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**PARTICIPATION AS ASSEMBLAGE**

INTRODUCING ASSEMBLAGE AS A FRAMEWORK FOR  
ANALYSING PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES AND OUTCOMES

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## KEYWORDS

*Participation, assemblage, empowerment, healthcare, unemployment, public administration, evaluation.*

## ABSTRACT

*The article presents a yet unexplored framework for analysing the multidimensionality and disconnections of participatory processes and their outcomes by using the concept of the 'assemblage' (DeLanda, 2006). The case is an eight-month collaboration between a task force initiated by Central Denmark Region, the socio-economic company Sager der Samler, and citizens. The collaboration is aimed at bringing together and working across various institutional and user perspectives to act on a societal challenge. The analysis is theoretically based on a review of existing theories of participation and typologies for analysing and evaluating participation. In particular, the analysis focuses on the assemblage approach as a way of acknowledging the institutional, affective, material and power-related complexity of participatory processes. The assemblage approach helps to analytically stress that the process under investigation should be evaluated both with a more traditional focus on decision-making or power allocation, as well as taking into account the social, personal-affective and material benefits produced, and the potential for change in the relationship between public administration and citizens.*

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## FOCUS AND CASE

This article contributes to the field of participation studies with the development and 'test' of an analytical 'assemblage' framework (Delanda, 2006) for studying participation. This assemblage framework stresses the multidimensionality, complexity and dis/connections of participatory processes and their outcomes. It thus helps us to discuss the tendency to understand the quality of participation as based on its ability to redistribute power and decision-making more evenly (Carpentier, 2011; Pateman, 1970; Arnstein, 1969). The assemblage approach makes it possible to ask two open, but specific, questions: an *analytical* question concerned with how the participatory process under investigation assembled humans, institutions and affects; and an *evaluative* question concerning how this process of assembling created values or new capacities. This particular analytical-evaluative approach is used in relation to a specific case study of a process involving citizens in strengthening collaboration between healthcare and unemployment institutions in the Central Denmark Region.

In 2012 the Central Denmark Region established a cross-sector 'Task Force' with regard to innovation in healthcare services, with representatives from regional administrative authorities, hospitals, municipalities, and general practitioners. During the current four year election period, this Task Force has committed 10 million DKK to the generation and test of new and innovative cross-sector solutions to healthcare problems (Regionshuset, 2011). The article investigates the collaboration between the Task Force and a specific socio-economic company situated in Aarhus, Denmark, called *Sager der Samler* (SDS). SDS was invited to take part in this innovation task to engage local citizens in the process of generating and testing solutions. SDS is a declared arena for participatory citizenship, founded in 2012. As a verb, *Samler* translates into meeting, unifying, assembling or gathering, which stresses that gathering people around various social causes and challenges is the key activity and method of SDS. *Sager* translates into cases, issues, causes, projects, or affairs. SDS aims to gather people around issues or problems such as sustainability (green action), inclusive communities or health. The collaboration between the Task Force and SDS was established as the Task Force initiated a second round of applications focusing on employment and citizens suffering from light to moderate psychological illness. The applications had to focus on the innovation question: what if jobcentres and healthcare collaborated on making citizens healthy? The Task Force received no applications in the first round and tried a new approach through the collaboration with SDS. This stresses the fact that SDS has become a platform that offers public administrative institutions a way of initiating processes of citizen involvement.

This particular case has been chosen as it offers a point of departure for discussing pressing analytical and methodological challenges of a more general character: how to analyse and evaluate collaborative processes involving public administration, mediating institutions (SDS) and citizens based on existing theories of participation; and, further,

which type of analytical strategy is needed to account for the various outputs and dilemmas of such a process?

## METHODOLOGY

The collaboration between SDS and the Task Force unfolded through five overall phases: 1) SDS established a steering group (Oct. 2013); 2) SDS hosted 14 so-called ‘coffee meetings’ with citizens, healthcare professionals and employment professionals from jobcentres (Nov.–Dec. 2013); 3) SDS facilitated a workshop where the insights from the coffee meetings were analysed (Jan. 2014); 4) SDS hosted two open workshops, and a steering group meeting in-between (Feb.–Mar. 2014); 5) SDS facilitated a workshop for the steering group, concerning the insights made during the two open workshops (May 2014). The nuances of these five steps and the choices behind them are elaborated on in the analysis below.

The above-mentioned process is approached through investigating exiting texts via document analysis (Lynggaard, 2010) and observations at meetings and participatory workshops (Hastrup, 2010). The documents collected are workshop designs and agendas (cf. steps 3, 4, and 5), maps and documents produced by participants during the workshops (cf. steps 3, 4, and 5), and a concluding report (7 pages) produced by SDS documenting and analysing the overall process (all steps). One of the authors (CS) took notes at the workshops relating to steps 3, 4 and 5. By combining document analysis and observations, a somewhat messy (Law, 2004) but rich corpus of material was collected. This material enabled analysis of the research made by SDS before the workshops, the intentions behind the workshops, how the workshops evolved, and the outcome of the process. Before the research process began, the authors and SDS signed an information sheet granting full anonymity to all participants; furthermore, SDS was given the right to withdraw data from the research project, should they feel that this was necessary: a right that was never exercised. At all workshops, the note-taking author explicitly revealed his position as a researcher investigating the participatory processes relating to the Task Force challenge, and guaranteed that no one would be quoted in person without informed consent.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: DEFINING, ANALYZING AND EVALUATING PARTICIPATION

