



Common Ground

Country Report: The Netherlands

The Significance of Citizen Participation in Politics and Society

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1. Understanding of Citizen Participation

1.1 What is meant by citizen participation in politics and society in the Netherlands?

Citizen participation is a general term for all forms in which citizens can participate in political decision-making. Deliberative citizen participation (from hereon DCP) (or deliberative democracy) is a form of citizen participation and has its own meaning in the Dutch political landscape. In government policy documents and government-commissioned research, deliberative democracy is described as a method by which political decisions can be made through an informed dialogue between citizens. Deliberative democracy is positioned as a complement to representative democracy (people's representatives are elected through elections) and – to a lesser degree, as referendums are rare in the Netherlands – to direct democracy.¹ The three most important characteristics of DCP, according to a 2009 study commissioned by the Ministry of Home Affairs, are:

- a) selection of participants by drawing lots (as opposed to self-selection which is common in most other forms of citizen participation)
- b) provision of objective information about the issue to be discussed and
- c) forming judgments through deliberation.²

In society the terms 'deliberative democracy' or 'deliberative citizen participation' are rarely used. However, there is often talk of citizens' forums and citizens' assemblies, which are forms of DCP. Media often use the interpretation of citizens' assemblies as described in the book *Nu is het aan ons* ('It's up to us now') by Eva Rovers: "A group of inhabitants of the Netherlands examines a complex social problem and is thoroughly informed by experts and experts by experience. They then work together to find a solution through deliberation." In addition to the media, there are also interest groups that influence the definition of citizens' assemblies in society, such as *Extinction Rebellion Netherlands*. They define a citizens' assembly as a process in which citizens can make political decisions on an issue that concerns and divides society as a whole. Selection by lot, provision of information and deliberation are important parts of this.³ But there is also discussion in society about whether citizens' assemblies are principally a tool to be used by policymakers to address tricky policy questions, or actually an instrument to achieve a wholesale innovation of the democratic process. Some groups see citizens' assemblies not only as a way of helping politicians solve issues, but as a completely new type of democracy, in which citizens and governments work together to resolve problems.

1.2 What are the most common forms of citizen participation in the Netherlands?

The Netherlands has a widening practice of (local) government-initiated forms of citizen participation, not all of which could be described as DCP. Local governments have some legal duties to involve citizens in decisions which may affect them; over the years this has prompted a variety of experiments and initiatives for citizen participation. Non-deliberative participation is widespread and can take the form of town hall meetings, online consultations, focus groups, etc. In recent years there has been an uptick in deliberative variations on these generally smaller-scale activities. Municipalities have been experimenting with processes where recruited or self-selecting citizens are asked to provide input into policies, or the design of public services. Their role is often advisory, for example through sharing ideas and experiences, or providing feedback on policy proposals. One example is an advisory citizen body on

¹ <https://www.kennisknooppuntparticipatie.nl/downloads/handlerdownloadfiles.ashx?idnv=2005867&forcedownload=true>

² https://vng.nl/files/vng/vng/Documenten/Extranet/Burgerzaken/bestanden_burgerparticipatie/M.Leyenaar_boekje-%20burgerforum_inventarisatie_090527.pdf

³ <https://extinctionrebellion.nl/burgerberaadgids-principes-en-meer/>

social care established by the municipality of Groningen.⁴ For some of these participatory structures, citizens are recruited because of their involvement, knowledge or experience with the subject matter – one could argue that these are in some way expert bodies rather than citizen participation bodies.

⁴ <https://www.advies-groepsociaaldomeingemeentegroningen.nl>

The most high-profile form of DCP in the Netherlands is the citizens' assembly, also referred to as a citizens' forum. As described above, a citizens' assembly is a means for governments to facilitate a dialogue between citizens about how policy goals should be achieved.⁵ The potential of citizens' assemblies is seen in utilising the creativity of society and the opportunity to develop better, more widely supported and more effective policy.⁶ In recent years these types of processes have gained a great amount of traction among citizens, civil servants, politicians and NGOs.

⁵ <https://www.klimaataakkoord.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/10/03/betrokken-bij-klimaat>

In addition to citizens' assemblies and citizens' forums, some experience has been gained in the Netherlands with 'citizens' budgets' (also called 'participatory budgeting'). The idea of citizens' budgets is that local residents are given control over (neighbourhood) funds and municipal budgets, so that the money can be spent on matters that are important to local residents themselves. The oldest example of citizen budgets is in the city of Utrecht, where experiments with budgets per neighbourhood have been going on since 1987. As of 2023, there are few examples of places in the Netherlands where participatory budgeting is used: Amsterdam is the only municipality where a citizens' budget is still used.⁷

⁶ <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-49716e7c5ff7090af-357703435569-e0b6ac08a2f/pdf>

Since 2014, Rotterdam has also experimented with a 'citizens' jury'. This citizens' jury is organised by the municipality and consists of a group of citizens who meet a few times per year to assess the municipality's policy and provide advice to the Mayor and Aldermen on how improvements can be realised. From 2014 to 2017, the citizens' jury in Rotterdam met seven times and discussed various themes.⁸ This experiment was not followed up after 2017.

