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# The governance games of citizens and stakeholders' engagement: longitudinal narratives

## Journal Item

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# The governance games of citizens and stakeholders' engagement: longitudinal narratives

**Abstract**

This paper focuses on a process of citizens and stakeholders' engagement promoted by a local authority to co-design the city vision with multiple actors (politicians, public managers, consultants, citizens and other external stakeholders). The setting for this research is provided by a municipality in Sweden and our theoretical perspective is the decentred theory of governance (Bevir 2013). A multi-actor, longitudinal and qualitative analysis has been carried out by triangulating interviews with key stakeholders, non-participant observations, and documental analysis, and by collecting the empirical material at two points of time (2014-2018). Our findings present several narratives and show that four main governance games were played (political; reputational and professional; spectacle; and social games). We discuss how these games interplay may change the perception of actors about the process of citizens and stakeholders' engagement.

**Keywords:** governance game, citizen participation, stakeholder participation, local government, Sweden

**Introduction**

With the role of government changing in the modern society, citizens and stakeholders'[1] engagement has been given increased attention (e.g. Bovaird and Löffler, 2012; Edelenbos et al., 2010; Klijn, 2012; Peters and Pierre, 1998). Particularly, the transformation of the society towards more horizontal relationships and the new information and communication technologies have indeed increased the opportunities for the participation of citizens in the work of government (e.g. Bloom and Sancino, 2019; Meijer, 2016) and new forms of multi-actor governance have been emerging as a feature of modern public administration (e.g. Almqvist, 2013; Bingham et al., 2005; Bryson et al. 2017; Torfing et al., 2012).

There is a widespread literature that has explored practices where citizens and stakeholders have been engaged either for making policy decisions (Edelenbos and Klijn, 2009; Fung, 2006) and/or for co-producing public services (Bovaird, 2007; Brandsen and Honingh, 2016; Nabatchi et al., 2017). Several elements have been investigated in this respect, such as for example how these practices impact on representative democracy (Klijn and Skelcher, 2007; Munro et al., 2008), their main benefits and risks (e.g. Irvin and Stansbury, 2004), their effects (e.g.; Nabatchi, 2010; Van Damme and Brans, 2012) and motivations of citizens and stakeholders to take part in these processes (e.g. van Eijk and Steen, 2014; Fledderus and Honingh, 2016). However, most of the studies on citizens and stakeholders' engagement tend to adopt a philosophy of modern empiricism (Bevir, 2010) based on (post)positivist approaches. In this paper, we aim to fill a gap in the literature by taking a post-foundational philosophical perspective (Bevir 2013) and employing an interpretative approach[2] (Bevir and Rhodes, 2006) to public administration which is grounded on meanings and storytelling (Bevir, 2011), rather than on causalities (i.e. the impact of X on Y).

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[1] In the text of the paper we say citizens and stakeholders to acknowledge the fact that some citizens can be involved as people entitled to some political and democratic rights in a given place(s) (here the use of the word citizens), as well as representatives of a given organisation(s) (here the use of the word stakeholders). Specifically, we take the following definition of stakeholder: "Any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman 1984: 46).

[2] "Interpretive approaches are constructivist in that they seek to make sense of the world via the compilation of specific stories or narratives situated within their different contexts (belief systems and historical traditions). However, as constructions, they are partial and subject to challenge, so different and competing narratives can operate in relation to the same set of events" (Sullivan 2007, p. 144).

Post-foundationalism is based on meaning holism. Meaning holism states that 'propositions, meanings, and beliefs can be understood only in the context of wider language games or webs of beliefs' and it challenges both the reifications associated with correlations, and models that are constitutive of formal social explanations typical of positivistic approaches (Bevir, 2013, p. 4). It is thus extensively inductive and abductive, rather than merely deductive, as well as focused on language, meanings and beliefs rather than on numerical and/or ordinal variables and casual correlations. From this paradigmatic perspective, 'public administration is less about finding formal connections, than about telling stories about beliefs, actions, practices, and their contexts' (Bevir 2011, p. 190).

Given this backdrop, the aim of our paper is to describe and interpret what are the practices, intended here as governance games, played in a local governance process where citizens and stakeholders are engaged by a local authority for a given aim, the co-design of the city vision. The analysis of the governance games allows us to interpret how actors interact and form their perceptions about the engagement process. Our research questions are the following: what are the governance games (language and meanings) played by the different actors engaged in the participatory governance process? How do governance games form actors' perceptions (beliefs) about the participatory governance process? To this purpose, the research focuses on the narratives and the stories through which meaning making dynamics are made by multiple types of actors (e.g., politicians, public managers, citizens) to explain their perceptions about the reasons for the participatory governance process  and their perceptions on the project benefits. Investigating meaning making dynamics, covert issues and practice structuration (Cappellaro, 2017) is typical of interpretative studies and qualitative strategies (Ospina, Esteve and Lee, 2018).

The empirical context of our study is a typical municipality in the south of Sweden, Kristianstad Municipality. Since a strong predominance of research on citizen participation is embedded in the Anglo-Saxon context (Ianniello et al., 2019), there is room for studies carried out in other administrative and socio-cultural contexts, such as in our case the Scandinavian/Nordic one, which is

characterized by a high level of autonomy, transparency, openness, and participation of citizens. Specifically, in 2014, Kristianstad municipality launched a new vision "We grow and develop together" which will last until 2030. The vision project was unique in its ambition to include citizens and stakeholders and to actively use their inputs to co-create the vision. Data have been gathered by non-participant observations, documental analysis and semi-structured interviews with politicians, public officials and managers involved in the vision project, and citizens and stakeholders who actively contributed to the project.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section gives a brief account about the debate over pros and cons of processes of citizens and stakeholders engagement. The third section presents our theoretical approach, namely a decentered theory of governance (Bevir, 2013). The fourth section proceeds with the description of the research context, methodology and methods. The fifth section presents our case study. Then, the paper presents the findings (sixth section), discusses them (seventh section) and draws in the last section some conclusions and future research perspectives.