Participation is a key term in various disciplines: political science (Pateman, 1970), development studies (Cohen and Uphoff, 2011/1980), media studies (Jenkins, 2006), urban planning (Arnstein, 1969), health (Tritter and McCallum, 2006) and aesthetics and museology (Bishop, 2006). Participation is also a term that has had very different disciplinary histories and moments of resurrection/disappearance depending on the field of study (Carpentier, 2011; Møhring Reestorff et al., 2014; Cornwall, 2008; Kelty et al.,

2014; Delwiche, 2013). Although academics have long struggled to define and demarcate the concept of participation, it is most often used to describe a form of social, cultural or political contribution to a collective process – often involving an element of power redistribution that benefits ordinary citizens. Or as defined by Chris Kelty et al.: “participation concerns collective actions that form something larger so that those involved become part of and share in the entity or effects created” (Kelty et al., 2014, 5). Where there is a possibility to be a participant, the possibility also exists to stay or become a ‘non-participant’; however, exactly when the boundary between non-participation/participation is crossed – and crossed in a way that can be evaluated as positive – is a topic of academic dispute or perhaps even confusion.

#### ANALYSING MAXIMALIST PARTICIPATION

Nico Carpentier distinguishes between ‘minimalist’ and ‘maximalist’ approaches to the political role of participation in democracy: in the minimalist (or representative) model “the societal decision-making remains centralized and participation remains limited (in space and time)”, while “participation plays a more substantial and continuous role and does not remain restricted to the ‘mere’ election of representatives” in the maximalist model (Carpentier, 2011, 17). From a maximalist point of view, citizens participate politically in society in a range of more complex and mundane ways, – for example, carrying out community or voluntary work, taking part in discussions about society or by acting in ways that challenge established discourses and norms. As such, citizen participation takes place all the time, and not only when citizens engage in institutionalised politics. When taking a maximalist approach to participation, it is important to reflect on how to analyse and approach the various agencies and elements of a specific process, before beginning to evaluate or discuss the outcomes of participation. How do we grasp the complexity of socially engaged participation if it is not a question of voting, but embedded in a variety of complex social situations? Cohen and Uphoff argue that three analytical dimensions should be accounted for in order to ‘get specific’ about participation:

- What *kinds* of participation are occurring or desired (e.g. decision-making, implementation, creation of benefits, evaluation)
- *Who* participates (e.g. local residents, local leaders, official personnel, outsiders)
- *How* is participation taking place (top-down vs. bottom-up initiative; voluntary vs. coercive incitements to take part; structure and channels of participation (e.g. direct or indirect); duration and scope (short-term, continuous, broad vs. narrow range of activities); degree of empowerment involved) (Cohen and Uphoff, 2011/1980)

Marie Dufrasne and Geoffroy Patriarche add to Cohen and Uphoff by focusing more on the remedies of participation (technologies, applications and interfaces) that facilitate or

hinder certain forms of participation (Dufrasne and Patriarche, 2011, 69). In addition, they address the style of the communication involved: transmissive, reactive and interactive. Furthermore, they offer a typology of citizens that can be described in terms of:

- Legitimacy (ratified vs. non-ratified participants)
- Access/specificity (random vs. representative citizens, anonymous vs. identified citizens, broad public vs. specific groups, expert public vs. lay public, participants by rights vs. ad hoc participants, individual vs. collective parties)
- Position (is the participant a client, user, citizen, activist, public, partner or co-producer?)

These various analytic models will be used to describe the specific participatory process initiated by SDS. We combine these conceptual models with an analytical strategy focusing more on participatory processes as concrete or historical processes of putting together or assembling people, institutions, spaces and affects. In this way, an unexplored ‘assemblage approach’ to participation is adopted by analysing the case as a process. Here various elements (e.g. humans, technologies, spaces, organisations, resources) are temporally attached to each other in ways that change their singular *properties* in favour of (more or less empowering) *capacities* (DeLanda, 2006; Anderson et al., 2012). According to Manuel DeLanda, assemblages are based on relations of exteriority (not identity) between parts with certain relatively fixed properties, but potentially open capacities. The social space consists of assemblages in the sense that, for example, a city is a kind of assemblage of material, immaterial, human, non-human, spatial, technological, affective and juridical parts. The city assemblage consists of smaller assemblages of, for example, institutions, organizations, families, couples and individuals. These can also be subdivided into smaller assemblages. And the city – assemblage is in itself a subpart of the larger nation state assemblage, which is part of an even larger European assemblage, and so forth. In this way, the assemblage term is an overarching concept trying to explain the social as a combination (and more or less fluctuating or restricted re-combination) of elements with certain individual characteristics, which nevertheless change when being combined with other elements. Any assemblage would thus be accompanied by an unpredictable “possibility space” (DeLanda, 2006, 29), but also has “an objective existence because they can causally affect the people that are their component parts, limiting them and enabling them, and because they can causally affect other assemblages at their own scale” (DeLanda, 2006, 38).

