Urban Governance and Citizen Participation: a Case Study from the Helsinki Metropolitan Area

1 Introduction

Since the 1990s, there has been an extensive body of research on governance, a networked way of formulating and implementing policies and directing the society, based on “soft” forms of control, various forms of cooperation, negotiations, the blurring of sectoral boundaries and a multitude of actors who not only represent the public sector but also the market and civil society (see, e.g., Kooiman 1993; Stoker 1998; Sørensen & Torfing 2007; Bevir 2011). In recent research, projects in particular have been conceived as a central element of governance, and authors speak of the “projectification” of public policies (Sjöblom et al. 2006; Sulkunen 2006; Godenhjelm et al. 2012). However, the relation between governance and democracy is ambivalent. On the one hand, the networked and multi-actor forms of governance can be seen as problematic from the point of view of democracy, as aspects like political control, accountability, transparency and representation become unclear (Hirst 2000, Papadopoulos & Warin 2007, Sørensen, 2005, Kuokkanen, 2009). On the other hand, governance is seen as a way to empower the civil society, to promote the direct participation of citizens to projects and partnerships and to create more deliberative forms of formulating and implementing policies (Papadopoulos & Warin 2007, Sørensen 2005, Kuokkanen 2009, Hajer & Wagenaar 2003b, Warren 2009).

In this paper, I analyse urban governance, projectification and citizen participation through a case study from the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. My case is a multi-actor policy programme called the Urban Programme for the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, which aimed to increase the international competitiveness of the area and find new forms of action and collaboration. The programme was implemented through projects. Inside the programme, I concentrate on a special participatory project named Citizen Channel, which aimed to find and test new modes
of citizen participation at the metropolitan level. In my research, I am interested in following questions: Did the Citizen Channel project create or promote more participatory or deliberative forms of democracy? What was the relation between the project, the Urban Programme for the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and the permanent administration of the municipalities of the area? How was participation framed in relation to the discourse of competitiveness, central in the Urban Programme? Can citizen participation in general be developed through projects? I situate my research inside a wider framework of governance and democracy, where collaborative forms of governance can be seen either as a threat to the basic values of representative democracy or as a way to create more participatory and/ or deliberative forms of democracy

2 Urban Governance, Projects and Participation

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing body of research on governance (often using the prefix “new”, “network”, “collaborative”, “interactive” or “participatory”). In this context, governance refers to a networked way of formulating and implementing policies and steering the society, based on various forms of cooperation, negotiations, the blurring of sectoral boundaries and a multitude of actors who do not only represent the public sector but also the market and the civil society (see e.g. Kooiman 1993, Hajer & Wagenaar 2003a, Sørensen & Torfing 2007b, Bevir 2011). According to governance research (and also in the political rhetoric), governance is seen as the ability of political actors to cope in socio-political environments which are becoming more complex and pluralised, with new spatial, temporal and sectoral dynamics (Sørensen & Torfing 2007a, Hajer & Wagenaar 2003b, Pinson 2009, Warren 2009). Complexity is related to the solving of difficult policy problems and to coping with emerging risks, whereas pluralisation is related to the growing number of different groups in society, the need for individual and direct forms of participation and to the claim for identity politics. Finally, new sectoral, spatial and temporal dynamics refer to the interconnection of institutions and sectors both horizontally and vertically, the inclusion of actors outside the public sector, the changing relations between the state and the local level as well as the changing time frames of policies. These developments, in turn, require new forms of cooperation and coordination.
Urban scholars relate governance both to micro- and macro-level changes (Pinson 2009, Le Galès 2002, Brenner 2004). On a macro level, there has been a change in the political steering conducted by the state, which includes the retreat of the state at the local level and a shift from the relatively uniform redistributive regional policies to a growing responsibility of the local level and locally tailored policies. On a micro level, there is an increased mobilisation of local networks and actors and a growing emphasis on collaboration between different actors. In recent literature, it has been suggested that projects are an essential element of governance both at macro and micro levels (Pinson 2009, Sjöblom et al. 2006, Jensen et al. 2007, Sjöblom et al. 2012, Sulkunen, 2006). The French urban political scientist Gilles Pinson (2009) even states that projects have become the main instrument of the governance of cities. However, the phenomenon of “projectification” is widely seen at the regional and local level, whether urban or rural (see e.g. Sjöblom et al. 2012). Usually, projects are used together with related policy instruments and forms of action such as programmes, contracts, evaluations, funds and partnerships (Sulkunen, 2006, Sjöblom, 2011). The essential element of all these instruments is to couple networks, a multitude of actors and local solutions to temporary forms of organisation. However, these forms coexist with permanent institutions and have an interaction with them (Jensen et al. 2007).