⁷ <https://www.amsterdam.nl/stadsdelen/oost/oost-begroet/>

1.3 How do historical and cultural factors shape the understanding of citizen participation in the Netherlands?

Often, when our participation culture is discussed in the Netherlands, reference is made to 'the polder model' or 'poldering'. The polder model is a form of consultation economy and consensus model that dates back to the Middle Ages. At this time, the Netherlands was a decentralised state, with power divided among regions, cities, wealthy merchants and the 'city holders'. It was considered necessary for these different groups of society to reach agreements through negotiation and compromise. In the 1980s and 1990s, the same term was used to refer to a consultative culture in which employers, employees and independent experts entered detailed negotiations to reach agreements on important socio-economic issues.⁹ It is essential to emphasize that traditionally, citizens were not actively involved in the nationally renowned participation model.

⁸ <https://rotterdam.archiefweb.eu/#-search.1698759439674-search-for-burgerjury>

From the end of the 20th century, this has begun to change. Politicians and policymakers started to realize that the distance between government and citizens had become too great. Citizens felt that politics did not represent their interests and had little confidence in their own ability to influence politics. Policymakers made efforts to increase citizen participation, initially with little success.¹⁰ From 2010 onwards, citizen participation initiatives increased enormously, but this was not a result of government policy. On the contrary, much of the

⁹ <https://isgeschiedenis.nl/nieuws/geschiedenis-van-het-poldermodel>

¹⁰ <https://www.wrr.nl/binaries/wrr/documenten/rapporten/2012/05/22/vertrouwen-in-burgers/Synopsis-R088-Vertrouwen-burgers.pdf>

pioneering of citizens' assemblies in the 2010s was thanks to self-organising citizens. Inspired by the 2011 large-scale citizens' summit *G1000* in Belgium (an initiative by citizens disillusioned by their politicians' inability to form a government after federal elections), a group of engaged citizens took this idea and recrafted it so it could be applied on the local level in the Netherlands, eventually bringing together some 700 people in the municipality of Amersfoort for the first Dutch *G1000* citizens' summit. Aside from its scale, another typical characteristic of a *G1000* citizens' assembly is that its agenda is set by the participating citizens rather than by policymakers. Various Dutch municipalities saw a *G1000* assembly in the years 2014–2019. Partly because of this, citizen participation has become more important in Dutch politics, and it is expected that this will continue to be the case in the upcoming years.¹¹

The rise of deliberative citizen participation is set against a backdrop of increasing division in society, for example between generations, between urban and rural dwellers, and between socio-economic groups. As in other countries, these divisions appear to also coincide with diminishing trust in politics and institutions. The recent *Social Cohesion and Wellbeing* study by Statistics Netherlands suggests that in the last quarter of 2022, only 25 percent of people over 15 had confidence in parliament.¹² Nevertheless, research by the national socio-cultural research agency SCP shows that approximately 70% of Dutch people are satisfied with their democracy. "The Dutch especially value free elections and freedom of expression. Yet most people see room for improvement. Especially in politics: politicians should listen better, learn from mistakes and be more honest."¹³

Around the turn of the century, the introduction of a binding referendum was also discussed during a revision of the constitution. This was seen as a necessary addition to the current representative system. A non-binding corrective referendum was instituted as a democratic instrument, but withdrawn in 2018. A proposal to reinstate the corrective referendum has been submitted in 2022, this proposal has been approved.¹⁴ The political developments around the referendum also affected public opinion with regard to citizen participation. Firstly, the referendum is often presented as a (better) alternative to less well-known forms of deliberative participation. Also, referendums are a popular go-to solution when people express dissatisfaction about the relationship between citizens and government. In this context, the 2018 decision to abolish the referendum is offered as proof that the government does not want to listen to citizens.

2. Legal Framework and Institutional Structures

2.1 What laws and regulations are in place in the Netherlands to promote deliberative citizen participation?

There are no laws in the Dutch legislative framework that specifically encourage DCP, but there are laws that encourage or even require citizen participation in a broader sense.¹⁵ These laws mainly apply at the local, municipal level. The *Municipal Act* contains the 'participation ordinance', which states that citizens must be involved in policy decisions, and that rules must be established by the municipal council on how residents and stakeholders will be involved in policy decisions. In the event that the municipal council does not provide a specific interpretation of the participation ordinance, the uniform public preparation procedure from the *General Administrative Law Act* applies. This includes a procedure for submitting viewpoints, which

¹¹ <https://vng.nl/artikelen/lokale-democratie-in-2040-de-opmars-van-de-participerende-burger>

¹² <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2023/19/minste-vertrouwen-in-tweede-kamer-in-10-jaar-tijd>

¹³ <https://www.scp.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/09/01/uitdaging-komende-politieke-jaarhoud-kritische-burgers-aangehaakt>

¹⁴ <https://www.parlement.com/id/vh8lnhrsk1yn/referendum>

¹⁵ https://vng.nl/sites/default/files/2023-06/aan_de_slag_met_participatie_-_handreiking_2.0.pdf

prescribes that residents can express their views on a policy topic in writing or orally. The Municipal Act and the General Administrative Law Act do not say anything about deliberation or the actual active involvement of citizens in the preparation of policy, but it provides an initial opening for participation rights.

