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Design and Development of Mediated Participation for Environmental Governance Transformation: Experiences with Community Art and Visual Problem Appraisal

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Abstract: For environmental governance to be more effective and transformative, it needs to enhance the presence of experimental and innovative approaches for participation. This enhancement requires a transformation of environmental governance, as too often the (public) participation process is set up as a formal obligation in the development of a proposed intervention. This article, in search of alternatives, and in support of this transformation elaborates on spaces where participatory and deliberative governance processes have been deployed. Experiences with two mediated participation methodologies – community art and visual problem appraisal – allow a demonstration of their potential, relevance and attractiveness. Additionally, the article analyzes the challenges that result from the nature of these arts-based methodologies, from the confrontational aspects of voices overlooked in conventional approaches, and from the need to rethink professionals' competences. Considering current environmental urgencies, mediated participation and social imaginaries still demonstrate capacities to open new avenues for action and reflection.

Keywords: Social imaginaries; mediated participation; environmental governance; community art; visual problem appraisal.

INTRODUCTION

The current multitude of environmental challenges has resulted in the development of environmental governance, which we see as synonymous with interventions aimed at changes in environment-related incentives, knowledge, institutions, decision making, and behaviors (Lemos & Agrawal, 2006). More specifically, we use environmental governance to refer to the set of regulatory processes, mechanisms and organizations through which political actors influence environmental policies, actions and outcomes.

Arguably, when dealing with complex issues such as climate change, the involvement of diverse stakeholders and sectors, each with their own views, narratives and interests (Margerum & Robinson, 2016) becomes even more important. These forms of involvement allow environmental governance to become more transformative (Rijke et al., 2013), and to have a stronger impact on society. But political actors are not always open to these more intense forms of involvement, which implies that there is also a need for the transformation of environmental governance itself, in order to become more sensitive towards the multiplicity of societal voices.

To enable and facilitate the involvement of these diverse stakeholders and sectors, various participatory and collaborative approaches in environmental governance have been developed, such as community-based natural resource management (Kellert et al., 2000), network governance (Klijn et al., 1995; Rhodes, 2007), and collaborative governance (Emerson et al., 2012). Of particular importance for the effectiveness of these experimental and innovative approaches, as participation models argue, is their implementation in the early stages of environmental governance (Rijke et al., 2013). Such a view aligns with André et al.'s (2006) reference to "early initiation" as an initial operating principle for public participation. The dominant views on public participation, as prevalent in impact assessment procedures, do not invite "the public" to participate as a pro-active strategy, but instead effectuate the public participation process as a formal obligation in the development of a proposed intervention.

Contrary to such views, our research group has in the contexts of climate change, loss of biodiversity and other environmental challenges, and driven by a collective sense of urgency and action leading to informed decision making, been exploring approaches for participatory and deliberative governance, aiming to transform environmental governance. This article thus elaborates on spaces where participatory and deliberative governance have been deployed, with inspiration and data resulting from experiences with mediated participation approaches, in contexts of environmental challenges where prevailing technological foci call for integrative and complementary perspectives, social dialogue and collective action.

MEDIATED PARTICIPATION

When addressing environmental governance, academic literature often emphasizes the importance of public participation, allowing for the incorporation of the diversity of knowledge and values in decision-making, even though this position is not always accepted in political practice. Several reasons exist to engage stakeholders in environmental decision-making; the decision-making becomes better informed and creative, public problem awareness and commitment are increased, the democratic right of stakeholders is strengthened and social learning is enhanced (see Mostert, 2003; Panten et al., 2018; Reed, 2008;). However, these qualities do not emerge spontaneously; as Reed describes (2008, p. 2417), “the quality of decisions made through stakeholder participation is strongly dependent on the nature of the process leading to them”.