According to earlier research, the relation between governance and democracy is ambivalent. On the one hand, the networked and multi-actor forms of governance can be seen as problematic from the point of view of democracy, as aspects like political control, accountability, transparency and representation become unclear (Hirst 2000, Papadopoulos & Warin 2007, Sørensen, 2005, Kuokkanen, 2009). On the other hand, governance is seen as a way to empower the civil society, to promote the direct participation of citizens to projects and partnerships and to create more deliberative forms of formulating and implementing policies (Papadopoulos & Warin 2007, Sørensen 2005, Kuokkanen 2009, Hajer & Wagenaar 2003b, Warren 2009). From the perspective of democratic theory, governance is seen, most of all, as a threat to representative democracy. According to that perspective, the institutions of representative democracy are undermined by the governance arrangements and these arrangements tend to be elitist, i.e. the most resourceful actors participate in them. On the other hand, the potentials of governance are linked to participatory and deliberative forms of democracy. According to this logic, the institutions of representative democracy have to be complemented with the direct participation of citizens, which in the context of governance often happens at the local level through various projects and partnerships. Moreover,
consensus and discussion rather than voting and the aggregation of interests lead to optimal results, and the networked and multi-actor character of governance is seen as a way to promote them.

The participatory and deliberative initiatives are often implemented the level of policies rather than politics (Warren 2009, Laws & Hajer 2006, Hajer & Wagenaar 2003b, Häikiö 2005, Pinson 2009, 34). The Canadian democracy scholar Mark Warren (2009) speaks of “governance-driven democratisation” which, according to him, is linked to participatory developments in the field of different policies and is much driven by public officials outside the channels of electoral democracy. According to Warren, administrators are interested in new democratic processes, together with a large industry of consultants and democratic process entrepreneurs, because of the functional reason that policy-makers are on the front lines of the “new pluralised ungovernability” of societies. The development described by Warren has also been referred to as the creation of democratic innovations (e.g. Saward 2000, Smith 2009, Bengtsson 2008) or, from a more critical perspective, as democratic or participatory engineering (Zittel & Fuchs, 2007, Blaug, 2002). Graham Smith (2009, 1) defines democratic innovations as “institutions that have been specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process”. In his study, Smith is concentrating primarily on institutionalised forms of participation in political decision-making beyond the local level. However, democratic innovations can also take place in smaller-scale and less formalised arrangements, for instance inside different kinds of projects and partnerships (cf. Hajer & Wagenaar 2003a).

3 Research data and methodology

In my methodological approach, I have much affinity with interpretive policy analysis (see e.g. Hajer & Wagenaar 2003, Fischer 2003) and with critical policy analysis more generally. In the years 2008–2009, I conducted 29 semi-structured interviews (and besides them, got two answers by e-mail) with the actors of the Urban Programme for the Helsinki Metropolitan Area 2005–2007 and a specific participatory project, Citizen Channel. Moreover, I analysed the relevant policy documents related to the Urban Programme – programming documents, descriptions of the projects and policy evaluations.
I first interviewed members of the management group of the Urban Programme, which consisted of relatively high-level municipal officials from the four cities of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and representatives from the Ministry of Interior, the Finnish Association of Local and Regional Authorities and YTV (a network of the four municipalities of the region which was charge for utilities like waste disposal, traffic and air protection). Interviewees at the project level included both project workers and members of the management and steering groups of the Citizen Channel project, as well as citizens and municipal officials who had participated in the project. The management group of the Citizen Channel project was a relatively small group which consisted of municipal officials from the four cities, the chairperson of Helka (the NGO which was in charge of the implementation of the project) and the representative of the Finnish Association of Local and Regional Authorities. The aim of this group was to function as a link between the project and the programme level and to make decisions about the finances of the project and other important issues. The steering group, which was in charge of the concrete implementation of the project, consisted of more various stakeholders working with issues of participation and representing both municipalities and NGOs. Finally, I interviewed activists of different district associations and grassroots level municipal officials – in this case, librarians – who had all been active in the implementation of the project. I have analysed and thematised the interview data with the help of a qualitative analysis programme, atlas.ti.

