational perspectives at the local governance level. It has drawn a picture of the organisational wholeness of organising participation by utilising previous rich discussions and empirical data. Future research that focuses on the institutional and organisational side of citizen participation should pursue a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness, relations between and integration of those elements. For instance, qualitative comparative analysis methods could be used to test the framework in other countries and governance settings and how these different constellations of administrative elements enable the successful use of citizen participation to improve public services and policy. The findings of this study highlight the role of management as a core element in participatory systems; therefore, it would be necessary to study more comprehensively how managers organise influential systems of citizen participation.

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