The Council of Ministers recently approved the bill ‘Strengthening participation at a decentralised level’. This expands the aforementioned participation ordinance. This new law ensures that citizens and stakeholders must be involved not only in the preparation of policy, but also in the decision-making and implementation of municipal policy. Once again, the municipal council must consider how and when it gives residents a say in the establishment of new municipal policy and record this. The law also stipulates that residents can propose to carry out public tasks if they believe they can perform such tasks better or cheaper than the municipality or its contractors. This is the so-called ‘right to challenge’. The right to challenge is not directly related to DCP, therefore this report will not expand on it.¹⁶

In addition to the ‘Strengthening participation at a decentralised level’ bill, which expands the existing regulation on citizen participation, the new *Environment Act*, in which participation plays an important role, will come into effect on January 1, 2024.¹⁷ The *Environment Act* aims for more local decision-making about the physical environment, explicitly with citizen participation. This means that the ideas, wishes and opinions of residents and other stakeholders play a central role in the development of new plans and projects in the living environment. Local communities must be actively invited to participate, advise and provide feedback on various aspects of spatial planning, the environment, and all things related to the physical environment. Involving residents, entrepreneurs and other stakeholders at an early stage becomes mandatory as the *Environment Act* comes into play. This not only means that citizen participation must be supported and encouraged, but also that municipalities must be able to demonstrate afterwards that they have provided for participation by citizens and other stakeholders in decision-making. This is called the ‘obligation to state reasons’.¹⁸

The *Environment Act* does prescribe that citizen participation must take place, but it does not specify what this citizen participation should look like. For example, it does not specify which procedures and deadlines apply in the participation process. Questions are therefore being raised about the extent to which the new law will actually contribute to greater trust and support in society.¹⁹

2.2 Are there specific guidelines or initiatives that support deliberative citizen participation in politics and society, such as local guidelines or national programmes?

In the autumn of 2020, a broad majority of the Second Chamber of parliament requested an investigation into the possibilities of setting up citizens’ forums around climate and energy policy.²⁰ The resulting advisory report concludes that citizens’ forums have the potential to involve citizens in climate policy. For example, it states that citizens’ involvement should not only happen for climate policy, but also more broadly. “The citizens’ forum can help bridge differences between people through dialogue. And contribute to finding innovative ideas. It can therefore be a good addition to existing forms of consultation, participation and representative democracy”.²¹ In June 2023, parliament gave the green light for a national ‘Climate Citizens’ Forum’ with the question: “How can the Netherlands eat, use things and travel in a

¹⁶ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/burgerschap/burgerparticipatie>

¹⁷ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/omgevingswet/vernieuwing-omgevingsrecht>

¹⁸ <https://www.gemeentepeiler.nl/omgevingswet-participatie/>

¹⁹ <https://www.pbl.nl/sites/default/files/downloads/pbl-2023-betrokken-burgers-signalenrapport-4957.pdf>

²⁰ <https://www.tweedekamer.nl/downloads/document?id=2020D39380>

²¹ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/klimaatverandering/klimaatbeleid/betrokken-bij-klimaat/betrokkenheid-burgers-bij-klimaatbeleid>

way that is better for the climate?”²² The project was expected to start in March 2024, but since the coalition government collapsed in early July 2023, it is no longer certain what the future of the Climate Citizens’ Forum will look like.

²² <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/326c118c-a990-4a60-86d4-5beb117804ec/file>

A good example of a national programme in the field of DCP is the ‘Democracy in Action’ program, a collaboration between, among others, the Home Affairs Ministry and the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG), that is established to support the implementation of the bill ‘Strengthening participation at a decentralised level’.²³ For this programme, pilots with citizens’ forums will be started in eight municipalities, where experts will monitor their development.

²³ <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/actueel/nieuws/2020/06/05/wetsvoorstel-versterking-participatie-op-decentraal-niveau-voor-advies-naar-raad-van-state>

Another example that does not specifically focus on DCP, but does focus on citizen participation in all shapes and sizes, is the policy programme ‘Democratic Challenge’, also initiated by the Home Affairs Ministry and the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG). The programme ran from 2015 to 2017 and municipalities were encouraged to experiment with new forms of local democracy. For example, experiments have been conducted with citizen budgets, citizens’ summits (G1000s) and self-governing neighbourhoods.²⁴

²⁴ <https://democratic-challenge.nl/>

Another national initiative is the research project REDRESS (‘Revitalised Democracy for Resilient Societies’), in partnership with, among others, the Home Affairs Ministry, the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management, Prodemos and the Association of Dutch Municipalities (VNG). This project examines the extent to which hybrid democratic innovations could strengthen representative democracy in the Netherlands. Hybrid democratic innovations are processes where forms of deliberation (such as citizens’ assemblies) are combined with forms of voting (such as referenda).²⁵

²⁵ <https://redress-project.nl/en/>

In this context it may also be relevant to mention national programmes that are not specifically designed to strengthen citizen participation, but that promote participation as part of their – broader – objectives. One such example is the *Regional Energy Strategy programme* (RES), focusing on low-carbon energy generation. There is also a national programme on *Local Heat Transition* (NPLW). Both these programmes encourage local and regional governments to set up bespoke citizen participation activities so that new plans and policies on these themes can be conceived in collaboration with local residents, which is hoped to boost public support for sustainable energy projects.

2.3 Are there specific policies that hinder deliberative citizen participation in politics and society?

There are no specific policies in the Netherlands that hinder DCP. But because the Netherlands is a representative democracy and is historically characterised by a ‘polder model’ in which citizens hardly play a role in the development of policies, DCP is not strongly anchored in existing legislation. The aforementioned laws (the participation ordinance, its reinforcement and the new *Environment Act*) do state that citizen participation must take place, but no requirements are set as to how citizens must be involved. This can be an obstacle to participation in the form of deliberative participation.