An aspect through which the concept of participation can be defined is the direction of the information flow (Rowe & Frewer, 2005). To move away from broad definitions of participation which follow the ladder¹ of Arnstein (1969) in a sometimes automatized sense, we use a distinction, as made by Rowe and Frewer (2005), between informing, consulting and participation. In the case of informing, the information flow goes in one direction (indirect interaction). Consulting is gathering information from participants. Participation is the exchange of information between an organization and the public through direct interaction. This implies that in a participatory process, information is exchanged through some form of social dialogue, within a communicative platform which recognizes the diverse and probably unequal power positions, different interests, types of knowledge and eloquences—to name a few aspects—of participating social actors. To articulate these inequalities, we prefer to use the term stakeholders here. This term enhances the focus on the different stakes or interests and consequent power positions of persons involved. We also use this term to differentiate from the term actor which, interpreted theatrically, moves away from the autonomous behavior of a person to acting as induced or guided by the theatre director and the script (Stanislavski, 1980).

The more policy-oriented description of actor by Enserink et al. (2010, p. 79), stating that “an actor is a social entity, a person or an organization, able to act on or exert influence on a decision”, focuses on a multi-actor perspective. Articulating the ability to influence decisions as collective action, presuming “that no individual will be able to unilaterally impose their desired solution onto others” (ibid.), makes the sharp distinction between actor and stakeholder less

1 As we do appreciate the strengths of metaphors and yet search to move beyond that of the ladder, we propose a “discursive-material knot” approach to participation, as introduced by Carpentier (2017). This metaphor entails exploring horizontal communicative processes through a combination of material and discursive practices.

relevant. Yet, as the term actor may support the assumption that this concerns particularly actors who should have rightful access to a process of public participation, we like to reverse the focus. We aim to question the responsibility and accountability of policy makers, process designers and facilitators, as a major dimension for participatory and deliberative governance. This aligns with a recent study by Willmes and van Wessels (2021, p. 12) emphasizing the usefulness of making “issues and processes around responsibility” explicit for (network) governance. The inclusion of all and everything with a stake, aligns with contemporary perspectives accentuating the inclusion of voices from the past, the generation that is not yet born, and non-human entities such as, for example, described by Latour (2020) in his *Parliament of Things*.

Our focus here is on the realization of a social dialogue that includes the voices of all stakeholders; from all temporal dimensions, from human and non-humans, with a future oriented focus described by Krznaric (2020, p. 14) as “the good ancestor”. Exploring new avenues for more inclusive dialogues, Amitav Ghosh contributes to our inspiration when he states:

I would like to believe that out of this struggle [environmental action] will be born a new generation that will be able to look upon the world with clearer eyes than those that preceded it; that they will be able to transcend the isolation in which humanity was entrapped in the time of its derangement; that they will rediscover their kinship with other beings, and that this vision, at once new and ancient, will find expression in a transformed and renewed art and literature. (Ghosh, 2016, p. 162)

With the subtitle “Climate change and the unthinkable” of Ghosh’ book “*The Great Derangement*”, we are further pulled into processes of voicing in, and the envisioning of, participatory and deliberative governance.

In order to further conceptualize participation, in processes of representative governance, the concept of mediated participation is found to be useful (Witteveen et al., 2009), as it allows articulating the political perspective:

Mediated participation aims to bring ‘distanced’ or ‘overlooked’ stakeholders in a mediated way to the doorstep of decision makers by using media. It promotes inclusion of their stories, concerns and proposals in decision-making processes because it allows policy and decision makers to ‘learn’ in mediated interaction with distant stakeholders. (Witteveen et al., 2009, p. 32)

We should, when thinking about designing innovative strategies of mediated participation, also be aware that this endeavor may require crossing the borders

of conventional thinking and practice, as dominant positivist assumptions conflict with future and design-oriented ontologies. Buizer and Lata (2021, p. 174) refer in this respect to “practical implications for the way research and education activities are organized.” One promising area of innovation comprises arts-science interfaces, that can be deployed to facilitate participatory processes, considering that creative, artistic and transdisciplinary regimes shape different ways of thinking and thereby contribute to breaking through conventional barriers and paradigms. The Dutch government’s advisory architect (‘rijksbouwmeester’) Floris Alkemade (2020) refers in this context to qualities such as dealing with doubt and confusion, the power of imagination and even the pleasure derived from “the art of changing direction” which may result from an essential awareness of the urgent need for smart art-science amalgamations (p. 127).