The assemblage offers a general analytical approach to studying participation, but an approach especially relevant in a study of SDS. SDS is in itself an organisational assemblage, but it also aims at producing new temporary assemblages of spaces, people, technologies, institutions and affects in relation to the causes it investigates. Its technique is to attach various parts with certain properties (e.g. knowledge about the unemploy-

ment sector or about being unemployed) in order to create a ‘possibility space’ with an enhanced capacity in terms of producing solutions. This is in no way an easy or always successful technique (relevant parts can be hard to find, capacities difficult to build), but it describes a certain way of approaching participation as a process of ‘bringing together’ the relevant elements to create social change or movement. And by following the participatory process as a process of assembling, researchers are afforded a chance to become both more analytically specific and dynamic by focusing on the various productions of ‘new capacities’ created along the way. The method in this article, therefore, will be to approach – and define – participation as *a multidimensional process, where human and non-human elements assemble in ways that develop (more or less empowering) capacities.*

#### EVALUATING PARTICIPATION

According to Andrea Cornwall an “infinitely malleable concept ‘participation’ can be used to evoke – and to signify – almost anything that involves people” (Cornwall, 2008, 269). And this lack of clarity has even been accompanied by a somewhat utopian line of thinking, where all sorts of collective engagement (e.g. online) in itself is linked to a democratization of culture (see the discussion in Jenkins and Carpentier, 2013). When it comes to explicitly evaluating the purpose and value of participation, there seem to be two ways of handling the fuzziness, and risk of utopianism, of the concept. The first is to define participation very narrowly and create ladders or typologies of proper participation. The result is that the concept becomes very easy to demarcate, but also that the analytical flexibility of the concept is reduced; inside this logic, a point would often be that practices articulated as participation by certain agencies are really often non or quasi-participation. The second approach is to renegotiate the normative strictness of the first position by arguing that participation should be evaluated via more dynamic models. These models acknowledge the complex role of participation in particular contexts; here the focus would often be on stressing the relative contextual importance of seemingly ‘lower’ forms of participation, or to achieve some sort of ‘clarity through specificity’ by focusing on instances of participation instead of participation as such (Cohen and Uphoff, 2011/1980). In this way, it is possible to detect a strategy of ‘conceptual limitation’ and a strategy of ‘analytical contextualization’ when it comes to developing tools to evaluate participatory processes more thoroughly. In the following, key examples of evaluative typologies relating to these strategies are presented, and thereafter combined in stating the definition and understanding of participation employed in the present analysis.

The first is represented by the classic, and now widely reread, texts of Sherry Arnstein and Carole Pateman, but also by more recent authors such as Jules Pretty and Nico Carpentier. Pateman makes a distinction between *partial participation* and *full participation*. *Partial participation* is “a process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions but the final power to decide rests with one party only” (Pateman, 1970, 70). *Full participation* is “a process where each individual member of a decision-

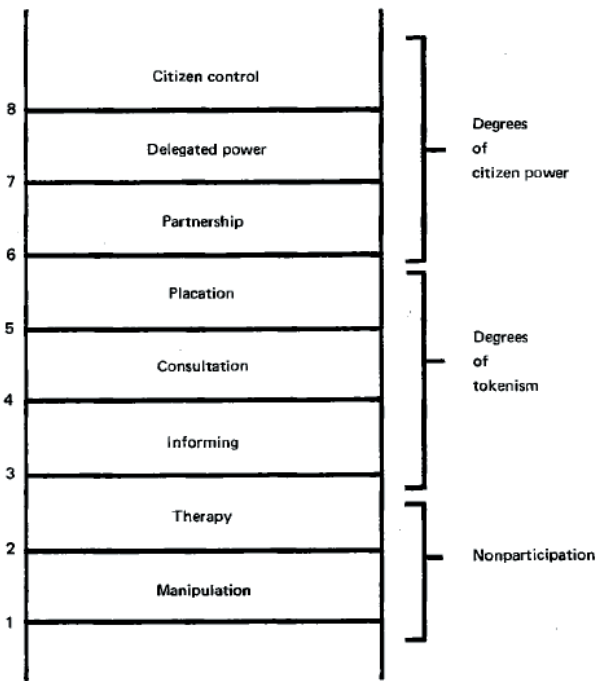


Figure 1. Arnstein's ladder (1969, 217)

making body has equal power to determine the outcome of decisions” (Pateman, 1970, 71). Sherry Arnstein develops a similar ideal via her ‘ladder of participation’, which is probably the most famous typology in the field (Arnstein, 1969, 217). The first rungs at the bottom of the ladder are ‘manipulation’ and ‘therapy’, which are masked forms of non-participation designed to keep the manipulators or therapeutics in control. Next steps are ‘informing’, ‘consultation’ and ‘placation’ as higher, but nevertheless still problematic, forms of participation. The most developed forms of participation are where participants get an increasing amount of decision power, named ‘partnership’, ‘delegated power’ and ‘citizen control’.