Furthermore, legislation and regulation can at times throw up obstacles to the practical implementation of DCP. For example, if an institution wants to give an incentive or thank-you

payment to participants who were selected to take part in a deliberative process, there can be legal and financial complications owing to social policies. An advisor from the province of Gelderland involved in their climate assembly says: “There is no legal basis for paying compensation for participation in a citizens’ assembly. Because we wanted to arrange it properly, we had an institution decision made based on the Province Act. But in doing so you encounter all kinds of practical difficulties. If you have the compensation paid out as wages, this may cause some people to lose benefits. If you pay it out as a volunteer allowance, you will quickly exceed the maximum permitted amount of 180 euros per month. If we want to promote participation by residents together, it would be good if national legislation was introduced to compensate for this.”²⁶

In a similar vein, regulations on consumer and data protection can sometimes complicate the sortition and invite process at the outset of a deliberative process.

2.4 What institutional structures exist to promote deliberative citizen participation (e.g., staff offices for citizen participation) on the national, regional and/or local level?

The first official institutional structure in the Netherlands to promote deliberative citizen participation was the charter for citizen participation to stimulate the use of citizens’ forums, which followed from the first ever national citizens’ forum in the Netherlands in 2006. The Ministry of Home Affairs instructed scientists to produce three reports on citizen participation and how forms of citizen participation could be encouraged. The reports were published in 2009.

There are also various organisations in the Netherlands that deal with citizen participation, which are more or less close to the Dutch government and could be regarded as an institutional structure. An example of a government organisation is the *Participation Knowledge Hub*, an initiative of the Ministry of Infrastructure and Water Management. This knowledge hub makes existing knowledge and experience accessible, shares it and stimulates the development of new knowledge and skills in the field of citizen participation.²⁷ Another organisation – this one slightly further removed from the government – committed to knowledge sharing and research into democracy, including citizen participation, is *Prodemos*. *Prodemos* is partly financed by the government and works closely with local, provincial and national governments in the Netherlands. Until 2018 it produced a ‘citizen participation monitor’ every two years, documenting the use of various participation methods at the local level.²⁸ Another knowledge institute is *Movisie*, which focuses on social issues in the Netherlands, including research into and advice on approaches to citizen participation. *Movisie* also works closely with governments, provinces and municipalities.²⁹

Each of these organisations are concerned with citizen participation in the broad sense of the word, but not specifically with DCP. In this field, it is mostly independent non-governmental organisations who initiate advocacy and knowledge sharing. A number of these organisations are collaborating in a national citizens’ assembly network.³⁰ The ‘Netwerk Burgerberaad’ lobbies politicians for a greater role of deliberative participation in Dutch democracy. Network members include the *Dutch Platform for Citizen Participation and Government Policy*, *G1000.nu*, *Bureau Burgerberaad*, and *Meer Democratie*.

²⁶ <https://www.energieparticipatie.nl/verhaal-1-landelijke-wetgeving-nodig-voor-vergoeden-participatie>

²⁷ <https://www.kennisknooppuntparticipatie.nl/over-ons/default.aspx>

²⁸ <https://prodemos.nl/over-prodemos/missie/>

²⁹ <https://www.movisie.nl/over-movisie>

³⁰ <https://burgerberaad.nu/>

2.5 How effective are these structures? Are there any obstacles or bottlenecks that limit their effectiveness?

It is difficult to determine how effective these institutional structures are when it comes to promoting DCP in the Netherlands. What is conducive to the effectiveness of these structures is that there is a lot of exchange between knowledge institutes such as *Prodemos* and *Movisie*, and the municipalities and governments where citizen participation is actually deployed. The independent organisations that are part of the network on citizens' assemblies also try to influence politics and governments to increase DCP. It could be argued that the broader political pressure by organized citizens has been reasonably effective, as more and more local and regional authorities have embraced citizens' assemblies over the past decade.³¹ An example is the role that *Bureau Burgerberaad* played in the creation of the *Climate Citizens' Forum*. Together with other organisations they had been lobbying politicians and media since 2020 aiming to broaden support for a national climate assembly for the Netherlands. A petition and a publicity campaign were launched in 2022. In June 2023, the minister for Climate and Energy tabled a proposal for a national citizens' forum on climate and parliament agreed to go ahead with it.³²

³¹ <https://vng.nl/artikelen/lokale-democratie-in-2040-de-opmars-van-de-participerende-burger>

³² <https://www.burgerberaadklimaat.nu/>

3. Significant Citizen Participation Projects

3.1 What significant citizen participation projects or initiatives have been carried out in the Netherlands in recent years and to what extent have they influenced the social and political discourse on deliberative citizen participation?

In 2006, the first national citizens' forum in the Netherlands took place: *Citizens' Forum on the Electoral System*. A group of 140 randomly selected people from all over the Netherlands were asked to explore the best way to elect the Second Chamber of parliament in the future. The forum deliberated over several months and published its proposals in a report that was submitted to the government. In April 2008, the cabinet announced that it saw no reason to adopt the advice of the *Citizens' Forum*.³³ Although the advice was not adopted, it did have an influence on the political discourse. In 2008, a debate took place in parliament in which all political parties present agreed that citizens' forums represent added value. The outcome of the debate was that the government was called on 'to develop a charter for citizen participation and to stimulate the use of citizens' forums and the like'.³⁴ This resulted in three reports in 2009. Ultimately, the recommendations from the 2006 *Citizens' Forum on the Electoral System* were adopted into a bill fourteen (!) years later: the *Citizens' Forum on the Electoral System* bill went into consultation in December 2020.