**Studying citizens and stakeholders' engagement: from "benefits" and "costs" to narratives**

There are several pros and cons in practices of citizen engagement (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). First, various and diverse reasons and expected benefits may motivate actors to take part to participatory practices. For example, governments may need legitimacy and consensus while providing the infrastructure to take decisions; citizens and stakeholders might want visibility while providing the criteria to judge and assess different options. Particularly, both pragmatic and influence legitimacy may arise when organizations work close to their constituents and are willing to relinquish authority and be responsive to constituents' needs (Schuman, 1995). Thus, engagement of citizens can enhance government's legitimacy (Klijn, 2012; Martin, 2009), but also increase resources, diversity and responsiveness of public organisations (Kahane et al., 2013; Renn et al., 1993). The participation of citizens and, more broadly, a pluralistic institutional structure based on the engagement of multiple stakeholders are also considered key pillars of a good governance system (Bovaird et al., 2003;

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Campanale, Mauro and Sancino, 2020). According to some studies, the observed benefits of engaging citizens and stakeholders would range from remedies to the lack of trust towards government (e.g. Fledderus, 2015) to the improvement of the outcomes and the quality of public services (e.g. Martin, 2009), as well as to the strengthening of democracy and legitimacy (e.g. Pestoff, 2009).

That said, engaging citizens and stakeholders can also have downside effects and entail several costs – both financially and immaterially - for governments (e.g. Williams, Kang and Johnson, 2016). For example, citizens and stakeholders may capture public interest and/or may get disappointed and decrease their trust in government when their expectations are not fulfilled by participatory governance processes (Greenwood, 2007). Moreover, while the normative expectations about the benefits of citizen participation have been often taken for granted (Ianniello et al., 2019), several challenges and disadvantages may emerge (Kahane et al., 2013). The study of Abels (2007) has shown, for instance, that these processes do not per se determine improvement of legitimacy and accountability of policy-making and that the final impact can depend on the linkage built with the political system.

However, regardless the emphasis on pros and/or cons of these processes, there is generally in the literature the epistemological assumption that some correlations can be found in these processes to explain some kind of "benefits/costs, outcomes, effects" and possibly made generalizable to other contexts, cultures and situations.

In the next section, we complement this approach by taking another epistemological and theoretical perspective, namely a decentred theory of governance, used also in previous studies in public administration (Durose, 2009; Sullivan, 2007). We therefore consider processes of citizen and stakeholder engagement as situated accounts of meanings and beliefs in action socially constructed and expressed through narratives and stories (e.g. Orr and Bennett 2017). In other words, we focus on the inherently emotional, historical, cultural and contextual embedded dimensions of processes of citizens and stakeholders' engagement (e.g. Ayres 2019), and we treat them as situated stories embedded within webs of beliefs rather than as reified structures with general properties.

**Citizens and stakeholders' engagement processes as situated governance games: a decentred theory of governance**

The decentred theory of governance takes a humanist and historicist perspective and is based on a constructivist and historical social ontology. This theory is presented by Bevir (2013) as a third approach to governance studies, the first two being respectively network governance (e.g. Rhodes, 1996) and meta-governance (Sørensen and Torfing, 2009). There are two fundamental differences – with exceptions of course - between on one hand a decentred approach to governance, and on the other hand network governance and meta-governance[3]. First, both network governance and meta-governance move from the premise that, respectively, organizational networks and multi-actor interactions, can be governed by a central actor(s); decentred governance is instead grounded on the premise that governance is simply occurring when practices of ruling and steering are enacted and this may happen from any individuals and potentially everywhere. Second, studies on network governance and meta-governance have tended so far to take the perspective of the governmental actor and a (post)positivistic approach, while studies from a decentred perspective have mainly taken an interpretative paradigm and potentially widening the units of analysis, moving from the perspective of individuals or actors not necessarily part of the government as well as putting the focus on other levels of analysis, such as for example languages and cultural practices. We see these perspectives not as alternative, but as complementary. In other words, and going back to one basic distinction, according to a decentred theory of governance the state is seen as stateless, rather than polycentric in networks or meta-governed through softer governance tools.. As Bevir (2013, pp. 56-57) wrote "decentered theory focuses on the social construction of practices through the ability of individuals to create and act on meanings".

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[3] It is not the purpose of this paper to engage in a comparison between these two concepts. However, network governance mainly refers to providing steering and coordination through collaboration amongst multiple actors (organizations and/or individuals) coalescing into a network (e.g. Emerson, Nabatchi and Balogh 2012; Provan and 2008). Meta-governance is the governance of governance (e.g. Kooiman, and Jentoft 2009; Sørensen and Torfing) and can be distinguished from network governance because it doesn't necessarily require (but it could) a network as an organizational form and/or collaboration as a mode of governance, as governance of governance by multiple modes (e.g. authority, market, nudge, etc.).

According to this theory, governance is about (Bevir, 2013, Chapter 3):

- contingent meanings and activity of the relevant individuals involved in all kinds of practices of rule, not a necessary logic or lawlike regularity;

- the social construction of the state through the ability of individuals for meaningful action;

- everyday practices which arise from situated agents whose beliefs and actions are informed by traditions and expressed in stories.

The role of social scientists embracing this theoretical perspective is that of interpreting "practices, including cases of governance, using narratives that unpack the contingent actions that embody beliefs informed by contested traditions and dilemmas" (Bevir, 2013, p. 65). This implies a shift from institutions to meanings in action and so a shift from social logics to narratives and a role of social science researchers aimed at explaining shifting patterns of governance by focusing on the actors' interpretations of their actions and practices. The focus on "everyday practices including cases of governance" builds here the link with the concept of governance games which has also inspired our work. Here we draw from Meijer (2017) who, building upon Scharpf's (1997) perspective of "games real actors play", has identified some key governance games in smart cities. We define governance games as social practices among actors occurring in a setting of rules, traditions and dilemmas through which coordination and cooperation is enacted. In Figure 1 below we present a model which offers a decentred and a micro-level[4] perspective of governance games. Specifically, we considered governance games as social practices where individuals balance i) perceptions about the reasons for the governance process (influenced by traditions – a concept used in the decentred theory of governance); ii) interactions, situation and events (language games and dilemmas); and iii) stratified perceptions and contingent meanings (beliefs) about these processes which resemble the historical in action, dynamic and longitudinal dimension of social life and thus of governance games.