Arnstein agrees that power equality and power transfer, which turns ‘nobodies’ into ‘somebodies’ (Arnstein, 1969) through decision-making, is the crucial characteristic of proper participation. The concept of participation must be used to describe only certain types of citizen empowerment in order for it not to be abused by agencies with a strategic interest in achieving ‘a participatory aura’, while actually wanting to remain in control of all relevant decisions. This line of thinking has recently inspired Nico Carpentier to argue that it is necessary to distinguish between, for example, simple ‘interaction’ or ‘access’ and actual participation, and between various more or less intense forms of participation: “we need to look carefully and distinguish between different participatory intensities. And indeed, we need to admit that some practices are labelled ‘participatory’, while they simply are not, or where the level of participation is only minimal. That’s where we need to be critical” (Carpentier, 2011, 267) (see also Carpentier’s article in this special issue).

The ‘conceptual limitation’ approach of Pateman, Arnstein and Carpentier, is noteworthy as it creates a strong and functional definition, but is nevertheless problematic for several reasons according to Tritter and Mccallum: it has a tendency to underestimate the complexity of the forms of participation often co-existing in participatory processes; to problematize public management as a part of participation; to downgrade the emotional, therapeutic and interactional dimensions of participation; to overestimate the ability and



willingness of users to take control over any kind of decision in qualified ways (Tritter and McCallum, 2006); and to define an absolute goal of participation for all participants instead of respecting their different needs (do all citizens want to take control?) (May, 2006). “One can grow tired of being an ‘active citizen!’” as stated by Sarah White (White, 2011/1996, 63).

This criticism calls for a more dynamic, multidimensional approach to evaluating participation, which has been developed by, for example, Chris Kelty et al. (2014), Jonathan Tritter and Alison McCallum (2006), John May (2006), Sarah White (2011/1996), and John Cohen and Norman Uphoff (2011/1980). Many of these explicitly comment on Arnstein’s ‘ladder’ to problematize or renegotiate the assumptions about participation underpinning them. For example, John May proposes replacing the metaphor of the ‘ladder’ (moving from bad at the bottom and good at the top) with a ‘star of participation’ to create “a decoupled, discontinuous typology” with no ideologically validated top (May, 2006, 312). This stresses that both the designer and the participant may choose to engage differently in the process without necessarily ending at the lower end of a ladder.

Following a similar line of thinking, Cohen and Uphoff (2011/1980) propose an increased awareness of four key types of output of participation: 1) ‘decision-making’ in the form of *initial* decisions on how and why to begin a participatory process, *ongoing* decisions that negotiate the trajectory of the project, and *operational* decisions made by involved organizations; 2) ‘implementation’ of projects through the *contribution* of resources, *administration and coordination* of efforts or *enlistment* of participants; 3) ‘benefits’ of a *material* (assets, income, artistic), *social* (e.g. better and common health or education institutions), and *personal* kind (e.g. self-esteem, political power, sense of efficacy); and 4) ‘evaluation’, which can be either focused on the project itself or on various activities strengthening a certain project (e.g. by voting, writing letters of opinion, lobbying). Following this, the output of participation can take various forms. Therefore, according to Cohen and Uphoff, “asking ‘what *is* participation?’ may be the wrong question, since it *implies that participation is a single phenomenon*. We prefer to focus on what specific but multiple activities and outcomes can be meaningfully understood, and supported, under this rubric” (Cohen and Uphoff, 2011/1980, 34).

This line of thinking is also present in Chris Kelty et al.’s development of a framework for discussing participatory dimensions of online platforms, such as Wikipedia, for instance. Here, the following are valorised as important, but not necessarily always equally important, dimensions of proper participation (Kelty et al., 2014): 1) education/knowledge, 2) the possibility of defining goals, not only fulfilling tasks, 3) control of the resources created, 4) the ability to exit the process without sanctions, 5) having a voice to affect outcomes, 6) visible metrics clarifying what is produced through the participants’ effort, and 7) affective processes and communication.

Summing up this review of evaluative models of how to approach participation, this present investigation of participation will: 1) take a maximalist approach to participation,

stressing that it can be investigated in a range of activities and not only traditional forms of political activity (such as electing delegates); 2) focus on evaluating and being sensitive to the various forms of output (e.g. learning, power equality, innovation, negotiation, affectivity, relations/identity/belonging, economic value, information sharing, legitimacy) and interests involved in the case. Following the criticism of Arnstein, the importance of not only using citizen control or power equality as criteria for evaluating participation is stressed, while also maintaining that without some element of ‘power transfer’ or ‘citizen voice’ the concept of participation makes little sense and could easily be replaced by ‘cooperation’ or ‘co-creation’. Participation is in this sense a *political* concept focused on empowerment through collective processes; however, the empowering dimension is not only linked to a more equal distribution of the power to decide, but also to a personal or collective sense of efficacy, vitality and well-being. In making this point, the present investigation shares Christine Rodwell’s preference for the term ‘empowerment’ (instead of ‘power’), since it is defined both “as a process of transferring power” and as “the development of a positive self-esteem and recognition of the worth of self and others” (e.g. through learning, relating, creating) (Rodwell, 1996, 307). As understood here, an evaluation of participatory processes should acknowledge both of these dimensions.

#### ANALYSIS: GETTING SPECIFIC ABOUT PARTICIPATION

In the following analysis, this article follows or ‘gets specific’ about the participatory process under investigation. We describe it as a historical process of bringing together or assembling human and non-human components (e.g. individuals, spaces, affects, social and economical constraints, knowledge etc.) in a combination with the analytical and evaluative concepts already presented. When taking an assemblage approach there is no natural ‘birth moment’ as any assemblage builds on existing assemblages. In this sense, the decision to begin the analysis at a certain time and place is an analytical necessity more than how reality works. Beginning by mapping the personal and institutional relations leading up to the moment of involving citizens, it is argued that these are actually also crucial moments in the creation of a participatory assemblage.