4 Urban Programme for the Helsinki Metropolitan Area and the Citizen Channel project

It is impossible to analyse urban governance in the Nordic countries without relating them to the Nordic administrative tradition and welfare state model (Granberg 2004). Finland, like the other Nordic countries, is characterised by a strong unitary state and municipalities which have a high level of autonomy and a central role in the provision of welfare services. The Finnish administration both at national and municipal levels is characterised by a high level of specialisation and sectorisation. Like in the other Nordic countries, the Finnish regional policy has traditionally been redistributive, targeted at the peripheral regions and limiting the growth of the biggest cities (Schulman 2000, 24). The issue of a specific urban policy came onto the political agenda in Finland in the 1990s, partly because of Finland’s EU membership, partly because of other economic, social and political developments of the era, including the
collapse of the Soviet Union, the economic depression in the early 1990s, the growth of the ICT based industry later in the 1990s and a growing number of immigrants in cities (see Haila & Le Galès 2005). At the same time as the regional policy started to emphasize endogenous growth, local activity and new forms of cooperation, cities were perceived more strongly than before as “motors” of local and national economic growth (see e.g. Schulman 2000, Bradley et al. 2004, Holstila 2007).

The Helsinki Metropolitan Area consists of Helsinki, the capital of Finland, and the municipalities of Espoo, Vantaa and Kauniainen. Helsinki has over 600 000 inhabitants, Espoo around 257 000 and Vantaa around 205 000. The small municipality of Kauniainen, situated inside Espoo, has almost 9000 inhabitants. My case study, Citizen Channel (Kansalaiskanava), was a project in the Urban Programme for the Helsinki Metropolitan Area 2005–2007. The Urban Programme was one of the first attempts to create a dialogue about common urban and metropolitan policies for the four municipalities of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area which have long been competing with each other. Officially, the aim of the Urban Programme 2005–2007 was to “to improve the international competitiveness of the Helsinki Region and its readiness to function as a world-class centre of business and innovation” (Pääkaupunkiseudun kaupunkiohjelma 2005–2007). In practice, the biggest achievement of the Urban Programme was that it created a dialogue and new forms of cooperation between the four cities of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. The Urban Programme was a development programme which was implemented through projects. The aim of the projects was to increase regional cooperation and organising capacities, often by creating different pilots and new models of action. The programme dealt with issues that were not in the responsibility of other existing policy sectors of established cooperation forums, thus relating the thesis that new forms of governance are likely to emerge in the context of an “institutional void” (Hajer 2003) – even if the four cities of regions were the biggest players in this context. Since my fieldwork (which was conducted in 2008–2009), the political pressure from the state towards the municipalities to deepen their metropolitan cooperation has augmented significantly. However, the aim of this paper is not to analyse the current debate on metropolitan administration, which is in a state of flux.

My case study, the Citizen Channel project, was one of the projects the Urban Programme 2005–2007. According to the original description of Citizen Channel, the objective of the project was to develop a model of interaction, a “citizen channel”, between the citizens and
the administration of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, a channel crossing municipal and sector borders. In practice, the project consisted of trying a variety of different participatory tools. One of the ideas of Citizen Channel was to augment interaction in the border areas of the four municipalities of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area. Thematically, the project had two dimensions: the issue of participation and the issue of crossing municipal borders (or the metropolitan dimension) which they tried to intertwine. The project was conducted by Helka, the umbrella association of district associations in Helsinki. It was, in fact, the only project in the Urban Programme conducted by an NGO, as the others projects were organised by municipal organisations or the development company Culminatum (owned by the regional council and the four cities as well as the universities, polytechnics, research institutes and business community of Helsinki region).