Positioning such rethinking of reality in the current context of environmental urgencies can also be framed as decolonizing the future, paraphrasing Krznaric (2020, p. 17) who states that the future has been colonized, a statement which leads to the question: “How can we be good ancestors?” (Krznaric, 2020, p. 13).

But such art-science interfaces are not easy to organize, as professional identities, discursive practices and artistic craftsmanship are distinct in both these domains. To make the worlds of arts and academia meet and act in a synergic way, their labelling as binary and oppositional worlds requires reframing. Svasek (2016, pp. 2–3) elaborates on the limited conceptualization of creative practice as linked to improvisation; combining the unexpected and the unrecognizable as qualities of craftsmanship differs from a modernist perspective on creativity as pure innovation. Goris et al. (2015) describe how valuing participatory and artistic qualities in community art projects for social change requires a difficult balancing act, as certain practices defined as participatory may fall short of attaining immediate political impact, nor instigate more long-term oriented changes. For example, activities qualified as “participatory video” may focus more on presumed qualities of amateur filmmakers as an act of participation versus more abstract and complex aspects of a political participation process.

METHODOLOGY

This section provides descriptive overviews of two applied methodologies of mediated participation, namely community art (poetry routes and social imaginaries) and visual problem appraisal (VPA), both of which, as Witteveen and colleagues (Witteveen et al., 2018; Witteveen & den Boer, 2019) have explained, are forms of mediated participation. Both methodologies have the potential for facilitating stakeholder dialogue and stimulating social learning in complex

multi-stakeholder settings, in order to enhance environmental governance and provide more robust grounding for decision-making processes.

Community art focuses on the creation of poetry routes, producing various social imaginaries, which refer to the ways people envision their social surroundings, as expressed in images and stories through popular and artistic expressions. A poetry route is both a genre and method, in which local communities in a facilitated arts-based process produce and combine images and poems in a series of printed banners regarding a particular theme or issue. The resulting poetry route feeds into a loop of social dialogue with other stakeholders similarly concerned or engaged with the issue at stake. In this fashion the poetry route travels and creates various spaces of dialogue.

In this article, two projects are described and reflected on, namely the poetry route River Flows situated in the Netherlands, and Suara Citarum, situated in Bandung, Indonesia. Furthermore, a new poetry route, in Terai Arc Landscape in Nepal is under way. The first author of this article developed the learning design of the poetry routes and facilitated their implementation together with the article’s co-authors. Table 1 gives an overview of these poetry routes.

Table 1: Poetry Route Projects

Name of poetry route	Theme	Country	Years of production	Role of the authors	References
River Flows	Perspectives on river management	The Netherlands	2017	Witteveen (Design and process facilitation), den Boer (Process facilitation)	Witteveen & den Boer (2019) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKBOKTNZhcs
Suara Citarum	Perspectives on river management of Citarum river	Indonesia	2019	Roosmini, Dwi & Witteveen (Design and process facilitation)	https://youtu.be/KY8gQjyADW4
Terai Arc Landscape	Perspectives on landscape stewardship	Nepal	2022–2024	Witteveen & Fliervoet (Design and process facilitation)	Work in progress

Source: Authors.

The second applied methodology of mediated participation is visual problem appraisal (VPA), which consists of a series of filmed interviews allowing stakeholders to express their concerns and issues. The interviews are used in thematic workshops to enhance the analysis of, and social learning on, complex issues from different perspectives. This article focuses on two applied VPA projects, both located in The Netherlands: River Rhine Branches, and My Garden. These VPAs address diverse topics within the context of environment transformations (see Table 2).

Table 2. Visual Problem Appraisal projects

Name of the VPA	Theme	Country	Years of production	Role of the authors	References
River Rhine Branches	Perspectives on river management	The Netherlands	2017–2021	Witteveen (Design and process facilitation) Fliervoet (process facilitation)	Witteveen et al. (2018) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xb-4ygRNB3o
My Garden	Perspectives on urban climate adaptation on local scale	The Netherlands	2020	Witteveen & Fliervoet (Design and process facilitation)	Research project “participation in climate adaptation”: https://projectenportfolio.nl/wiki/index.php/PR_00315

Source: Authors.