*Assembling people and institutions:* in some sense, the process began when KI encountered Annemette Digmann, who also had an established relation with another co-founder of SDS. KI was located in the regional innovation unit, while conducting her PhD studies, and Digmann invited her to join a writing group. KI is one of the founders of SDS, and SDS invited Digmann for a workshop in SDS. Digmann is head of innovation in the Central Denmark Region, and she quickly began to send some of her employees to SDS to engage in dialogues on social investment bonds, smart region, and so on..

*Assembling the Task Force challenge with SDS:* Digmann is part of the cross-sector Task Force, supporting innovative approaches to complex welfare problems. One of the Task Force issues was, as mentioned: What if jobcentres and healthcare services collaborated in making citizens healthy? As opposed to other issues suggested by the Task Force, this issue received no ideas and no applications. Based on the established relation between Digmann and SDS, Task Force decided to test a new approach to the issue by asking SDS to do “whatever it is you do”, and waiting to see the outcome in six months. SDS received 100,000 DKK for facilitating, hosting and developing the experiment. In this initial phase more intangible aspects like trust, personal integrity and charisma, rumours (about e.g. the working methods of SDS) and curiosity also enters the picture as forces that support the first fragile piecing together of parts of the assemblage.

*Assembling an organizational core:* in response to the question from Task force, SDS established a steering group consisting of: Peter Astrup (part of Task Force and employed in MidtLab, the regional innovation unit), Jonna Holm Pedersen (part of Task Force and employed in KL (Local Government Denmark)), and the SDS board and co-founders (Paul Natorp, Kristin Birkeland, Morten Daus-Petersen and Karen Ingerslev). Creating an organisational core like this is, according to DeLanda, a way of stabilizing, ‘coding’ or territorialising the assemblage by the building of agreements and formal structures that prevent the assemblage from simply breaking up in separate parts.

CS subsequently joined the steering group of this Task Force ‘cause’ as a researcher wanting to study the approach of SDS to participation by observing this particular process. The SDS co-founders mapped their network regarding three different perspectives on the question: 1) citizens out of work or on sick leave, 2) healthcare professionals and 3) employment professionals. The idea of this was to grasp the complexity of the challenge by including all sides. Or, rather, parts with relevant properties should be assembled in order to create new capacities for developing solutions to the problem.

*Assembling knowledge, stories and reformulations:* as a result of the mapping, the involved SDS co-founders invited 14 people for coffee meetings, interviewing people regarding their perspective on the Task Force question. Each interview was carefully documented and the results shared with the steering group. More specifically, they talked to four citizens with a user perspective on the unemployment and healthcare sector (such as being unemployed or on sick leave, for example), five professionals from the employment sector, and five professionals from healthcare, in order to map the various perspectives engaged in the challenge. The interview documentation was processed at a workshop for the steering group. Through the stories people shared, patterns emerged and two new questions for the work ahead crystallized: 1) How can we use “life narratives” as a point of departure for the interaction between citizens and system? 2) How can we define work in ways that allow more people to be working? In this sense, the research and investigation of

narratives were turned into new questions, which seemed more adequate to engage with the problem at stake. These questions directed attention towards acknowledging personal complexities and towards redefining what counts as work in contemporary Danish society. In a sense, this was the first benefit created by assembling people, institutions, knowledge and stories; the interviews motivated a moment of reformulation and learning among the members of the core group (including, for example, the regional Task Force members).

*Assembling collective encounters between citizens and institutions:* these two questions were used to frame two open workshops, where SDS mobilized a wide range of people with different kinds of relations to and perspectives on the questions. On 20 February 2014, approximately 20 people participated in a three-hour workshop in the SDS space in Aarhus. On 12 March 2014, the same group of people participated in another three-hour workshop. The first workshop focused on reflecting and developing an understanding of the two questions, while the second developed ‘trajectories of action’, building on the insights of the first workshop. The involved group of people were again citizens/users of the systems and professionals within health care and employment as well as members of the Task Force. Despite the emphasis on representing all perspectives, the employment dimension was somewhat less represented than the two other perspectives.

The two workshops took peoples’ own perspectives on the two questions and used these as the foundation for a collaborative exploration of the questions. The workshops produced several ideas for action, which were testable in different arenas within health care and employment (e.g. creating life narrative groups or trying to broaden the notion of ‘work’). The workshops were dominated by personal experiences and narratives explaining various problems regarding the encounter between personal life narratives and institutional logics and demands (from both a professional and user perspective), and the various types of socially valuable actions performed by humans (e.g. caring for loved ones, participating in community work) which are unrecognised as proper work. One participant shared his story of personal illness and how this had affected his life and ability to work. Another shared the frustrations of working in a health care system that had become too busy to listen to citizens’ life narratives. A third participant explained her movement from working in health care to suddenly becoming a patient herself. In this sense, the workshops created a rather intimate or intense environment based on sharing stories and getting an emotional or affective understanding of various and fluctuating positions in relation to the problem being investigated.