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[4] The focus on games has been applied also at other levels. For example, at a macro-level it has been often applied in economics (e.g. at the industry level), where game theory originates; at mid-level, Friedberg and Crozier (1980) focused on political games and organizational politics.

**Figure 1. Understanding the dynamics of citizen and stakeholder engagement in governance games**

*- Insert here –*


**Research context, methodology and methods**

The purpose of our work is to describe and interpret what are the governance games observed in a local governance process where citizens and stakeholders are engaged for a given aim. To fulfil this purpose, a research strategy based on a longitudinal and qualitative single case study was used. The empirical context is a municipality in the south part of Sweden, Kristianstad Municipality, with around 80.000 inhabitants. Citizen dialogue as part of the governance's process is generally seen as an important area for development in the local authority and, for several years, a systematic approach to citizen participation has evolved with a focus on the development of a better working democracy (Dehlin, 2017). Hence, citizen participation is important in the Swedish context. The Swedish administrative structure is highly decentralized with politically and functionally strong local governments (Schwab et al., 2017). Kristianstad municipality is fairly typical for Sweden, for example, when it comes to size, rankings of satisfied residents, unemployment rates and the municipal emphasis on resident dialogue, a relevant issue for supporting citizen participation. The purpose of typical case selection is that it can illustrate or highlight what is typical, normal and average (Patton, 2002). In order to achieve our purpose and investigate citizen/stakeholder-government interactions in a delimited context, a specific municipal project was selected: "Vision 2030: We grow and develop together", initiated by the municipality in 2012. The vision project was selected because it was unique in its ambition to include citizens in the design process and to actively use their inputs to form the vision. The uniqueness of the project resulted in attracting significant attention from several actors and in creating multiple perceptions of citizen and stakeholder engagement among them. The case appears thus to be relevant for the research purpose.

The study rests on abductive reasoning, whereby previous studies on citizen participation offer a frame for how to approach the phenomenon. The abductive reasoning enables us to find new issues, contributing to and developing the initial frame through the analysis of findings (Dubois and Gadde, 2002). This approach has the value of combining theoretical insights with the insights coming from the confrontation of theoretical issues with empirical materials.

The design of our study is characterized by prolonged engagement, since one of the researchers spent extended time with respondents in their native cultural environment and everyday world in order to gain better understanding of behavior and social relationships. Apart from non-participant observations, the case study is also based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with a variety of stakeholders involved in the vision project and documental analysis. Triangulation (Denzin, 2001) was used (Miles et al., 2014), thus strengthening the internal validity of our findings.

The interviews play an important role in the study, as they are a direct type of qualitative research method suitable for understanding why something happens (Hair et al, 2011) and allowed us to uncover underlying beliefs and attitudes, not possible to observe. The interviews were semi-structured and the researcher's prolonged engagement and deep knowledge of the municipality helped to design insightful and empirical grounded questions, which positively influenced the atmosphere during the conversations as the interviewees tended to open-up and become more informal.

The interviews were conducted at two different points in time. The first round of interviews was conducted during the vision project's design in the spring 2014: four public managers and one politician were interviewed, including the municipal director who initiated the vision project. The interviews were designed to understand the reasons beyond the decision to co-elaborate the vision, to identify the stakeholders involved and how they were involved in the process, and their perceptions regarding the project's potential outcome. The actors selected were those who played a key role in

the decision of launching this project and in designing it. At this time, non-participant observations took also place during one of the open meetings for the public.

The second round of interviews took place in the winter 2018. This second round of interviews was performed to explore the perceptions of different stakeholders about the process and its results after some years from design and formal adoption of the vision and to capture meaning making dynamics and narratives concerning perceptions of citizens and stakeholder engagement about the project once the project moved into the implementation phase compared to the initial ideas on it. To help the interviewees to induce memories and support interviewees' narrative development, the interview in this phase started with a short story about the project, including a news article written about the project and the final version of the vision. The first interview was with the project leader for the vision project and after that, a snowball technique was used. New interviews were arranged with recommended people as each new interview contributed significantly to the understanding of the case (Patton, 2002). It was important to interview different kinds of stakeholders in the project, to be able to capture the relevance of their different roles and their perceptions of the vision project, and thus the snowball technique was complemented with quota sampling (Miles et al., 2014). This selection technique resulted in 17 interviews in the two rounds with different stakeholders (citizens, public managers, a consultant and politicians) involved in the vision project. The interviews took place in the interviewee's office or in a conference room the interviewee arranged. Each interview lasted between 30 to 70 minutes and the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed.

The interviews were supplemented by documental analysis to ensure in-depth understanding of the case. The documents collected can be divided into four categories: external communication of the vision (e.g. invitations to participate in round tables and screenshots from the municipal webpage), citizen participation inputs (e.g. summaries from round tables and viewpoints submitted to the municipality through e-mail, post or webpage), different versions of the vision (including the final version), and pronouncements on the vision from political parties and municipal departments.