EXPERIENCES WITH COMMUNITY ART:
POETRY ROUTES AND SOCIAL IMAGINARIES

In this section, we elaborate on community art as a methodology and practice for public participation, and the afore-mentioned poetry routes (see Table 1) which aimed to contribute to sustainable futures by (re)articulating social imaginaries. Social imaginaries result from visioning, creating an active connection of lived and dreamed realities with past experiences and future ambitions. Social imaginaries refer to a collection of images, ideas and principles, fantasies, motivations, institutions, and rules which are shared by a group of people. They give meaning and presence to their surroundings and position all members in relation to one another. This argument aligns with Charles Taylor (2007, p. 23), who defines social imaginaries as “the way ordinary people ‘imagine’ their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends.”

We refer here to social imaginaries where the social connects the individual imaginaries into a collective representation of future realities, which are not usually considered in cognitive or opinionated public participation methodologies. Interpretations of social imaginaries may trigger associations with fairy tales and children (or adult versions of this), but they do have a closer and more immediate relation to social reality. Still, the gnome track in Figure 1 encapsulates this potential association. Including the pictures of the gnome track here may appear to be contradictory, as they seem to confirm the fairy tale association. However, the aspect we wish to visualize is the strong impact stories, dreams, and other affective thoughts similar to fairy tales, may have when recognized and shared as collective social imaginaries.

Figure 1. Social Imaginaries: The Gnome Track in Renkum, the Netherlands



Source: Authors

POETRY ROUTE RIVER FLOWS

A gender-balanced group of 26 international students of the MSc course Management of Development at Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences, who were mid-career rural development professionals mostly from Africa and Asia, participated during their studies in the Netherlands in the 2-week course “Media Design for Social Change”. The course aimed to deal with innovative processes supporting community resilience, participation and social learning by focusing on artistic, mediated and creative approaches. On several occasions, the students visited De Koppenwaard nature reserve and the nearby former brick factory on the IJssel River in the Netherlands, where they painted mono-types and wrote poems to express a sense of place, to highlight the cultural heritage of the site and to articulate the value of the natural resources of the area. A selection of monotypes and poems was used to create a dozen canvas banners (82 cm x 152 cm), which were displayed on the River Flows poetry route.

The activities attracted the attention of a local newspaper, the “Arnhemse Koerier”.² During the visits, a short movie was made to show the students’ activities and learning processes on the visits³. The nature organization Natuurmonumenten that commissioned the poetry route intended to use it to create awareness for, and involvement in, public participation in the redevelopment process of the old factory areas. In particular, it was planned to be used as a “conversation starter” for a participatory process, in which nature development, cultural heritage, flood safety and economic viability would be the key aspects. The poetry route was exhibited in the community room of the Van Hall Larenstein University of Applied Sciences in June and July 2017, in relation to the activities of the research group on Sustainable River Management and the Living Lab

2 For the press release (in Dutch) of June 14, 2017, see: <https://www arnhemsekoerier.nl/nieuws/algemeen/129242/kunst-en-gedichten-bevorderen-participatie-in-de-koppenwaard>

3 Link to the movie: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TKBOKTNZhcs>

Delta Oost, in which stakeholders related to the management of the IJssel River participated. With a public exhibition in the community hall of the municipality Rheden –through which the IJssel River flows and in which De Koppenwaard nature reserve is located– the poetry route did indeed attract attention and serve as a conversation starter.

The poetry route was evaluated as contributive to a shared vision, combining perspectives on cultural heritage, nature conservation and economic feasibility in a way that was supported by the diverse nature conservation organizations, local and regional governmental bodies, landowners, tourist businesses, the general public and other stakeholders. Although an array of positive outcomes could be observed, Witteveen and den Boer (2019, p. 100) also describe a series of challenges resulting from strategic and material features of this poetry route. They state:

Documenting and measuring this evidence for an artistic approach towards community resilience, participation and social learning in natural resources management no straightforward methods are available. People sharing their experiences will probably not tell their stories in a linear way or indicate a quantified (dis-) liking but instead will jump from one highlight to another, leaving gaps and returning to associate with other thoughts, feelings and ambitions.

This critical reflection resonates with Fenge et al. (2016, p. 11) who conclude “[a]rts-based approaches, and more specifically performance poetry act as an aid to encourage audiences to question the basis of knowledge and the power relations, which underpin everyday accepted practices.”