*Assembling affects and ideas:* The above-mentioned encounters resulted in various articulations of feeling empowered or of being able to transgress everyday problems at work when reflecting on possible changes. One participant articulated a sense of being “vitalised” through these workshops, which clearly underlines how participatory processes also have

more intangible or affective outcomes, which must be included in a potential evaluation. As such, the workshops also became 'safe spaces' where actors with normally very fixed relations (e.g. client vs. doctor) could enter into an individualized space based on citizens facing a challenge or acknowledging mixed positions (a doctor also on leave due to stress, or an unemployed person with a strong management background). People were of course well aware of their position (as professional/ user) in relation to the challenge, but seemed to be able to speak more frankly about this position due to the lack of institutional commitments or sanctions between the participants. As an observer one clearly sensed how a positive 'atmosphere of change' existed in the room – an atmosphere that was confirmed, articulated and perhaps also reinforced at the end of every workshop, where all participants had to "check out" of the workshop by stating their thoughts and reactions to the process. Here the articulations of how the workshop had created vitalising affects of relief, safeness and joy were salient among the participants.

This atmosphere motivated a wide range of more or less doable ideas such as focusing on establishing initial contact with unemployed people in new and less intimidating ways; offering citizens a sum of money to use, to find or create a job themselves; using individual life narrative books to supplement more factual citizen journals; including the visions and hopes for the future of the citizen; establishing networks of unemployed people with the same interests or who are focused on sharing life narratives; creating a knowledge bank for social workers and their ways of dealing with reforms and strict rules; public marketing of existing opportunities inside the system and unions; focusing more on the working conditions of social workers; and acknowledging voluntary work or social work at home (e.g. taking care of a spouse) as actual work. The participants from the Task Force contributed to these creative processes as well and also focused on how they could implement some of the ideas.

Maybe these ideas are not in themselves total solutions to the problem, but they nevertheless represent the participants' collective creation of a capacity to conceptualise concrete changes; a capacity that in itself contributed to the rather intense creative atmosphere. What was normally stuck and overtly codified seemed for a while to be open and changeable, and this clearly created an engaged and energized collective process.

*Missing parts and worries:* during the workshops, several participants articulated the need to add politicians and social workers to the assemblage as these could provide a more realistic space of 'possible actions'. In this way, a sense of impatience was also produced and added to the assemblage; or in assemblage terms: adding this part with its properties (e.g. an in-depth knowledge of the political and everyday conditions at the jobcentres) would have strengthened the capacity of the assemblage to conceptualise and act on relevant ideas. Therefore, social workers were invited to these events, but for various reasons could not participate. This lack was reflected on at both workshops, primarily to ensure that

not all responsibility for existing problems or possible solutions was assigned to a group of people not present at the events.

The process also created various worries among the facilitators. At the steering group meeting between the two workshops, concerns were raised about the fuzziness of some of the discussions at the workshop, and anxiety in relation to the possible solutions lacking quality was raised by one of the SDS steering group members. Another steering group member argued more pragmatically that a participatory process is precisely a process where you have to focus on the next step of doing something relevant with somebody, instead of being blocked by the anxiety of not creating a good enough output. This represented an interesting encounter between a 'quality discourse', focusing on the need for making sure that participation leads to something substantial, and a 'process discourse', focusing on the open-endedness and unpredictability of participation, which could mean that participation can lead to nothing – or perhaps lead to something at a later stage and in another situation.

*Assembling insights, conclusions and future relations:* to sum up the process, SDS facilitated a workshop for the steering group, concerning the insights made during the workshops as well as the overall collaboration between SDS and Task Force. The workshop pursued three questions: What did we create? What did we learn? How do we move along? SDS created a report describing the process and the ideas produced during the workshops, stressing the idea of working with 'everyday labs' to try out some of the many suggestions made during the workshops. The idea of the everyday lab was to create demarcated zones of experimentation where employees at the jobcentres were allowed to experiment with new solutions – inside the framework of the law, but without the burden of having to do what 'we usually do'. In an email evaluating the process, the idea of the everyday lab has been well received and will probably be included in future attempts at creating cross-sector innovation in the employment and healthcare sector.

#### CONCEPTUALIZING AND EVALUATING THE ASSEMBLAGE

After following the assembling of an assemblage, the first thing to consider is why it is a participatory assemblage – instead of simply a socially innovative or collaborative assemblage. Returning to the present understanding of participation – as a term referring to collective processes aimed at empowering the participants in various ways – the overall goal of this specific process is understood as an attempt to empower citizens trapped in an unsustainable relationship between employment pressure and healthcare problems. This goal is situated in a context focused on minimising welfare costs or developing welfare, but this does not disqualify the many participatory values or benefits, returned to later in this article, created in and through the process.

Specifying the type of assemblage created, the participatory process was initiated by a challenge posed by the Task Force regarding a project or goal defined by the task force

itself (improving health by increasing coordination between jobcentres and healthcare institutions). How to implement this goal, however, was up for debate and in this sense the participatory process is, using the concepts of Uphoff and Cohen, both a process of *ongoing decision-making* in relation to a project (how to react to the challenge) and *implementation* (how to turn the challenge into real changes) by contributing with resources (ideas, experiences, time, interaction etc.). The process was initiated by a top-down challenge or initiative by the Task Force, but all participation was voluntary, interactive and based on an individual engagement to contribute – not coercion or sanctions. The process lasted approximately eight months (Oct. 2013 – May 2014) and consisted of a broad range of activities (meetings, interviews, workshops open to all participants, and steering group workshops). Access to participation was created mainly through invitations aimed at people with experiences and knowledge of the challenge, but was also open to outsiders as the two larger workshops were announced on the SDS website and through social media.