A thematic narrative analysis (Czarniawska, 2004) was used to analyze the interviews, where the transcribed material was reduced through various steps of coding. The material was coded for topics (Charmaz, 2014). The initial coding involved reading the transcribed material. All passages that touched upon the topic of citizens and stakeholders' engagement were highlighted and coded with "citizens/stakeholders' engagement". This reduced material was then used for a more focused coding, where we actively searched for citizens and stakeholders' perceptions about their engagement in "Vision 2030". This allows to reveal the narratives that could explain how the perceptions about citizen and stakeholder engagement were created. By analysing and contrasting empirical material from two different times (2014 and 2018) we could then capture that the games played by actors created new perceptions of the engagement of stakeholders once the project had moved into the implementation phase. In vivo coding was used (Miles et al., 2014), i.e. words or short phrases from the participant's own language were used to form the codes. Typical codes were as follows: "To understand each other's perspective better" and "No one could say that we excluded anyone". The reduced data were scrutinized once more, the purpose being to identify higher levels of categories, and the codes were grouped together under higher-order categories in a theorizing process (Ryan and Bernard, 2003). Hence, the empirical data were labelled with our own categories, which meant what the empirical data concerned.

**Case study: Kristianstad "Vision 2030"**

In the early 2010's Kristianstad municipality initiated a vision project, "Vision 2030: We grow and develop together" ("Vision 2030") with the aim to strengthen the positive vibes in the municipality and to develop a vision which could guide strategic developments in the future. To get an overview of "Vision 2030", the milestones are marked on a timeline in figure 2. The design-phase of "Vision 2030" was running for two years, here divided into four rounds, and, after that, the project moved into an implementation-phase that is still active.

**Figure 2. Milestones in the project "Vision 2030"**

*- Insert here -*

In the first round, the basic rules of the game were set including *who* should be a part of the project. Key stakeholders from both municipal departments and municipal companies were engaged and a working group was formed. In this first round, public managers in leading positions and politicians were the only active players. Although citizens were mentioned as important players and there were clear instructions to involve citizens in the vision project, they were not introduced to the project at this stage. In the second round, five one-day-conferences were carried out with the working group to design a draft of the vision together with an external consultant hired for this phase of the project. The third round was a crucial phase, as a broad anchoring process was carried out in the spring of 2014 and citizens were finally invited to participate. The citizen participation was arranged in five different ways as summarized in figure 3, since different mechanisms were thought to address specific sub-groups of the wide and heterogeneous stakeholder group represented by the citizens.

**Figure 3. Different forms of participation in the project "Vision 2030"**

*- Insert here -*

The idea was to reach out to both targeted citizens who were believed to be able to contribute to the project because of their expertise and institutional role (i.e. round tables, school visits and the use of established networks) as well as to invite the general public, i.e. lay citizens (open public meetings and submission of viewpoints). The politicians also made a special request to the working group to include young people in the project to have a dialog with the youth.

After involving the citizens, the fourth and final round of the design-phase started. This round was closed to the public and only the leading public managers and politicians were involved. The task was to finalize the vision and submit it for decision to the City Council. The municipal director and the project secretary were identified by the other actors as playing the most active roles in finalizing the vision. It remains unclear and uncertain what role the citizens' contributions played in this final round. For example, a school politician reflected:

*I think it is possible to recognize the conversations in the vision. But maybe these ideas would have been there anyway? Even if we didn't meet the school kids, that I don't know. I mean it is quite general things. Nothing unique or strange in any way. For example, everyone wants people to be proud of their city.*

The vision was decided the 10th of June 2014, after some debate in the City Council. It is now active in the municipality, complemented by a strategic roadmap, which is a concretization of the vision. Table 1 summarizes the players involved in the different rounds of the vision project.

**Table 1: Participants in the project "Vision 2030"**

*- Insert here –*

**Unpacking governance games**

This section illustrates different governance games played by the multiple actors engaged in the project "Vision 2030", as emerged from the analysis and interpretation of actors' words and official documents.

***"Political games"***

Given the political character of the project "Vision 2030", it is not surprising that we observed several fundamental political dynamics. Indeed, the first round of the project saw the engagement of the politicians and public managers in order to launch the project and then the political dynamics were particularly evident in rounds three and four. During these rounds, an approaching election put time pressure on the project, which altered the dynamics between the members of the working group and other public managers and politicians in the municipality, changing also the possibilities and the prerequisites for the citizen participation. The politicians wanted to finish the project before the election, partly because it would have been very difficult to finalize it after the election if other people had been to run the municipality. Furthermore, from some politicians' point of view, it was important to show strength and effectiveness by finalizing a project that at that time had already run for over a

year with substantial costs and not to "lose face" so close to an election. The time pressure stressed the process and made it difficult to involve external stakeholders in the final phase of the project, as it would most likely prolong the process. A politician from the political majority reflected over how the vision was formulated in the final stage of the process:

> *I don't know how much of this that have surfaced during your other interviews, but the vision was very broad and all over the place in the end. And I am afraid that many of them who were active in the working group don't really recognize themselves in the final product, because someone here said 'Now, I will summarize this'… Thank you for your work, but I take it from here´. It was simply too many details.*

So political pressures led to a relatively quick and easy completion of the project. However, this also gave the impression to citizens and stakeholders that their engagement was mainly instrumental for the purpose to reach political consensus. This was supported by some politicians who recognized citizens' late engagement.

Politicians wanted to be seen and heard, to express their opinions and be active in the political debate in the municipality. As a consequence, once the vision was written and sent out on referral, all politicians representing the different parties in the municipality council wanted to take part in the debate and express their opinions concerning the vision. This led to frustration for some of the public managers working with "Vision 2030", who felt that their work was not valued. A public manager in the working group expressed his frustration in the following way:

> *It was frustrating when we went back to the politicians. Hell, it was frustrating! … Maybe we shouldn't have taken it personally or so, which maybe we did a bit too much. But they could not say what we should change. It was more: 'Make it sharper!' Ok, what do you mean with that?*

The political debates thus seemed to have influenced the perceptions of the project and how the stakeholders' engagement, both internal and external, was treasured in the end.