Even if the original aim of the Citizen Channel project was to develop a model of interaction, a “citizen channel”, between the citizens and the administration, the ambitious idea of creating a general model for the whole Helsinki Metropolitan Area soon changed to development of a “toolbox” of participatory tools that could later be utilized in similar contexts. In practice, the project consisted of trying a broad variety of different participatory tools in the target areas of the project. These included for instance the gathering of contact information of various local actors and the creation of local networks, the organisation of seminars, exhibitions and inquiries, walking tours at the local area, the gathering of local information from schoolchildren, receptions with planners and other municipal officials, the development local websites, the development of user democracy in local services, the creation local visions of the future or the gathering of information on international best practices. The project was implemented in target areas, where neighbouring districts belonged to different municipalities.

The main results of the Citizen Channel included forms of interaction and participation which were identified and tested during the project. In the “toolbox” published by the project (both as leaflets and on the Internet), eight different “tools of interaction” were highlighted (*Kansalaiskanava – Seutuyhteistyötä paikallistasolla*). First, the project presented three forms of action in the gathering of local development ideas. These included the organisation of open forums at the neighbourhood level (even bypassing municipal borders if needed), regular meetings between citizens and experts (like planners or local politicians) and the establishment of local discussion forums on the Internet. Second, in the dissemination of
information, the project emphasized the importance of neighbourhood web sites, but also the collection of contact information on relevant local actors and the creation of networks consisting of local associations, companies, planners, local politicians, active citizens and others. In the gathering of local information, the projects highlighted the use of SWOT as well as interactive GIS systems and maps. Finally, the project suggested the establishment of a “user democracy club” (which was actually established during the project), which would work with issues of client feedback.

5 Participation in the Urban Programme – different interpretations

The interpretations of role of participation and the Citizen Channel project in the Urban Programme varied according to the position that the interviewee had in the governance networks of the programme. In the interviews among the members of the management group of the Urban Programme it became evident that the most important dimension of the Urban Programme was the way in which it had created a stronger culture of deliberation between the four cities and enabled the trying of new ways of action, which are often limited in the Finnish context of strongly sectorised administration. The official aim of the programme was to increase the international competitiveness of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area, and citizen participation was only a secondary theme in the programme. However, in the interviews, the top level officials considered that citizen participation should be an important part of the development of urban and metropolitan policy, and the members of the management group of the Urban Programme mainly considered that the Citizen Channel project was a success. Generally, it can be said that the Citizen Channel project augmented the democratic legitimacy of the Urban Programme in two ways. First, through the Citizen Channel project the Urban Programme got one project that was dealing with the theme of citizen participation, which would have otherwise been very vague or lacking. Second, the programme got an NGO-led project in the programme that was otherwise very strongly in the hands of municipal actors. At the project level, some interviewees even considered Citizen Channel as a “PR project”.

“And we thought if this is only a PR project. I got this thought at least sometimes that is this done only because Helka can say that we are developing this [=participation], we have a project like this. I thought that so what, we
develop it, even if it would be so. It is good that we got such [a project], there was something that remained from it.” (Project organiser)

At the project level, funding from the Urban Programme enabled an ambitious project that had been planned already for a long time among the activists of Helka and especially at the beginning of the planning, the Finnish Society for Futures Studies and some active (former) municipal officials. For Helka, the project was a possibility to augment their professionalism and to give them the opportunity to work in close collaboration with the municipalities. Even if Helka is the umbrella association of district associations in Helsinki, the representatives of the Helka emphasized in the interviews the role of the association as an expert and promoter of citizen participation at the local level more generally. In the interviews, the professional role of Helka and its linkages both to the local level and to the municipal administration were also emphasized by the municipal officials. The steering group of the Citizen Channel project was also an opportunity to gather together experts working with citizen participation from different sectors and from the different municipalities of the Helsinki Metropolitan Area.