POETRY ROUTE SUARA CITARUM – CITARUM VOICES

The Citarum River in Java, Indonesia is a highly polluted river that regularly floods parts of the city of Bandung. Urban downstream populations, like those in the city of Jakarta, rely on this river for drinking water supplies. Yet, the Citarum River is one of the most polluted rivers in the world and despite all efforts, developing integrated water resources management remains a challenge. Clean-up efforts involving the police, military, government departments, organizations and the public in the 25 districts the river passes through are hampered by a lack of coordination between diverse institutes and local communities. To move towards a shared vision for the Citarum River, community-based approaches are required, facilitating the communities to become stewards of the river rather than polluters. In November 2018, a collaboration between Indonesian and Dutch knowledge institutes in the context of their partnership in the Living Lab Upper Citarum,

led to the creation of a space for exploring and implementing a community art project in rural upstream communities (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Community Art Project Suara Citarum – Citarum Voices



Source: Authors

Approximately 30 community members of the settlements Ciwalengke and Sukahaji, both part of the riverbank village Padamulya, gathered to join the Citarum community art project. Over two days in November 2018 the participants produced paintings and poems in relation to the Citarum river, which flows through both settlements. All paintings were exhibited in a temporary village “museum” during the days of the workshop. Community members read their poems and then each poem was paired with a painting selected by other community members. The resulting poetry route, *Suara Citarum – Citarum Voices*, was produced as a series of banners combining the paintings and poems, in Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia) and in English. This reassembling of the art works was achieved with permission from, and in cooperation with, the community and realized by professional artists and graphic designers to achieve maximum quality for the intended next loop of social dialogue.

The first exhibition of the poetry route was undertaken by representatives of both settlements, who took it for an exchange visit to the Banjaran community, which is at a 20 km upstream distance from the two settlements. When shown the poetry route, the audience experienced it as a dialogue between the river and the communities, which is also reflected in titles like “I used to be proud”, “Sorry Citarum”, “Cry of Citarum” and “For our grandchildren” (see Figure 3 for an impression). The community members, after statements of pleasure about their participation, expressed their interest during the closure session as forward looking. Deni Riswandani, on behalf of the participants expressed it as follows: “We are happy because what is presented is quite transparent. Hopefully this image brings a message for anyone who sees and this message hopefully becomes a solution to environmental changes.”

The participating Living Lab Upper Citarum facilitators of water management related institutions evaluated the poetry route as very innovative, as it confronted

the organizers of these local institutions with new roles to take up in the facilitation of the process and the production of the poetry route. It shuffled around existing views on voicing and representation, and it was met with surprise that the community was able to represent their views with paintings and poetry. Muhammad Rifa from the Human Resource Development agency of West Java province stated: “It is really interesting that they can draw something about their emotions and feelings about the Citarum river”.

The poetry route travelled to other kampungs and institutions for introducing a dialogical process on river pollution and management. Exposing the poetry route to other communities and witnessing the lively debates it induced, created attention for the design of such (community art) processes. The project ambitions were not limited to the community art project, though. The process, especially the process facilitation of the community art project—stimulating the social dialogue with the poetry route—was also analyzed for its meaning for university curricula, in this particular case, the Bandung Institute of Technology in Indonesia, one of the partners in the Living Lab Upper Citarum.

Figure 3. Part of the Poetry route Suara Citarum – Citarum voices



Source: Authors

POETRY ROUTE TERAI ARC LANDSCAPE

Terai Arc Landscape (TAL), a rather flat zone along the southern foot of the Himalaya Mountain range, shared by Nepal, India and Bhutan, contains 23 national parks, wildlife sanctuaries, etc. that are partly interconnected, enabling tigers to migrate over large distances. To develop integrated grassland management strategies for the nature reserves in the TAL, that anticipate hydrological, ecological and

socio-economic pressures, there is a plan to establish a community art project to record the mechanisms underlying the pressures, from a broad range of stakeholder perspectives. The combined insights will be used in co-creation processes with nature managers and local stakeholders to develop grassland management strategies that support the conservation of the tiger habitat.