***"Reputational and professional games"***

Politicians thought about the idea of engaging citizens and stakeholders for "Vision 2030" also as a way to get a good reputation with the public. Leading politicians wanted to obtain the favor of citizens and stakeholders through the participatory project, thus reinforcing their legitimacy and increasing their political consensus with the aim to be re/elected. In this case, the politicians and the working group were afraid to exclude citizens from the dialog and be criticized for that. This resulted in two public open meetings where everyone was welcome. The meetings were highlighted as important for reputation and legitimacy. A public manager elaborated on the politicians wish to include everyone as:

> *The third target was wider, like 'everyone who was interested'. You want to reach as many as possible, but it's an impossible target group. BUT if you say that we only want to reach people living in a certain area, then people think I exclude everyone else. You are afraid to get the debate: 'But what about us? We were not allowed to join'. So I think there's a fear of forgetting someone. You don't want to deliberately deselect someone.*

Hence, what emerges as one of the main reasons behind the broad engagement of the public was on one side to guarantee inclusiveness and on the other side to control for complains to protect the reputation of the local authority.

Schoolchildren were also included in the project by a special dialog at schools. In this way the municipality was supposed to build an image as a local authority that listens to the young and is open and progressive. To improve reputation and to build stronger bonds with the public, politicians themselves participated in and hosted all the meetings with the public in round three, i.e. they fronted the game.

Reputational and professional concerns seemed quite important not only for politicians, but also for public managers and the consultant. Public managers show a particular interest in building trust-based relationships with citizens through the realization of multiple events to meet citizens. On the other hand, the consultant wanted to keep the control of the project, partly due to uncertainty about forms

for citizen participation and partly due to a fear of not being able to control the dialogue with citizens, he limited the influence of the citizens and in that way ensured an easier process, where his reputation as an effective consultant remained. The consultant elaborated:

> *There was a fear that citizens with special interests would be too strong and would try to get their voice heard too much in the vision… So it was quite rational to think like this. The municipality wanted a document that was overarching and covered the municipality as a whole, a single document that they could go out and play with, to be able to use as a starting point.*

Also the citizens who participated in the project saw this as a way to strengthen their reputation, in terms of being opinion leaders who are influential and important enough to be listened to. In particular, this issue was extremely relevant for citizens who took part in the game lobbying for specific interests to be represented.


### *"Spectacle games"*

The municipality as a whole was proud of the way it involved the public in the project "Vision 2030". The active engagement of both citizens and other stakeholders in the process was lifted as a role model for how to run municipal projects and used to satisfy managerial needs to spread a good story on how citizens can participate in the work of government. For example, the engagement of the citizens was highlighted on the municipal webpage and the schools' visits were summarized and used for a public exhibition which was displayed in the city hall.

However, there were indications that citizens' engagement was mostly for show as they had a low opportunity to actually influence the project. Indeed, the external stakeholders were involved late in the process, when they had no real chance to actually impact the process or the vision. A citizen reflected on the round table discussion in the following way:

> *I can feel that the time was pretty forced, and too limited time to be able to dig deep, especially when it comes to our perspective… I could also feel that there were no room to influence [the*

*vision] anymore, or perhaps to some extent, but all that solid work that had been put into the*

*process, and it felt like there was missing a big piece.*

Thus, the participant in one of the round table discussions felt like she participated like in a theatre spectacle, where the output was not important but rather just holding discussions to claim an engagement of citizens and stakeholders. Furthermore, the secretary of the working group expressed the difficulty to use the input from the citizens to form the vision, adding to skepticism towards the role of the citizens' and stakeholders' contributions more as a spectacle with limited value:

*It was pretty scarce. But sure, we got some kind of quotes and stuff about people's opinions*

*and what they had said. But then it could be things we already had decided we shouldn't talk*

*about in the vision, silly things like… a hotel in the lake. Of course we put things like that*

*aside.*

Furthermore, at one point, a politician in the political minority went to the local media to express his view of the project. The newspaper published an article in the end of February 2013 (i.e. during round three of the project) with the headline "The vision is totally useless". In the article the politician expressed his opinion about the project at large, but also about how and when citizens were involved in the project:

*It is a strange order that the leading politicians goes out and presents the vision to the public*

*before our viewpoints have been submitted… It is totally useless, this vision.*

(Kristianstadsbladet, 2014-02-27)

This act to openly criticize "Vision 2030" in the local media was maybe done to get more visibility for the elections. The politician saw the project as an opportunity to make headlines on his own, and perhaps by criticizing and destroying the work of others, win over voters (*political game*). However, his act also influenced the public perception of the project revealing the relevance of powerful communication tools and use of media.


**"*Social games*"**

Social dynamics were also very important in our case study. New social relationships were developed and the politicians' networks grew. Several stakeholders highlighted the social value of the meetings. For instance, a citizen elaborated on how she felt during the discussion:

> *I was treated in a very positive way. I felt like they were very interested in hearing my thoughts and why I had the experiences I had.*

Also the politicians and public managers put high value in the meetings since the design of the project. The rules of the project envisaged several mechanisms to guarantee social contacts with different groups of citizens (cfr. round three). A politician highlighted the social aspects of the process, emphasizing the relevance of relationships with the territory:

> *It created a closer relationship with these people. I believe there were several people from immigrant associations, who I met there and talked to for the very first time, which I later have met in town, talk to and says hello to. And we have a kind of relationship today.*

**Discussion: governance games and actors' perceptions**

During the different rounds of the project "Vision 2030", several governance games took place between the actors, contributing to influence perceptions of the project during the design phase as well as the perception of the project once it had moved into the implementation phase. Perceptions of "Vision 2030" and the process of engagement varied across stakeholders. Table 2 in the end of this section, shows the governance games introduced in the previous section and the perceptions of "Vision 2030" and the stakeholder engagement these different games helped to form, both in the design phase and the implementation phase. The perceptions are the actors' own reflection over the reasons for and benefits of involving citizens and other stakeholders in the design of the "Vision 2030". Thus, some perceptions expressed are focused on motivations for engaging others in the project, while other actors expressed more personal motivations for participation. For example, citizens are those who tend to reflect more about their personal reasons for participating in the project, while politicians and public managers think about their professional reasons for designing a project

where several stakeholders are engaged. Reviewing Table 2 it appears as if dynamics among actors over time contributed to form their perceptions about this process.