"We heard about that money and negotiated a very long time and were grinding the project to that form so that we could get financing for three years for it. It was quite a nice spurt; we got visibility and developed our own competence and these tools and printed leaflets and the model then.” (Project organiser)

The issue of competitiveness, central to the Urban Programme, was not strongly present in the Citizen Channel project, where participation was mainly seen as an important thing in itself. From the perspective of the project, the Urban Programme was only a financing instrument. However, when asked, the most typical answer from the interviewees was that a city which is a nice living place and where citizens can participate can also be competitive. Some answers were nevertheless very critical and questioned the prevailing “mantra” about urban competitiveness, but competitiveness was also seen as a frame which had to be used to be able to get financing for the project. The way in which the concept of competitiveness was opposed to or reformulated at the project level was interesting from the point of view of the politics–policy-divide, as the level of policy became a site for the (re)interpretation of the high-level objectives (see e.g. Häikiö 2005, 15–18).
“And this competitiveness mantra is of course repulsive for me and for many. (...) But there could be pleasant, interesting districts, with interesting thing happening (...). We strengthen the vitality in those places and look tools for it and disseminate them to every district, so that every district can use those tools and strengthen their own district, starting from their characteristics. (...) We had to think there in relation to the high level objectives and criteria, so that this helps in this way your high level objectives [i.e. of the Urban Programme]. And we bent and turned it of course quite creatively.” (Project organiser)

At the grassroots level, the project organised different activities, which involved to a varying degree the inhabitants of the target areas. However, the most active people in the project were activists of district associations, and district associations were also the channels for spreading information about the project at the local level. According to the interviews among the activists of district associations who had participated to the project, the overall Urban Programme was relatively unknown, and the Citizen Channel was mainly seen as a way to get networked with other district associations across the municipal borders. In the interviews, the participants of the Citizen Channel project spoke about concrete, local issues at their living area. Interestingly, the interviewees linked also many other developments that were happening in metropolitan cooperation at the same time to the Citizen Channel project, although the project was not responsible for them.

The activists of inhabitant associations were already active before the Citizen Channel project. They were also often active elsewhere, like in municipal (party) politics. For the participating citizens, the main benefit from the project was not the idea that they would have been “activated” or “empowered”, but rather the creation of new networks, especially with the actors of neighbouring districts. From this perspective, the Citizen Channel project differed a lot from the empowerment projects targeted to disadvantaged neighbourhoods, typical for social urban policy.

"We are all a bit, like, involved [in municipal party politics]. So that you got relations to the whole city. We are like grassroots level politicians.” (Participant of the project, inhabitant association activist)
Officially, the aim of the Citizen Channel was to create a model of participation. However, the participants emphasized very concrete issues. An explanation for the different interpretations of the project was the way in which the project had been “marketed” to the local inhabitants. The project organisers did not believe that the development of participation would be interesting enough to gather local inhabitants to the various meetings and activities organised by the project, so they began from concrete local issues, often chosen together with inhabitants, such as traffic connections the development of a local river area.

“It does not sell to say that welcome to participate or come to have an impact or do you want to have interaction. (...) Instead (...) you have to somehow go through a theme that hey, now we talk about traffic, do you feel that there are bad public transportation connections in your area or are you afraid of the building of Ring road II or something, you have to go that way, through the theme and the topic and the issue. It has clearly been the thing that you have to forget the word “participation” or the word “interaction”. (Project organiser)

6 Developing participation through projects?

My case study is one illustration of what citizen participation can mean in the context of (metropolitan) governance networks, programmes and projects. I would like to discuss a few themes further. First, I see my case study as an interesting example of an NGO as a project actor in the implementation of a public policy. In the interviews, Helka was described with relatively similar attributes independently of who I was interviewing. These were professionalism and the association’s links to, on the one hand, municipal administration and on the other, to the grassroots level. In a way, the role of Helka was to act as an intermediary organisation between the administration and the grassroots level. In the interviews, the way in which Helka had built networks, trust and credibility was seen as crucial in this process.