Concerning the ‘who’ of participation, the process mixed a range of participants: leaders and decision makers from Central Denmark Region, health care institutions and the employment sector, process facilitators, process observers, and people with direct experience of the sectors involved in the challenge. All participants were identified and local in the sense of having a residential connection to Aarhus. They acted both as random citizens with a specific experience of the world and as representatives with a certain position in relation to the challenge (professional, user, facilitator). In this sense, the rather specified or ‘designed’ group constellation contributed both with classical forms of expert knowledge in relation to the topic (professionals) and various lay experiences of the system (through users), but also with a few ‘outsider’ perspectives from participants who had simply reacted to the open invitation on the SDS homepage. These positions were partly deconstructed during the workshops by focusing on all participants being ‘citizens facing a challenge’ – and by participants mixing positions (e.g. being both a doctor and on sick leave). However, they still implicitly structured some of the situations and interactions due to the fact that the professionals often played a more significant role in the creation and narrating of ideas produced in smaller groups during the workshops.

Evaluating the participatory quality of the process, it looks like only a partial form of participation following Pateman; participants at a late stage lose the ability to affect decisions, which reside only with the Task Force; partial participation as a complex form of consultation (cf. Arnstein), where citizens’ perspectives are heard through the workshops, but without the Task Force having any obligation besides listening. From a decision-oriented democratic perspective, the process was not a strongly embedded moment of citizens co-deciding actual changes together with an established system. In the end, the Task Force took the decision of whether or not the input from the participants should be transformed into actual changes. The case is nevertheless complicated by the fact that SDS and the citizens chose to reformulate the task given by the Task Force, and in some

sense delivered solutions that the Task Force were not able to implement. This stresses that we need to balance the criticism of ‘a system not willing to listen to citizens’ ideas’ by acknowledging the institutional logics permitting and blocking the implementation of citizen-led solutions.

Leaving aside this narrow understanding of participatory quality, the values produced during the assembling process were not necessarily decisions or implementations, but rather a range of overlapping benefits; these were: 1) *social* benefits in terms of a range of specific ideas that could be used in the political development of a more sustainable relation between employment and healthcare institutions or in relation to other challenges (e.g. SDS decided to continue using the concept of the ‘everyday lab’ in other ways). Social benefits, also in terms of a range of interactions and relations between institutions and users that offered both an understanding of each other’s perspectives and experiences. Furthermore, the process underlined the role of SDS as an increasingly important local meeting space between various social fields (e.g. the Region, municipalities and users); 2) *personal* benefits such as energy, affective comfort and listening, and a sense of being heard and understood, which were clearly articulated by the participants; 3) *material* benefits like funding smaller salaries for the facilitators or materialised stories and artefacts (e.g. interviews, the report) created and shared among participants.

This underlines that participatory assemblages should not only be evaluating in terms of power and decision-making, but also as encounters that could vitalise participants and create a sense of agency and engagement, which can be valuable in itself. Following Kely et al., an evaluation of the process would also have to include: learning and knowledge produced and circulated among the participants (including institutions and professionals learning about users, users learning about institutions and professionals, and all users learning to participate in a collective process); experiments with goal-setting and reformulations during the workshops, relations and vitalising or engaging affects; the experience of users getting a chance to affect and inspire representatives from official institutions; the ability to exit without sanctions. In this sense, the process produced a range of values and types of output besides its potential to create or affect decision-making.

Discussion: power, public administration and SDS

The assemblage analysis has revealed three interesting discussion points, each with an accompanying dilemma: 1) the complexity and multi-valued character of contemporary forms of participatory citizenship; 2) the changed role of public administration in an era of increased (focus on) participation; 3) the role and functions of institutions like SDS in relation to public administration. Attention will now be turned to discussing these points and dilemmas.

Firstly, the analysis has shown that to understand participatory processes, a multifaceted approach to analyzing and evaluating them is needed. Taking power or decision-making as the sole criteria of evaluation threatens to reduce the ability to identify and observe the various benefits created – especially those of a more processual or intangible



kind. However, agreement is still found with Carpentier, for instance: power and equal decision-making must play some role in the process to label it as participatory in the first place. The goal of any type of participation must be to redistribute power more evenly to the benefit of the citizen involved or affected. But the process, as such, should be both analyzed and evaluated more openly as it can, as is argued here, create multiple values and benefits, although participants did not directly affect decision-making in tangible and measurable ways. Furthermore, a process always involves some element of negotiation and decision-making – also when decisions do not lead to structural changes. In this sense, the process under investigation created a momentary space of equalized decision-making: participants, across various background and power positions, could affect the collective process and thus engage in moments of ‘speaking up’ and ‘voicing’ personal opinions and affects.