³³ https://www.parlement.com/id/vhnm77ltkw7/burgerforum_kiesstelsel

³⁴ https://vng.nl/files/vng/vng/Documenten/Extranet/Burgerzaken/bestanden_burgerparticipatie/M.Leyenaar_boekje%20burgerforum_theorieenpraktijk_090527.pdf

A relevant and current example of DCP in the Netherlands is the implementation of *Regional Energy Strategies (RES)*. The Dutch government has decided that the energy transition (from the use of fossil fuels to sustainable forms of energy) must be realized at the regional level. This means that clusters of municipalities are tasked to work together and develop a *Regional Energy Strategy (RES)*.³⁵ A citizens' forum was used when formulating the *RES* in one of the regions, called 'Food Valley'. Participants were asked to provide feedback and advice on the draft strategy, which had been developed by municipal and provincial councils in spring 2021. In addition to these deliberations, two participants from the *Citizens' Forum* were delegated to the *RES* stakeholder consultation to introduce the citizens' voices there, too.³⁶ The *Food Valley*

³⁵ <https://www.regionale-energiestrategie.nl/participatie/default.aspx>

³⁶ <https://www.regiofoodvalley.nl/programma/energietransitie/wie-maakt-de-res/wie-doet-mee>

RES participation process was perceived to be effective and has since been touted as an example for other regions that are in the process of establishing their energy strategies.

The *Amsterdam mini citizens' assembly*³⁷ was held in the autumn of 2021. It resulted in 26 specific proposals in response to the question: "Amsterdam wants to reduce CO₂ emissions by 55% in 2030 compared to 1990. (...) Help us by devising measures to achieve these objectives." The final proposals were projected to achieve a potential 44% reduction in CO₂ emissions – an improvement on the municipality's existing policies, but some way short of achieving the target.³⁸ It is thought that the narrow nature of the mandate and question for the assembly have contributed to its 'failure' to meet the reduction target, as it prevented the participants from proposing certain far-reaching measures. Currently, it is still unclear when the municipal council will decide about whether and how the proposals will be implemented.³⁹ Nevertheless, the mini citizens' assembly in Amsterdam is sometimes referred to as an example to bring a broadly representative group of citizens together to have fruitful deliberations about a controversial topic.

Citizens of the municipality of Roermond (in Limburg, the province where the **Common Ground: Shaping Regions Across Borders Program** is taking place in the Netherlands) have been in conversation with their local council for years to convince them to adopt the idea for a *Citizens' Assembly Roermond*. The initiators' aim is to create a space for much greater involvement of citizens in governance and policy, for example through a fully-fledged citizens' assembly. In these conversations, politicians have been asking questions about the structure, examples and mandate of the citizens' assembly, demonstrating an interest, but so far no commitment to the initiative. The initiative group is asking the local authority to add citizens' assemblies to the local toolbox for citizen participation.⁴⁰

A final recent example of DCP is the *G1000South Holland 2023*. This is an example of a citizens' assembly at provincial level. It was different from many other deliberative processes as it consisted of three distinct assemblies, each on a different theme and at a different location within South Holland. The themes that participants deliberated about were: housing, the future of rural areas, and quality of life & mobility. The overarching question was "What do you think should be different in South Holland?". The outcomes coincided with the provincial elections, so the newly elected representatives were encouraged to use the citizens' agreement when deciding on a new programme for government. A monitoring group of participants continues to work with civil servants, politicians and others to make sure that the results of the *G1000South Holland* will find their way into policy and into implementation.⁴¹

4. Significance of Citizen Participation

4.1 Political perspectives

How is deliberative citizen participation discussed and perceived in the political arena? Is it widely accepted or are there controversial views?

Deliberative forms of participation are widely accepted as an optional addition to representative democracy. For example, approximately thirty municipalities have citizens' assemblies included in their coalition agreements and some other municipalities have indicated that they

³⁷ https://amsterdam.raadsinformatie.nl/document/11067178/1/1__Eindadvies_mini-burgerberaad_def

³⁸ <https://www.dehaagsehogeschool.nl/media/lectoraatpublicgovernance-onderzoeksrapport-hva-mini-burgerberaad-gemeente-amsterdam-2021#:~:text=Een%20zo%20representatief%20mogelijke%20groep,zogenoemd%20mini%2D-burgerberaad%20Duurzaamheid%20georganiseerd>

³⁹ <https://www.burgeroverheid.nl/artikel/het-amsterdamse-mini-burgerberaad-voor-een-toekomstbestendigestad/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.facebook.com/BurgerberaadRoermond>

⁴¹ <https://g1000zuid-holland.nl/>

are considering having a citizens' assembly in the short term.⁴² Aside from that, a large number of local authorities have been using more or less deliberative forms of citizen participation to inform their decisions on topics such as care and wellbeing, planning, and the local economy. As part of an ongoing move 'from government to governance', politicians realize that they need to work together with residents. Various studies, including 'Support for the citizen forum' by the *Dutch socio-cultural institute (SCP)*⁴³ and the mini-advice on citizens' assemblies from the government's advisory agency on the Physical Environment (OFL)⁴⁴, highlight the opportunities of citizens' forums and the popular support for them. The State Parliamentary System Committee also refers to the instrument and acknowledges its potential. These recent expressions of support for deliberative democracy underline that there is a broad current across the public sector and society more broadly in favour of the use of instruments such as citizens' assemblies.⁴⁵