“Helka has a strong competence to work like this. They have been to us, at least for the city of Helsinki, an important partner also otherwise. And they know and can cooperate. And they have good local networks and an extensive group of inhabitant actors.” (Member of the management group of the Urban programme)
In earlier research about associations in governance networks, researchers have feared that certain associations can become new kinds of “democratic elites” (Bang & Sørensen 1998, see also Hirst 2000, 20): they can become more and more bureaucratic and in fact exclude ordinary citizens from participation. Elsewhere in empirical studies on urban policies researchers have noticed that the participating associations can already be the very established ones and do not necessarily have a link to local people, who remain objects rather than participants in the policies (Sintomer & de Maillard 2007). This critic, however, was not present in my interviews, despite role of Helka as a professional organisation and as a partner of cities. Some interviewees considered that Helka would be the only possible organisation to conduct such a project, because citizen participation does not have a clear place in the regular municipal administration. Others considered though that a project that would have been conducted by the cities themselves would have had more long-lasting effects and could have been more easily adapted to their normal organisation.

“I think it was very good [that Helka was leading the project], because it became credible. Who else could have conducted it, the alternatives would have been a consult, no, or then a city, an office in a city, a project leader of a unit. Of course it could have been so, but when we talk about Citizen Channel so I can’t really think that it would have been something else than an NGO.”

(Project organiser)

Second, the aim of the project, the development of participation, made the project very different from many other participatory initiatives (or at least, from many studies dealing with participation), where citizen participation is a way to achieve something, not a thing that is developed in itself. However, this idea is present in the literature on democratic innovations (Saward 2000, Smith 2009, Zittel & Fuchs 2007, see also Warren 2009) or the development of democratic procedures by public authorities or other actors. In a critical analysis of democratic innovations, Ricardo Blaug (2002) sees a cleavage between the aims of what he calls “democratic engineering” and those of bottom-up activism. In the context of Citizen Channel, the project was marketed to local inhabitants in very concrete ways, and they were not necessarily aware of the modelling part of the project, which was left to the project administration. Among the project organisers, the emphasis on concrete issues was seen as a prerequisite to get the project to succeed and it was not questioned. However, the idea
modelling was criticised by one interviewee at the project level, who saw it as something that could maybe be useful for public sector officials but not for the grassroots level.

“The target was so much in models, modelling, but this modelling benefits more officials. (…) From the grassroots level it does not always look so convincing, probably partly because we lack important structures, I think, so the models don’t [do] anything.” (Project organiser)

Among the participants of the project, there was no questioning of the aims of the project. However, in the interviews, they did not talk about developing participation but about very concrete issues at their area, and I got the feeling that the overall objectives of the Citizen Channel project or the Urban Programme in general were unknown to them (something that I have noticed in my earlier research about project work, too, see Kuokkanen 2004). Moreover, at the time when I was doing my interviews, the project had just finished, and the district association activists were very confused about the continuation of the activities that the project had started. The critique of the limited time frame of projects was also present in the interviews of the librarians who participated in the project.

“I thought that this [interview] is a good place to unburden the frustration that projects start and they come, and they end, and all cooperation ends when they end.” (Participant of the project, librarian)

As it was seen in the framework of this article, new modes of governance are often linked to more participative and/ or deliberative forms of democracy. It was clear Citizen Channel included different measures of direct participation, even if this participation remained limited and the most active people were the activists of the district associations, also active elsewhere. The interviewees also told about a deliberative and consensual decision-making culture inside the project. However, from the point of view of democracy, it is necessary to have power – it is not enough to have participation or deliberation without any real decision-making. The impact of projects stays weak, also from a democratic perspective, if they do not lead to anything. On the other hand, Citizen Channel was a development project, aimed to create a way of action that could be used later. It can be argued that if such a project could enhance citizen participation in the future, it would have achieved something from a democratic perspective.
Third, my research showed a cleavage between regular municipal administration and projects. Even if the project would create innovative forms of participation, there were difficulties in getting the results into the regular municipal administration – something which is very clearly present in earlier research about participatory projects in Finland (Häikiö 2005). Even if the project was conducted by an NGO, it would need commitment from the municipalities to get it anchored to the municipal organisation. This was a problem that was recognised throughout the interviews. On the other hand, one public official emphasized the complex environment of different policy instruments and saw that projects do not necessarily fit to the framework of strategic steering in municipalities.

