

Citizens in security. Taking stock of citizen participation in social safety

This report deals with the question what forms of citizen participation in the domain of social (or community) safety can currently be observed in The Netherlands, in particular those related to the police; which problems and issues can occur with these initiatives and how government, society and citizens themselves can benefit from them. A state-of-the-art has been carried out of available reports and articles as well as of empirical, local practices. In order to map these local examples a deskresearch has been conducted with the use of free datasources that were available in the internet. Also, a short survey was conducted among (almost) all Dutch municipalities and community police accountmanagers. The result was a longlist of local practices. Interviews have been carried out with representatives of these practices.

The research provides a current diagnosis of citizen participation in the domain of social or community safety. The literature and the empirical study show that citizen participation in this domain occurs in many shapes and sizes. The diverse ways in which citizens become active confirm that the 'do-democracy', a term that in The Netherlands has become in fashion over the last couple of years, has increasingly manifested itself in the security domain. To answer the main question of this study about forms, issues and benefits of citizen participation this report provides a snapshot of the current state of affairs. We will elaborate briefly on the three questions below.

Forms of citizen participation

By citizen participation in the domain of social safety we mean the active involvement of citizens in policy making and realization of collective interests in the field of social safety. We have constructed seven categories or forms of citizen participation in social safety. The many forms of citizens participate are reflected in the different objectives and operating principles by which those goals should be achieved (see also Annex 1):

1. Citizen surveillance: exercise informal social control collectively in (semi) public space and/or using technology to inform each other about undesirable situations and so doing deter and discourage people with criminal intentions or displaying antisocial behaviour; e.g. role models, neighbourhood fathers, neighbourhood/citizen watches and Whatsappgroups
2. (Criminal) investigation: gather information for tracing suspicious people and so doing actively combat criminal and antisocial behaviour; e.g. text alert, citizens as investigators, Whatsappgroups, special websites
3. Care for public space: improve and beautify public space and so doing combat and mute criminal or antisocial behaviour; e.g. residents budgets, 'Opzoomeren' (Rotterdam)
4. Mediation: equip residents with skills in order to resolve conflicts between residents themselves and so doing reduce antisocial behaviour in neighbourhoods; e.g. neighbourhood mediation
5. Stimulate contact: stimulate contact between residents and between residents and the police, thus increasing mutual trust; e.g. Police Kids
6. Gather and share information: gather information and make it accessible and thus provide citizens and authorities with more or better information; e.g. Our Neighborhood Safe, Police app

7. Influence policy: empower citizens in shaping policy coupled with co-production in the implementation of policies and so doing influence these policies; e.g. 'Buurt Bestuurt', securitypanels, Safe Neighbourhoods Teams.

Problems and issues surrounding citizen participation

It is not obvious that the plethora of forms and shapes of citizen participation actually contribute to social safety, i.e. that the stated goals and operating principles can actually be realised. We found three important conditions (context factors) and want to point out three other 'issues' that often resurface around citizen participation in security.

The three conditional context factors are:

1. the degree of collective resilience in a neighbourhood (which is the social cohesion in a neighbourhood connected with a willingness to use social cohesion in order to address problems);
2. the presence of so-called 'best persons' (professionals but also civilians who can make a difference);
3. the extent to which professionals are offered professional discretionary space by their organizations, i.e. they may act beyond the usual ways of doing things and based on their own discretion.

The three issues underlying the fact that citizen participation does not constitute a simple unproblematic answer to the government's increasingly loud call for a 'participation society'. The first issue is the (classical) problem of representation of local residents. To what extent does the commitment of active citizens reflect support among the local population? Do the active citizens constitute a good representation of that population? The second issue concerns the institutionalization of citizen participation in the professional organizations in the security domain. On the one hand it is necessary and inevitable that initiatives are supported and institutionally framed, on the other hand excess of institutionalization can be damaging to the self-sufficiency of citizens and their motivation to actively improve social safety. The third issue is that citizen participation can have all kinds of unanticipated consequences, such as social exclusion of those who refuse to or cannot let themselves be heard in the policy arena, displacement of crime or groups displaying antisocial behaviour from one place to another (geographical displacement). Beside these three issues some forms of citizen participation have their own specific major and minor problems (see Table 2 in the concluding chapter).

Benefits of citizen participation

This research is based on a literature review, desk research, a survey and interviews. Because this study did not contain a quasi-experiment about the effects of citizen participation, the proceeds can only be derived from reports of the key people involved, together with practical and theoretical knowledge of experts. Our conclusion is that the most important benefits for citizens as well as the police deal with feelings about safety: to feel safer, to experience a sense of control over the environment, to have more trust in other residents or the police, to feel that a useful contribution to society or to the self-sufficiency of residents has been made, to gain a pleasant feeling from new social contacts or having created a more attractive public space, or to get a sense of recognition and satisfaction with the policy objectives of the municipality or the police. Given the importance of the perception of safety for the

legitimacy of the government and the police this is an interesting result. Furthermore, these feelings can cause behaviour that contributes to social safety directly. Examples are reporting more incidents to the police, addressing other people in public space, more commitment to the neighbourhood, more self-reliant (preventive) behaviour, increased problem-solving capabilities, increased acceptance of policy interventions and the like. Other benefits refer - incidentally - to an objective reduction in crime and/or antisocial behaviour as a result of increased surveillance and investigation or increased capabilities to act effectively, e.g. by having more or better information to ones disposal or by developing better (collective) interventions.

Citizen participation plays a role in community policing, is almost exclusively prevention oriented and can support tasks of police officers such as surveillance, enforcement, communication, mediation, gathering of information, policy development (prioritization) and police investigation. Citizen participation thus has positive effects for police functions for three reasons. First, policymakers, politicians, and other partners in the security domain increasingly acknowledge the importance to be better connected to citizens. Citizen participation in social safety issues fits well into a networked society and has become less optional. Second, efforts by citizens have increasingly become cross-linked to the work of professionals (police, municipality, housing corporations, welfare and care). Many citizens have knowledge and understanding of security issues. They actually have something to offer. Participation has become a more promising practice compared to the past, from which the police can benefit. Third, citizens sometimes contribute in a direct way, but often also in an indirect way, to strengthening police work. Indirect value, by focusing on liveability issues or social cohesion, can be of great significance for community safety. And we already noted that the improvement of a sense of security among citizens can be considered as a goal in itself. Looking at it from such a perspective, the positive by-catches perhaps weigh even heavier than the intended benefits.

This latter insight means that when policymakers assess qualities of citizen participation, both the direct and indirect significance for the development of social safety must be included. In almost every project that has been addressed in this study the quality of contacts between citizens and police improved as a result of their cooperation. As a result, the citizens involved see the police more often as a reliable partner, under the condition that both parties can live up to expectations. In addition we note that many initiatives are born out of an already established good relationship between citizens and the police, the municipality or welfare organizations. Citizen participation in security thrives where good relations exist between neighbours and between them and authorities. If such a social vitality is missing, the question is whether investment in citizen participation is worth the effort. It seems then better to bet on combining a high level of policing with building trust in the neighbourhood. In conclusion we can say that in The Netherlands the police would do well to look at citizen participation in a benevolent way and to take up citizens' initiatives large-hearted. It offers the police good possibilities to be in connection with local citizens. To avoid frustration among citizens, the police must show that they do their job well. Cooperation with (active) citizens then is the obvious result of good mutual understanding.