However, the support for more citizen participation through deliberative platforms is not unanimous. The Council of State, a legal body that advises the government, states in response to the bill for a 'Strengthening Participation at a Decentralised Level Act': "The question is whether the instruments proposed by the government strengthen representative democracy or undermine it. For example, research shows that only a small proportion of citizens use the types of instruments proposed by the government. This means there is a risk that a small group of citizens will have a disproportionate amount of influence on policy".⁴⁶

This is also called the participation paradox: critics observe that new forms of citizen participation are mainly engaging one cohort of society, consisting mainly of affluent, highly educated, politically active citizens. The paradox expresses the idea that as more opportunities for participation arise, inequality in participation is more likely to increase than it is to decrease.⁴⁷ This perception has led some political parties, in particular those whose electorate is mainly based within less affluent sections of society, to be sceptical of the benefits of citizens' assemblies, or even hostile to these forms of participation.

Another factor affecting broader adoption of deliberative forms of citizen participation is the perceived tension between representative and deliberative democracy. Among those who hold roles in representative democratic institutions, there is sometimes a sense that their responsibility is undermined if citizens are invited to participate in decision-making.⁴⁸ Interviews with two professors also revealed that this is one of the strongest obstacles to the implementation of citizens' assemblies in the Netherlands. Some elected representatives strongly hold on to their acquired power within democracy, and emphasize that this is the only legitimate form of power, according to the constitution.

What are the positions of relevant political actors on the issue of citizen participation?

In the Netherlands there are few political actors who position themselves very clearly in terms of deliberative citizen participation. The outgoing Minister of Climate and Energy, Rob Jetten, from the liberal political party *D66*, forms an exception. In 2023 he committed himself to the *National Climate Citizens' Assembly*, mentioned above. His party explicitly mentions the establishment of permanent citizens' forums in its 2023 election manifesto. In addition, the party states under the heading 'strong democratic institutions': "With referendums, citizens' forums and other initiatives, we ensure direct participation in our national, regional and local government."⁴⁹

⁴² <https://vng.nl/artikelen/lokale-democratie-in-2040-de-opmars-van-de-participerende-burger>

⁴³ <https://www.scp.nl/binaries/scp/documenten/publicaties/2021/11/04/draagvlak-voor-het-burgerforum/Draagvlak+voor+het+bürgerforum.pdf>

⁴⁴ https://overlegorgaanfysiekeleefomgeving.nl/publicaties/downloads_getfilem.aspx?id=1446664&force-download=true

⁴⁵ <https://open.overheid.nl/documenten/ronl-49716e7c5f-f7090af357703435569e-0b6ac08a2f/pdf>

⁴⁶ <https://www.raadvanstate.nl/adviezen/@121476/w04-20-0175/>

⁴⁷ <https://stukroodvlees.nl/de-participatie-elite-en-de-participatie-paradox/>

⁴⁸ Leyenaar, 2015. *The burger aan zet.*

⁴⁹ https://d66.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/D66_VKP2023_2023-2027.pdf

The green and social-democrat alliance of *GroenLinks-PvdA* also expresses support for climate assemblies in their election manifesto. “In order to make citizens’ assemblies a permanent part of our democracy, we are looking at the possibility of a permanent citizens’ assembly that selects political topics for new citizens’ assemblies. We actively encourage local authorities to make citizens’ assemblies and neighbourhood voting days part of their policy implementation.”⁵⁰

⁵⁰ <https://groenlinkspvda.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/GL-PvdA-VKP-Ongenummerd-189.pdf>

The liberal-conservative VVD, which has so far made little noise about deliberative democracy, mentions in its election manifesto: “To make people more involved in the development of policy, citizens’ forums will be established for specific topics.”⁵¹ Other parties, including the newly formed *New Social Contract party (NSC)*, which is polling strongly ahead of the 22 November 2023 general election, do not make any statements about deliberative citizen participation in their election manifesto. Figure 1 shows a poll from early November 2023, giving some indication of the expected proportions in the next parliament.

⁵¹ <https://www.vvd.nl/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Verkiezingsprogramma-VVD-2023-2027-1.pdf>

The national institute for strategic policy analysis in the field of the environment, nature and space, PBL, has written two major reports in the past year that closely examine citizen participation in policy issues. Initially the PBL sees citizen involvement as necessary for major tasks. It is stated that “policy is substantively better with citizen involvement and citizen involvement is essential for the development of just and legitimate policy”.⁵² In the ‘*involved citizens*’ report (2023), a citizens’ forum is categorised as a participation tool at one extreme end of the spectrum in terms of representativeness and decision-making power. The report then discusses risks and trade-offs of this form of participation. For example, it warns that if certain preconditions are not met (referring to the influential 2021 *Brenninkmeijer report*), the policy instrument could cause more harm than generate legitimacy for decisions. Furthermore, the report identifies a caveat with regard to the representativeness and inclusivity of citizens’ assemblies, saying that people who do not have the necessary conversation skills, or who do not have time to participate, can be unintentionally excluded from the decision-making process. Another risk highlighted in the report is that certain groups could use their participation to ‘settle accounts’ with democratically made decisions. The PBL perceives citizens’ forums as a supplement to the democratic system, and not as a replacement for it. Citizens’ forums and participation can therefore contribute to democratic innovation, but the primacy remains with politics. Even though there are currently no political actors who are clearly opponents of citizens’ assemblies, there is often critical reflection on this form of policymaking. In addition, PBL, among others, considers the form of participation as a phenomenon that requires further research but is not yet completely safe in its application.