The poetry route Terai Arc Landscape is part of the “Save the tiger! Save the grassland! Save the water!” project. This research project is financed by the National Science Agenda program of the Dutch Research Council, involving a collaboration of 25 partners from Dutch and Nepali universities, NGOs and companies working in the fields of hydrology, ecology, nature conservation and stakeholder participation and communication. During the operationalization of this project (which is facing delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic), concerns were raised about integrating the envisioned poetry route as a mediated participation activity. After deliberation among the project partners, different yet complementary epistemological perspectives on analyzing natural systems were combined. The poetry route Terai Arc Landscape that will be implemented as part of the project aims at articulating the community views and voices, through the compilation of paintings and poetry. This poetry route thereby aims to feed into the social-ecological system analysis and also envisions to activate the community in relation to a stewardship on the river management activities.

EXPERIENCES WITH VISUAL PROBLEM APPRAISAL (VPA)

Visual Problem Appraisal (VPA) is a film-based learning strategy, originally developed for higher education purposes, which aims to enhance the analysis of complex issues from various perspectives through a series of filmed interviews (Witteveen & Lie, 2018). Each interview communicates the insights of a stakeholder, their views, interests and preferences which are not necessarily familiar or easy to understand for the observing audience. The diversity of stories unfolds during VPA workshops, in which both voicing and participation take place in a mediated way.

A VPA set is to be used as a tool for social learning in diverse arenas such as policy making and education. It is a structured process that consists of three phases: (1) A scoping stage where participants become familiar with the subject matter and issues through facilitated individual and group study and deliberation; (2) A simulated stakeholder consultation, where participants select and view several interviews and provide feedback. “Meeting” a number of stakeholders allows the participants to learn about the various perspectives of these interviewees and the way they frame their problems. (3) In an “action” stage, participants interpret and organize the always confusing, contrasting, and

contradictory information and formulate recommendations for action. This can take various shapes, such as scenario development, policy design or elaborated project proposals.

VPA sets have been used in higher education in several countries and they have shown to be very effective, offering an innovative and deliberative space for students, whereas evidenced impacts, as described by Witteveen et al. (2009, p. 42), include: “Enhanced problem and policy analysis capacity and intersubjective consensus; social learning, collective learning about social issues, problem framing and perceptions; reduced self-referentiality and increased commitment for primary stakeholders concerned”.

The series of film portraits creates a mediated platform enabling direct stakeholders from the area to meet indirect ones in policy and management positions allowing them to explore and act on competing or conflicting interests. The VPA methodology offers an innovative tool for participatory and deliberative governance, and provides an important addition as it solves two well-known problems: (1) the shortage of time and material resources for stakeholders to participate (leading to stakeholder fatigue) and (2) the fact that often the same people participate in diverse arenas (the ‘usual suspects’). In addition, we should mention the advantages of using VPA’s visual textuality to record and portray narratives. Furthermore, the process of facilitation may bring in a new dynamic, as it focusses on the competences of participants to watch, to listen and to analyze in a reflective manner.

VISUAL PROBLEM APPRAISAL RHINE RIVER BRANCHES

This VPA project aimed to develop strategic guidance for the complex, multi-stakeholder setting of sustainable river management for the Rhine and its branches in the Netherlands. The VPA aimed to function as a tool to support innovative governance as it shaped processes of participation and social learning, creating social imaginaries of sustainable resource management and policy platforms to communicate about sustainable river futures.

A professional film crew of 3–4 members recorded the social and natural environment of the river and its branches, in a series of documentaries supported by filmed interviews of the stakeholders. Filming took place from 2018 to 2021, at different times of the year. In order to present the diversity in the narratives, the portraits included direct stakeholders such as farmers, local entrepreneurs, fishermen and residents as well as indirect ones such as tourists, nature conservationists, water managers, policy makers, and governmental administrators. The filming of the interviews was done by a small film crew, while the interviewees were chosen after a series of stakeholder selection workshops. After producing a first subset of interviews, the complete set of VPA interviewees was reviewed by a transdisciplinary team (whose composition changed during the process).