Citizens got involved in the participatory process of "Vision 2030" to get their *voice heard* (social games), but also due to *professional expectations* and to the chance to *lobby* for their most important issues (professional and reputational games). Hence, citizens had the expectations of exercising an increased power in the decision-making process, motivated by a desire to maintain or improve professional reputation. However, their perception of their engagement in "Vision 2030" changed during the process due to the interplay of several political and spectacle dynamics, and in the end the citizens felt that their *voices were easy to disregard* and *not valued*. Still, certain citizens representing special interests saw a value in being included in the strategic conversation, as it gave them *professional recognition*. Even if they could have doubts about the impact of their engagement for the vision project and the real valued added, their mere engagement in the project gave them status (professional and reputational games).

The members of the working group started to work with the mechanisms of citizen and stakeholder engagement to gain *legitimacy*, but also to *avoid criticism* (reputational and professional games). They believed that citizen and stakeholder engagement could contribute to make the vision project successful but in pursuing this goal they were also partly driven by reputational reasons (reputational and professional games). They could also see other benefits such as *networks* where the citizens could get to know each other and, hopefully, create an understanding for each other's diverse viewpoints and perspectives (social games). However, the desire to involve many actors in the process under a limited amount of time resulted in the fact that some members of the working group believed that there was *no real value* in the citizen engagement, as there was no time to go beyond a superficial level of engagement and the stakeholders, thus, were primarily engaged in the project for show (spectacle games) At the same time, these professionals felt *pride* in involving the citizens in the project despite the time pressure, and saw the citizen engagement as a *learning experience*. They also

recognized the social *networks* they established during the vision project as a valuable output and a source for future collaborations and citizen participation. Social dynamics seems indeed to have contributed to the positive perceptions of the participatory governance process (social games).

Public managers that were not involved in the working group, such as the municipal director and other public managers, encouraged citizen engagement as they saw it as something requested and valued by the politicians, as well as clearly indicated in the municipal directives. Moreover, they considered it also as a possibility to *share the responsibility* for the place and its development with other stakeholders (political games) and as an opportunity to strengthen a *collaborative mindset* (social games). Finally, to involve the citizens was also seen as a way to gain *trust* among the citizens for the municipal organization and the politicians, improving their professional image and pursuing their professional goals (professional and reputational game). In retrospect, the public managers' perception of involving the citizens remained positive in terms of a strong belief in that it increased the *legitimacy* of the project (political games). However, due to the fact that it turned out to be rather difficult to actually use the input from the citizens in the design of the vision, the dynamics between the key stakeholders in the project changed and the public managers altered their views of the importance of involving citizens in the project. The *limited implementation* of the vision indeed negatively influenced their perception of the project and the citizen participation was not seen as leading to any *real value,* but rather as something that was positive for how the project was communicated (spectacle games).

Finally, some politicians saw it as an important part of their *political image* to work with citizen engagement and had high hopes for increasing the *legitimacy* of the project as well as of the municipality in general (reputational/professional and political games). Further, as stakeholder group, politicians differed from the public managers in that they also hoped for real contributions and saw the citizens' participation as a source for *crucial input* to the vision project (reputational and professional games). The political conversations with the citizens during the autumn 2014 and the

social dynamics that played out further strengthened their perception of the importance of citizen participation. As the politicians and the citizens got to know each other, personal relationships were developed and the politicians' *networks* grew (social games). Social games also contributed to seeing citizen participation as a way to develop a *collaborative mindset,* which could potentially strengthen the role of the citizens in the future projects. The experience made politicians aware of the relevance of citizen engagement and of the need of improving it: they would like to include the citizens even more in the municipal work in the future, and believed that the *citizen participation came too late* in this specific process, where very much already were decided (political games), thus requiring a revision of the process.

**Table 2. Governance games and their influence on multi-stakeholders' perceptions of stakeholder engagement in "Vision 2030"**

*- Insert here –*

**Conclusions**

Our study focused on a process of citizens and stakeholders' engagement promoted by a local authority to co-design the city vision with multiple actors (politicians, public managers, consultant, citizens, members of a working group). Specifically, we investigated with a longitudinal approach the different "governance games" embedded in a local governance process of citizens and stakeholders' engagement. The aim was to describe the social practices played and the meanings in action attributed by the actors involved, with a focus on multiple actors' perceptions on the process. The underlying assumption of our research is that from narratives and stories it is possible to identify a plot of meaningful actions (e.g. Ospina and Dodge 2005), with some underlying beliefs and traditions that can provide – as in the nature of stories - a morale about governance games, which in our case lies in the typology of the games observed.

Our research was based on the case study of developing "Vision 2030" in the local authority of Kristianstad, Sweden. This initiative was introduced and implemented by public managers and politicians with the help of a consultant and was based on the engagement of citizens and stakeholders in the process of developing a vision for the municipality. Our findings highlighted four emerging governance games, namely: political games; reputational and professional games; spectacle games, and social games.

Political games are characterized by dynamics and meaningful actions taken by several actors with the aim of obtaining political consensus; reputational and professional games are characterized by dynamics and meaningful actions aimed at getting professional recognition, reputation and legitimacy; spectacle games are typical of dynamics and meaningful actions aimed at getting visibility in the city and in the media and at establishing an emotional connection and/or admiration from other participating actors; social games are characterized by dynamics and meaningful actions aimed at making social contacts, and engaging in collective activities.

The findings – what we refer to as longitudinal narratives - show how these dynamics and games interplay may change the perception of actors about the overall process of citizen and stakeholder engagement. For example, the approaching of the elections compressed opportunities to express citizens' voice and inputs (political games) and played a key role in determining how individuals, specifically managers and citizens, experienced the process. While political and spectacle dynamics mostly negatively influenced actors' (citizens and public managers) perceptions, we observed how getting to know each other (social games) was a key element, similarly to professional dynamics, for the majority of actors to make sense about their positive perceptions about this participatory governance initiative.