⁵² <https://www.pbl.nl/publicaties/betrokken-burgers>

4.2 Perspectives from society

How is deliberative citizen participation discussed and perceived in society? Is it widely accepted or are there controversial views?

An opinion report by the *REDRESS Consortium*⁵³ shows that 63% of the Dutch participants support the idea of citizens’ forums with citizens who provide advice on social themes. An interesting outcome from this study is that there is division over the question of whether politicians should adopt the advice of a citizens’ forum. The group that believes that politicians should ignore advice is larger than the group that believes that politicians should always adopt advice (37% versus 27%). Objections that people mention against a citizens’ forum are that

⁵³ <https://redress-project.nl/en/>

participants have too little knowledge, that wrong considerations come into play, that there are too many opinions to reach a judgement or that the loudest voices will have the upper hand.⁵⁴ Finally, an interesting outcome of the opinion survey is that support for the idea of a citizens' forum at the national level is equally strong among lower and higher educated people. This goes against a frequently heard comment that citizens' assemblies would be a hobby horse of highly educated people.

What are the positions of relevant civil society actors on the issue of citizen participation?

Academic and publicist Annemarie Kok is known as a critic of deliberative democracy. According to her, citizens' assemblies are promoted based on incorrect claims, for example that citizens have a strong desire for co-governance. She argues that this has not been proven. Furthermore, she mentions that participants in citizens' assemblies only have to deal with one theme, operating for a short time in a comfortable social vacuum, which, according to her, has little to do with actual politics and policymaking. In addition, she disputes the idea that representative democracy and deliberative democracy can coexist. Firstly, she warns against undermining representative democracy. For example, she states that when the outcomes are compelling advice, this is contrary to the constitutionally free mandate of representatives and that 'elected bodies are 'held hostage' by people who have obtained their power by pure chance.'⁵⁵ In addition, she warns against the reluctance to act: the gap between the outcomes of citizen participation and the manifesto on which the representatives were elected. She goes on to argue that the democratic system is already chaotic and that it will be even worse if power becomes yet more diffuse.⁵⁶ Kok believes that democracy can best be strengthened by keeping the system as tight and clear as possible. In her view, democracy does not mean that citizens have to participate all the time.⁵⁷ She adds that the existing representative system offers sufficient opportunity for citizens to participate and warns against untried innovations.

In opinion pieces by Annemarie Kok, she mentions Eva Rovers' book, 'Now it's up to us', saying that its title is almost vengeful-sounding. This book indeed presents an indictment of the current representative democracy as being insufficient, and is seen as a manifesto for citizens' assemblies in the Netherlands. The book has been fairly impactful in broadening and deepening awareness of deliberative democracy and citizens' assemblies in particular among people in the Netherlands. In it, Eva Rovers presents a specific image of citizens' assemblies, giving a lot of prominence to the 'mandate' that the assembly should obtain prior to its deliberative work. According to Rovers, it must be made clear in advance under which conditions recommendations will or will not be followed up. "Otherwise, the danger is that a costly citizens' assembly will be set up that will require a lot of time from participants, but of which all recommendations could potentially be ignored."⁵⁸

Rovers' emphasis is slightly different than that of others, notably citizens' assembly practitioners at *G1000.nu*. For *G1000.nu*, a clear and equitable agreement between the government and the citizens' assembly is also a requirement, but not in the sense of a 'mandate' for the assembly. Instead, the organisation advocates a 'comply or explain' approach, with final decisions still being made by elected representatives in the representative system. *G1000.nu* has been wary of portraying deliberative and representative democracies as competing quantities. Instead, it focuses on autonomy and community as pillars that allow citizens to develop meaningful agency, with process design choices reflecting this.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ <https://www.scp.nl/publicaties/publicaties/2021/11/04/draagvlak-voor-het-burgerforum>

⁵⁵ <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2022/06/17/burgerberaden-leiden-tot-een-chaotische-democratie-a4133827?t=1698767688>

⁵⁶ https://www.montesquieu-instituut.nl/id/vm44gbltfx/nieuws/grouthink_rond_burgerparticipatie?colctx=vkpk-k66f6wqp

⁵⁷ <https://www.klimaatakkoord.nl/actueel/nieuws/2022/10/03/betrokken-bij-klimaat>

⁵⁸ <https://www.volkskrant.nl/columns-opinie/opinie-red-het-klimaat-en-het-burgerberaad-laait-burgeral-vanaf-januari-meedenken-over-maatregelen-be632145/>

⁵⁹ <https://g1000.nu/>

5. Challenges and Barriers

5.1 What are the challenges that hinder the development of deliberative citizen participation in the Netherlands?

In the first place, a potential challenge for the further development of DCP in the Netherlands is the relative unfamiliarity of (forms of) DCP among citizens. Many citizens are partly or wholly unaware of their democratic rights, or the opportunities that are available to them to take part in (deliberative) citizen participation. If citizens had greater awareness of their options, they might choose to demand more deliberative participation opportunities from their (local) government. However, awareness raising and information provision would require a universally embraced evidence base on what DCP is and what it should look like, for which it may be too early, given the ongoing debates in society. Currently there is a risk that certain approaches or practices are portrayed as the standard for DCP, based on relatively little experience and evidence. This would come at the expense of diversity, experimenting, and learning together. Moreover, governments are also relatively inexperienced with employing DCP, which could discourage them from taking up DCP in the short term, or, in contrast, result in them underestimating the complexity of organising a robust deliberative process and doing it poorly. On that latter observation, risks include underestimating the complexity of organising the process, appreciating the consequences of process design choices, and failing to protect the independence of the process.