“I think that we don’t need any projects anymore, I think we need political decisions next. We have an immense amount of experiments and projects and summaries and evaluations and opinions and experiences, and I don’t think we get any new findings from any project. (…) It's easy to outsource participation – just like the third sector and questions of social policy – to projects that are outside the regular organisation of government, and in worst cases, they stay there and don’t change anything.” (Project organiser)

"It’s a constant challenge in a project how it is transferred to normal action, or is there anything that is transferred to these current practices. (…) But we (…) have created the strategy [for the city], where we have defined objectives and through it the way of action, how we want to target things, how to do them. So I kind of understand that you cannot really change the organisation through projects. You get those things to management that you want to take and which fit to a certain time and way of action.” (Member of the management group of the Urban programme)

However, the Citizen Channel project did have some continuation in the form of a later project organized by Helka and in another democracy-oriented project of the Urban Programme 2008–2010, which were seen in the interviews as the continuation of the action started in Citizen Channel. Moreover, the benefits of the toolbox created by the project were seen useful from the perspective of municipal mergers elsewhere in Finland. Even if many of the activities started by the project ended at the same time with the project, for instance the
user democracy club continued to be active after the project. Many interviewees among the project organisers said that changes in the organisational culture of municipalities are slow, and the Citizen Channel was only a part of a bigger group and continuum of participatory initiatives that can slowly have an impact on municipalities. Also the interim evaluation of the Urban Programme 2005–2007 saw that the rooting of the project as such would have been unrealistic, but it was nevertheless creating prerequisites for further work (Uusikylä et al. 2007).

“With one project you do not usually make very big changes, even how much you got good and realisable ideas. The challenge is rather that it takes time for people to adopt new models and ways of action, so one project can seldom get big things rooted. Development is a long process where you proceed one bit at a time.” (Project organiser)

Gilles Pinson (2009), who has conducted research about projects and cities, does not see the short-termism of projects as a problem. For him, projects are a way to anticipate the future in a relatively flexible and dialogical way in a more and more pluralistic and uncertain world. Pinson speaks of the importance of “meta-project” – or horizons, principles and policy discourses, which form a frame for singular projects – as a way to ensure continuity. In the context of projects like Citizen Channel, however, the risk is that the project – even a continuing meta-project – stays outside the regular municipal administration.

7 Conclusion

In my paper, I have analysed the role of citizen participation in a project, situated inside a policy programme. The Citizen Channel project was successful in trying, testing and modelling different forms of participation and interaction between citizens and public authorities. Even if none of the forms of action in the project was especially novel, the strength of the project was to gather under one project different participatory measures and assess them.
However, what was the role of the project – and citizen participation more generally – in the whole policy programme was ambivalent. The Citizen Channel project meant different things for the different participants of the governance networks of the project. First, at the level of the Urban Programme, citizen participation was just a theme – and even a secondary theme – in the programme, which was mainly centred on creating networks and on the issue of competitiveness. However, it can be argued that the programme could augment its democratic legitimacy by having a participatory project, conducted by an NGO. Second, for Helka, funding from the Urban Programme enabled the realisation of an ambitious project that had been planned for a long time, even if they had to frame their ideas in a way that they fitted in the framework of the programme. Moreover, for Helka, the project was a possibility to augment their professionalism and to give them the opportunity to work as a partner of the municipalities. Finally, the participants of the project emphasized concrete local issues and the creation of new networks and were not necessarily aware of the broader objectives of the project. The Citizen Channel project did not result to a broad participation at the target areas, and the most active participants were the activists of local district associations.

The project showed that an NGO could have a role as a professional actor and as an intermediary organisation in governance networks and in the implementation of a public policy. However, the democratic effects of the project remain vague, if citizen participation remains limited and does not have a link to real decision-making and power. In a development project like Citizen Channel the findings of the project should be anchored to the municipal administration so that the project would have a broader democratic impact.

Finally, it is good to note that the metropolitan governance of the Helsinki Region is in a period of flux. At this point it is impossible to say what forms the administration of the area will take or will is stay as it is for the moment. It can happen that the programme- and project based governance of the region is only a period of transition on a path towards more institutionalised forms of metropolitan governance. However, in a later phase, it can be interesting to assess whether projects like the Citizen Channel did actually act as a way to get issues of participation at the metropolitan level onto the political agenda.
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