This leads on to the second discussion point because these encounters between various perspectives and positions are in themselves symptoms of a transformation of public administration, which over time could empower citizen perspectives. According to Hansen and Gemal (2014), public administration has developed from focusing on developing regulations offering all sorts of solutions to citizens – described as clients – in a period from the 1940s to the 1970s, to a phase often referred to as ‘new public management’ in the 1980s–1990s, where citizens were approached as consumers and the system as a business focused on creating evermore cheap and effective solutions in order to secure Denmark’s ability to be a competitive state. This is replaced by a third contemporary phase of ‘new public government’ or ‘new welfare’ that is still focused on effectiveness, cost-reduction and competition, but also on approaching citizens as co-creators and on creating more pluralistic and contextual solutions and processes (Hansen and Gemal, 2014, 3). In this new phase, “the public sector is no longer in the service of the citizens, but is an equal player in the co-creation of welfare. The citizens, non-profit organizations, private enterprises, interest groups, and the like, are all co-creators in this process” (Hansen and Gemal, 2014, 8). This type of new welfare is, however, firmly embedded in a paradox as it simultaneously attempts “to empower its citizens and control the output of their activities”. Processes become more collaborative and based on citizen contributions, but still seems to privilege the system with the final ability to decide (Hansen and Gemal, 2014, 3). This raises a question, which is also important in the discussion of the relationship between SDS and the Task Force, which clearly initiates a process of involvement (both with SDS and citizens) linking it to a ‘new public government’ line of thinking:

“Is NPG a sophisticated way of reducing costs on welfare and getting more out of its citizens in a situation where the western world is undergoing a financial crisis and western countries are in need of better competitive positions? Or is it, on the contrary, a much-needed new angle on public administration, pointing to and trying to correct some central weaknesses in NPM, for example its narrow focus on (economic) efficiency, to the detriment of public involvement?” (Hansen and Gemal, 2014, 13)

The authors of this article agree with Hansen and Gemal's cautiously optimistic answer to this question, as they stress that the ongoing interaction with other groups, perspectives and citizens makes administration "marginally open to something outside of it, and accordingly it has some kind of fragility inscribed into it" (Hansen and Gemal, 2014, 21). In other words, the process under investigation exemplifies the increasing willingness of public administration to enter participatory spaces where perspectives of 'the other' – meaning perspectives not generated by the logic of administration itself – will be raised. Entering these spaces does not in itself create public decisions guided by citizen perspectives or 'citizen power'; however, they nevertheless create a new and continuous number of encounters between administration and citizens, which inscribe 'other voices' into the practices of public administration. This article presents an investigation of actual people from actual public institutions facing citizens and users in a non-institutional setting, arguing that these types of meetings could, in the long run, be of great value in terms of creating a user and citizen oriented approach to public administration and innovation.

The third and last thing to discuss is the role and function of SDS in the above-mentioned change. SDS has become an increasingly important partner for public institutions such as the Central Denmark Region or local municipalities. This is linked to the search by public administration for ways of developing the 'new welfare' approach. SDS thus becomes an important mediator between administration and civil society/citizens. The strategy of SDS here seems to be to bring together, gather or assemble participants in ways that could disturb or renegotiate established relations, practices and ways of thinking. Or, rather, to create hyper-complex meeting spaces of multiple perspectives, making it impossible for those with power not to notice or be affected by those not in power.

In this way, SDS plays the role of enabling the creation of participatory assemblages that become a 'space of possibility' for creating new empowering capacities, benefits and values among the participants. This space of possibility also becomes a kind of 'safe space', where controversial opinions and stories can be raised in the presence of relevant institutional representatives. It becomes a space of 'momentary equality' (we are all citizens), 'role mixing' (e.g. being both sick/stressed and a professional) and thus 'egalitarian confusion' (who has which specific capacities in relation to the challenge?). SDS thus facilitates the creation of concrete and sensual, socially and institutionally complex, but also affectively engaging and safe spaces. Here the multiplicity of voices and perspectives in relation to a certain cause can be expressed and heard by the relevant official institutions and decision-makers. And in this sense, the technique is also all about putting citizens in a position where they can actually have an effect on how a certain cause is being dealt with. But also in a position of whether a range of other more relational, affective and cognitive benefits are created through citizens engaging in the process. The dilemma of new welfare, however, represents a continuous challenge for an institution like SDS: how to ensure that citizen perspectives are not only used to brand public administration as 'participatory', but are also continuously included in policy decisions or structural changes.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, a specific process of citizen involvement has been analysed, taking an assemblage approach to both analysing the specific bringing together of individuals and institutions throughout the process and evaluating the multiple values and benefits created. The importance of power and equal decision-making as a goal for participatory processes has been stressed, but also how an evaluation must take into account various outputs and values besides power redistribution. Following on from the analysis and evaluation, the relationship between new involving forms of public administration and an institution like SDS has been discussed. The argument is put forward that the latter plays the role of a mediator and facilitator of institutionally complex, affectively engaging and safe spaces, while also facing a continuous challenge in terms of improving the potential for structural changes as an outcome of these encounters between various perspectives, institutions and individuals. Further research on the process could focus more on the effects of the process on the administrative representatives and participants involved. What is remembered from the process and how is it used? In what way (e.g. cognitive or embodied) has the process affected professionals' approach to similar processes or challenges, for example – or the participants' understanding of public administration? This would add to the understanding of the assemblage's ability to produce new capacities.

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