A further challenge is the high cost of DCP processes, and the expectation that funding a participation process gives the funder the final say on strategic choices. Speaking in general, governments can afford to commission a citizens' assembly or similar process; citizens or voluntary organisations generally cannot. When funding citizen participation activity, governments acquire a position of significant influence. For instance, they will be tempted to determine the scope and question(s) for a deliberative participation process, with no guarantee that this matches the issues that citizens most pressingly wish to address.

A major barrier for the broader adoption of DCP is the dependency on political goodwill, which is hindered by multiple fears. For example, some elected representatives are nervous that through DCP policy decisions are outsourced to (lay) citizens, while they themselves remain accountable for the outcomes and consequences. It could be argued that such fears are overstated or even needless, as a council cannot really sign away its decision-making powers to a temporary body of citizens. A thorough approach would see the council considering the outcomes of the deliberative process, and respond to these on a 'comply or explain' basis, as set out in writing in advance of the citizens' deliberative meetings. However, the approach promoted in Eva Rovers' *Now it's up to us*, which has become a common reference, is to set a strong and non-negotiable mandate for the deliberating citizens. Consequently, elected representatives, who may be naturally inclined against sharing their responsibilities with random citizens, are handed an argument against deliberative processes, in that delegating their (constitutional) power to a group of citizens would not meet the standards of good governance.

Under the surface, these challenges are closely linked with the issue of trust. As working with DCP is still a developing aspect of democracy in the Netherlands, many policymakers haven't got much – or any – personal experience with such processes, which may affect their view-

point. Those who have been sceptical about greater citizen participation will not easily be persuaded to put trust into randomly selected citizens on matters of controversial or complex policies. Note: to counteract this, there is a rapidly growing number of people within institutions who – despite having no direct experience of them – are deeply persuaded of the capabilities of citizens in this regard. While this obviously doesn't present a challenge to the development of DCP in the Netherlands, it can sometimes occur in tandem with unrealistic expectations and therefore a risk of disillusionment. Returning to the lack of trust in citizens' abilities from policymakers, this is often encountered by practitioners, sometimes expressed in attempts to gain a great degree of control over the process, both before and during the citizens' deliberations. A local authority may wish to frame the topic and/or question in a rigid manner, or decide about the information that the participants will or will not be given as part of the process.

DCP in the Netherlands may also suffer from the country's political climate, which has become increasingly populist in recent decades. Most – but not all – of the populist parties and movements that have entered the political sphere are hostile or indifferent to deliberative democracy. They are often more inclined to promote referendums, as a yes-no decision about a controversial topic plays more into their agendas than a process of dialogue seeking broad consensus. Another aspect of the populist grip on the political climate is that citizens are more often and more easily drawn to taking entrenched positions on important topics, too, especially in the face of complex crises, like the *Covid-19* pandemic, climate breakdown, or the untenable nature-agriculture balance. This appears to strengthen the already occurring process of citizens 'disconnecting' from politics. On the one hand, this context is a challenge to DCP in the Netherlands, as an increasing subset of citizens is unlikely to respond to invitations to participate in decision-making. On the other hand, it also offers a chance as policymakers may embrace new approaches to decision-making such as DCP if these are seen to offer a possibility to rebuild trust between citizens and politicians. The longest-serving practitioners organisation in the Netherlands, *G1000.nu*, insists that a truly independent process is a precondition for mutual trust – arguing that authorities should agree to let go of any claims to influence during the deliberative process.

Much like in other countries, the political cycle limits when DCP processes are held, with politicians often formulating ambitions for citizen participation in conjunction with their policy goals for the four-year period for which they have been elected. Demand for larger and longer processes will inevitably peak during the second and third year of the political term, and events will need to be scheduled in such a manner that public holidays are avoided. The resulting risk is that capacity – both with practitioners and within local authorities – may be stretched during peak times and that the quality of the deliberative processes may suffer as a consequence.

A common point of debate around deliberative citizen participation is whether and how it obtains sufficient and credible legitimacy. While parliament and councils obtain legitimacy through elections, critics question from what a citizens' assembly would derive its legitimacy. Some would argue that for citizens' assemblies, the representation of diversity in society achieved through sortition gives them legitimacy, although it is obvious that complete representativeness is an illusion. Therefore, critics of DCP can easily point to any imperfections in the make-up of the assembly to delegitimize any unwanted outcomes. Currently, discussion on

the challenges of representation often dominate conversations about the potential of DCP. Overcoming this challenge will need both better results from citizen recruitment and selection, resulting in truly diverse and broadly representative assemblies, and an effort to manage expectations and criticisms of deliberative processes, away from participant statistics, with greater focus on (what happens in) the dialogue process instead.

6. Authors

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