Jørgensen (2012) describes these dynamics as being aligned with the disruption of seemingly strong socio-technological configurations and the relevance of including non-engaged stakeholders in an arena approach towards transitions.

The VPA provided a space to listen to stakeholders whom conventional public participation processes did not consider and consequently anyone who was non-engaged, silenced or overlooked also featured in the repository of film portraits, but not all, as Molina y Vedia (2008) argues, were easy to enlist, such as the self-silenced stakeholders. Examples of everyday exclusion include inland navigation skippers as they continuously sail on the rivers, or seasonally affected actors in times of drought or floods who are inaccessible during those times.

Recent activities using the VPA River Rhine Branches with staff of the Dutch water authority led one participant to make the following statement: “maybe [it was] good we did not do the interview ourselves as it forced us to listen”. A view on listening as being a complex activity can be considered an expression of “reduced self – referentiality”; a major result of mediated participation, which Witteveen et al. (2009, p. 56) framed as “creating spaces for stakeholder dialogue and social learning by removing social, cultural, psychological and/or physical barriers between authorities, policymakers and primary stakeholders for meeting in the ‘public sphere’ for collective learning and decision-making.”

VISUAL PROBLEM APPRAISAL “MY GARDEN”

The literature shows that climate adaptation is a difficult process, in which various factors can have an obstructive effect (Bulkeley & Casta Broto, 2013). This is not different in the Dutch local governance situation, where municipalities often have a sectoral approach and a lack of structural embedding of climate adaptation in spatial planning processes (Uittenbroek et al., 2019). Also, citizens and other stakeholders have a limited awareness of extreme weather occurrences and the increasing impact of climate change. Moreover, there are no uniform solutions and stakeholders have different priorities, interests and preferences for particular solutions. This makes climate change a complex societal problem. However, many of these impeding factors are social constructs, which can be addressed by increasing the adaptive capacity in society.

The project VPA My Garden recorded on film what people experience and do in their private gardens, whether it is a “hedgehog” garden or a manicured garden, or whatever variation that is possible. The project also featured their motivations. The resulting filmed portraits, capturing the garden experience of 20 residents and a domestic cat, were intended to be used in workshop settings related to citizen participation in urban climate adaptation. The VPA My Garden was used in co-creation workshops, in which the focus was on raising awareness on climate effects, and on creating a climate-proof design for the street or neighborhood. Through

VPA, participants in the workshops met other stakeholders in the neighborhood and competing or conflicting interests became clearly visible.

The resulting VPA showed how citizens were passionate about their gardens and how they imagined them. Interviewees narrated about a variety of functions and activities which indicated that more places or spots existed than those that would actually fit in the square meter outline of their garden. The social imaginaries used by the filmed citizens is expressed by real, imagined or dreamed functions and activities, such as harvesting your own food, socializing with everyone, contributing to biodiversity or simply having a nice place to dry laundry, drink a cup of tea or read a book. Pieter T., whose filmed interview is part of this VPA formulated it as follows: “When I sit here in the garden, I have different corners where I can sit and those corners give me peace because I sit between the greenery and hear the birds.”

The films showed that the reality is not what takes place but what could take place: seasons and other time frames, shadow, sunlight, fruits, flowers and other natural gifts, the presence of family and friends were easily imagined (see Figure 4 for an impression). This is exemplified by Seniye T, who has a Mediterranean origin. She said: “And as you can see, I do have an olive tree here. No olives, but I just like that we are aware of where the olives come from.” In addition, the inclusion of the “interview” with Lola the cat advanced the audience’s interest for considering non-human voices.

Figure 4. My Garden Interviewees



Source: Authors

CONCLUSIONS

The exploration of experiences in this article aimed to gain insights about the opportunities and challenges of mediated participation for environmental governance, thus also supporting a transformation of environmental governance. Experiences with community art-based poetry route and film-based visual problem appraisal had the ambition to overcome frictions in the integration of diverse discursive cultures and textualities, that we can find in the more conventional (and minimalist) approaches towards participatory and deliberative governance.

Achieving participation through art-based methodologies—using film and poetry—can contribute to diverse arenas of social dialogue and governance transformation. More specific conclusions, based on more detailed accounts of the events as described in this article, require prudence when analyzing the impact of the spaces explored, in order to prevent jumping to enthusiastic positivism. To prevent this over-optimism, we will therefore start formulating the challenges before we shed light on the value of our experiences.