While we acknowledge the limits of our research which was based on a single case study located in a specific administrative and socio-political context (Nordic countries), we believe our article provides an important contribution to public administration from at least two points of view. From a research point of view, these stories of situated agency that we call governance games can advance

public administration theory by providing contextual knowledge to be compared with other contrasting or similar narratives coherently with the view of public administration as storytelling (Bevir 2011). Moreover, from the teaching point of view, the types of governance games identified can be used as heuristic devices for teaching on the topics of local governance and citizens and stakeholders' engagement and for informing critical reasoning and debate among professionals, manager, politicians, and citizens.

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**Table 1. Participants in the project "Vision 2030"**

| Who | Design-phase | | | | Implementation-phase *(Jul 2014 – now)* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Round 1** *(Jun-Dec 2012)* | **Round 2** *(Jan-Dec 2013)* | **Round 3** *(Jan- May 2014)* | **Round 4** *(June 2014)* | |
| Citizens | | | ✔ | | ✔ |
| Members of the working group | | ✔ | ✔ | | ✔ |
| Other public managers | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ |
| Consultant | | ✔ | | | |
| Politicians | ✔ | | ✔ | ✔ | ✔ |

**Table 2. Governance games and their influence on multi-stakeholders' perceptions of citizen and stakeholder engagement in "Vision 2030"**

| Governance games | Design phase<br><br>*(Perceptions of the reason for the citizen and stakeholder engagement)* | Implementation phase<br><br>*(Perceptions of the benefits of the citizen and stakeholder engagement)* |
|---|---|---|
| **"Political games"** | | **CITIZENS**<br><br>**Easy to disregard:** "You must have ideas about how to use the viewpoints, or at least how to come back to the participants and how to get a result, not only 'now we have listened.' Sometimes I get the feeling that 'Oh, now we must listen to what the citizens want' and then that is done." |
| | **OTHER PUBLIC MANAGERS**<br><br>**Political leadership:** "And it was a part of the project directives that there should be dialog. Even if it didn't say how." "It was a very clear task from the politicians, that in this we should involve the citizens. So it was.. I am not sure if me myself would recommend such a broad involvement with the citizens."<br><br>**Shared responsibility:** "To pinpoint these actors and to bring all of these actors together. To get everyone to take a common responsibility for the place and its development." | **OTHER PUBLIC MANAGERS**<br><br>**Legitimacy:** "Now, at least we were out and talked to people. You engaged more. And that was kind of the purpose with the whole thing, to make it more legit." "I do believe it has gotten a bigger legitimacy. I do think so. At least among our politicians. Because if someone is new as a politician and they are introduced to the vision, then you think 'who have come up with this? Is it just some public managers or a few politicians?' NO this is something... We have involved more people, outside the organization in this. And I do believe that it raises the legitimacy to all of this." |
| | **POLITICIANS**<br><br>**Political image:** "I guess we felt some kind of obligation to make these visits [school visits]. I think it was more like a number of school | **POLITICIANS**<br><br>**Citizen participation too late:** "I personally can feel that we should have had more dialog out there among people, among both citizens, |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | visits SHOULD be done, but it was not like that automatically it meant that the results of these visits really influence actual vision." | business owners and organizations and so on, much earlier in the process, so that those points and wishes, those needs to a larger degree could have directed the vision work. Now, this kind of input came in the end, when very much already is decided." |
| **"Reputational and professional games"** | **CITIZENS**<br><br>**Professional expectations and lobbying**: "I represented open education in this context and in that role it was important for me to bring up our interest of course…we need to lobby for the open education and for increasing the general level of education" | **CITIZENS**<br><br>**Professional recognition:** "I have reported back to my organization and to people working with open education. And then I am also involved with other organizations, so I have reported to these networks as well." |
| | **OTHER PUBLIC MANAGERS**<br><br>**Trust:** "I think that you want to gain trust. The citizens should trust the municipal organization, the politicians. That 'we do great things that are to gain' and well yes, trust I think is the best word." | |
| | **WORKING GROUP**<br><br>**Avoid criticism:** "No one could say that we excluded someone, everyone was welcome. I mean, if you choose not to get involved or to submit your viewpoints, then that is also a choice that you make."<br><br>**Legitimacy:** "I see it as a necessity…when the vision should be implemented both for legitimacy and anchoring and for the next step, to make something out of it, then it is completely necessary to have a larger crowd behind your back." | |
| | **POLITICIANS**<br><br>**Legitimacy:** "Legitimacy? Isn't that the reason for involving people from the outside? At least for me, that's the reason. I do believe that for our own sake, it was really | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | important, with this legitimacy, we had actually had a dialog. It wouldn't have felt right to decide a vision for Kristianstad and just have had the conversation here, inside." **Crucial input**: "This time we had projects also in the schools. They are the ones who will be adults and will carry this municipality forward.. I think that the youth's thoughts about the future are crucial. And that we take these seriously." | |
| **"Spectacle games"** | | **WORKING GROUP** **Pride:** "What we ended up using the least was the input from the schools. But at the same time, this is something that we were the most proud of, that we actually talked also with the youth about this." **No real value:** "It is like when you ask small children about what they want to do when they are adults; they have many ideas but they don't think about the consequences." |
| | | **OTHER PUBLIC MANAGERS** **No real value:** "It is legitimacy. I think that is what this whole thing is about. 'Yes, but we have had…' But I don't know if there is any real value in it, but at least we have had it. But sure… Then I get a little more legitimacy then if I had been sitting in my chamber, and writing it myself perhaps." **Limited implementation:** "To make the vision is 1%. To implement it is 99%. And this is where you can't cope…There is 99% left. And here we fail every time.. Sometime we do things, just because it is should be done." |