The nature of mediated participation implies that “voicing” is rendered differently: no longer favoring direct communicative qualities such as eloquence, time and mobility resources and other aspects of access and inclusion. This comes at a cost: if mediated participation is to result in social dialogue, it is required to design strategies that consider particular aspects resulting from art-based perspectives, such as visual ethics, and the power dynamics of portrayal. Frictions are caused by issues related to craftsmanship and discursive power. As participation cannot be equally implemented in all elements in the process—for instance, in the final compilation of art works—it remains necessary to focus on the governance and dialogical aspiration. This aligns with Literat (2012, p. 2962) who wrote that mediated participation creates new opportunities for stakeholder engagement, but also raises important questions regarding “collective creativity, authorship, and the aesthetic significance of digital participation.” Recognizing such frictions may probably lead to curricula reviews, focusing on transdisciplinarity and 21st century skills.

Another challenge is that processes of mediated participation require the recognition of complexity by process facilitators amongst others. This can be exemplified with the VPA My Garden. These film portraits led to the realization that contemporary debates may tend to position every issue in a political context. A citizen with a garden full of trees and bushes could then be positioned in a left-wing political corner, whereas a paved garden could represent a right-wing stance. The VPA My Garden shows landlords who prohibit their tenants from altering the pavement, a wheelchair requiring pavement and a resident’s disappointment that their pear tree did not carry fruit. These stories convincingly confronted

the VPA process facilitators and their audiences with the idea that it is imperative to recognize and respect the diversity of existing or imagined functions and activities that citizens attribute to their gardens before introducing tangible interventions to adapt those spaces towards climate change.

The societal relevance of these integrative approaches to learning and transformation should nevertheless stimulate institutes of higher education to integrate art-based narrative methodologies and facilitation competences in their curricula, as part of their teaching on soft system knowledge. Amitav Ghosh elaborates on “climate change and the unthinkable” (the subtitle to his book “The Great Derangement”) as an imaginative failure in the face of global warming. He formulates it as follows: “we are confronted suddenly with a new task: that of finding other ways in which to imagine the unthinkable beings and events of this era” (2016, p. 33).

Still to be considered as a challenge, but of utmost importance, is the recommendation that process facilitation should be accountable beyond its direct handling. Facilitation towards transparent and achievable goals also links to procedures and activities guiding participation processes. This allows facilitators to be transparent about expected efforts, engagement and resulting relevance. As evidenced in the Terai Arc Landscape project, to prevent a misalignment in using the outcomes of participatory processes, it is important to engage in timely negotiations on how the outcomes will be used, so that the mandate of those who will use the outcomes can be defined beforehand.

To advance further insights and actions for environmental governance transformation, and to respect the urgency in developing and implementing environmental actions, governmental authorities, education institutes and other influential stakeholders should dare to support innovative, uncompromising and adventurous approaches. In particular, the concept of social imaginaries is considered of great value for processes, which are designed and motivated by art-based or creative methodologies and requires further exploration. Using this concept of social imaginaries may open new avenues for action and reflection in times of urgency, as this concept allows us to stay away from conventional modernist thinking.

Complementary to our call for good process facilitation, and the need to be sensitive to power imbalances that arise from these methods, there is another valuable outcome. We also witnessed—with both methodologies (community art and VPA)—the autonomous power of art-based mediated participation. Bringing the poetry route *Suara Citarum* to downstream villages prompted spontaneous and passionate debates about the Citarum river. Thus, the intrinsic power of the poetry route was revealed. In such cases, the facilitator or process designers are challenged to take a step back and respect the emerging dynamics, also allowing for paths other than those planned to be taken. This implies an element of trust

that these unexpected paths will also generate relevant contributions. This aligns with the last lines of the poem “The Flood”, written by participating villagers Cucu, Sopian and Engkar: “But if you come together. With hopes and dreams. We can grow side by side”; it also resonates with Kokom and Mida’s words in the poem “A prayer for Citarum”: “That is what I want for tomorrow and forever”.

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