| | | CITIZENS<br>**No real value:** "I can feel that the time was pretty forced, and too limited time to be able to dig deep, especially when it comes to our perspective… I could also feel that there were no room to influence [the vision] anymore, or perhaps to some extent, but all that solid work that had been put into the process, and it felt like there was missing a big piece" |
|---|---|---|
| **"Social games"** | **WORKING GROUP**<br><br>**Networks:** "If we can get them [citizens] to talk to each other and to understand each other's perspectives then we have an additional effect, more than to just collect viewpoints. It becomes… A second contribution is to get important stakeholder groups in the municipality to understand each other's perspectives better" | **WORKING GROUP**<br><br>**Learning:** "It became a journey of knowledge for the staff in the municipality to go through such a process".<br><br>**Networks:** "We got a lot of valuable input to the vision itself, but we also got a network which I hope people have cherished. A network with people with a lot of opinions, about the municipality and about development and such, which you could use for different meetings and such. Now, I don't know if it has worked like this, but that was the thought when we started it, to also get these key people as a network." |
| | **OTHER PUBLIC MANAGERS**<br><br>**Collaborative mindset:** "It is not so important to decide what should be done by 2025, but the important thing it to find a way to work together with other actors." | |
| | | **POLITICIANS**<br><br>**Networks:** "Besides creating legitimacy for us, it created a closer relationship with these people. For example, I know that there were several people from immigrant organizations, whom I met and talked to for the first time, which I later have met in town and talked to and said hello. And we now have a |

| | | relationship that we didn't have before."<br><br>**Collaborative mindset:** "So as an isolated event, to visit a few school classes, is perhaps not worth very much, but we must see the larger picture, as some kind of strategic mindset about how we listen to children and young people." |
|---|---|---|
| | **CITIZENS**<br><br>**Voice heard**: "Something that was positive was that there actually were participants from the politicians. It made me feel like there actually was a possibility to get my voice heard where it matters" | |

**Figure 1. Understanding the dynamics of citizen and stakeholder engagement in governance games: a decentred perspective**

Perceptions on the reasons for the process

(Traditions)

Interactions, situations, and events (Dilemmas and beliefs in action)

Rules

Games

Actors

Stratified perceptions (Longitudinal and historical perspective)

**Figure 2. Milestones in the project "Vision 2030"**

A working group for the vision is formed and the project takes off. (2012-12-10)

Consultant is hired.

Stakeholder participation:
-Round tables (2014-02-27 2014-03-05 2014-03-10)
-Open meetings (2014-02-25, 2014-03-03)
-School visits
-Comments via web (opened 2014-02-13)

Vision project is initiated (2012-06-26)

Five one-day conferences with the working group. (spring 2013)

Draft of vision.

Consultant leaves the project.

The vision is decided in the city counsil (2014-06-10)

Implementation

Design-phase

Implementation-phase

June-12          Dec-12          June-13          Dec-13          June-14

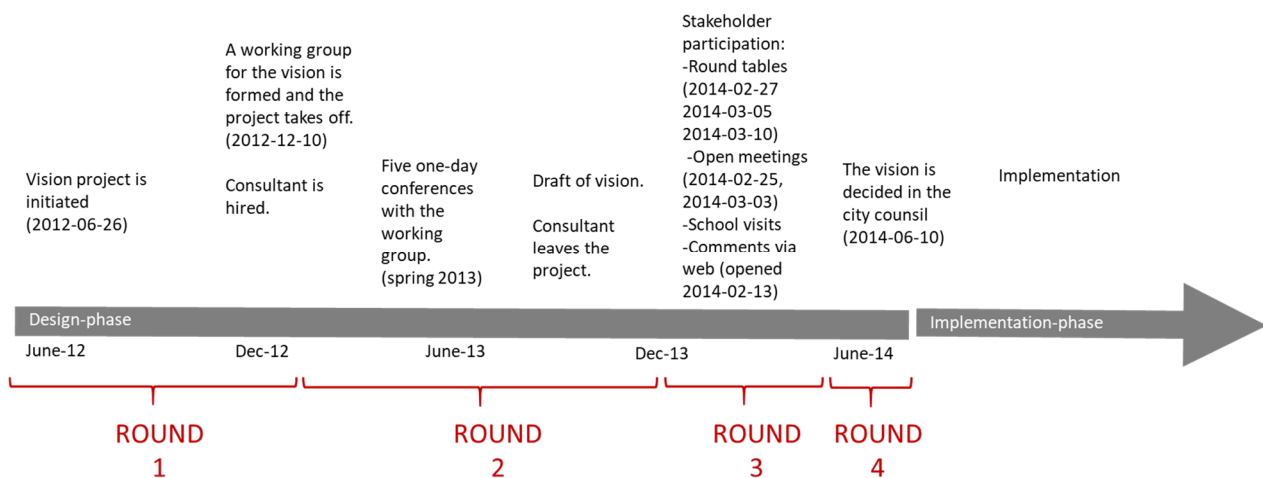ROUND 1          ROUND 2          ROUND 3          ROUND 4

**Figure 3. Different forms of participation in the project "Vision 2030"**

| Open public meetings | Round tables | School visits | Established networks | Comments |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| • **Who?** Everyone<br>• **How?** Invitation through web and daily newspaper<br><br>↓<br><br>• 2 meetings, in total around 40 people. | • **Who?** Citizens with different competences and backgrounds<br>• **How?** Personal invitations by mail<br><br>↓<br><br>• 3 meetings, in total 30 people. | • **Who?** Students in junior high and high school<br>• **How?** Contact with teachers to visit classrooms<br><br>↓<br><br>• 7 visits, in total around 175 students. | • **Who?** Established networks (e.g. industry council, senior-citizen council).<br>• **How?** Through regular contact<br><br>↓<br><br>• Number of meetings undocumented. 133 comments saved. | • **Who?** Everyone<br>• **How?** Encouragements on municipal webpage<br><br>↓<br><br>• 40 viewpoints submitted via web. 29 viewpoints submitted via e-mail to e.g. politicians. |