Multilingualism in citizens' assemblies

Substantiated choices for inclusive participation

Public Governance Research Group

2025

let's change
YOU. US. THE WORLD.

DE HAAGSE HOGESCHOOL

Multilingualism in citizens' assemblies

Substantiated choices for inclusive participation

Authors
Juliet van Viersen, Marianne van Bochove, Maria Martoccia & Christine Bleijenberg

Department
Public Governance Research Group

Professional partner
The Municipality of The Hague

Date
September 2025

Photography
Roderik Rotting (Bureau EMMA)

The Hague University of Applied Sciences, 2025

Table of Contents

1 Introduction

Our highly diverse contemporary society raises new questions about how citizen participation is organised. One of these questions is: how do you have an inclusive conversation with participants who speak different languages? A participation professional worded this question as follows:

"In order to organise representative citizens' assemblies, we also want to facilitate participants who speak other languages. Especially in super-diverse cities, this plays an important role. Switching to a shared language such as English is not always a solution, as this can also exclude Dutch-speaking participants. And if you separate all the participants per language group to talk to each other, they also become less part of the larger group. How do you facilitate a good conversation with participants who speak different languages?"

It is a recognisable challenge for participation professionals who work on citizens' assemblies and other forms of citizen participation. How do you ensure that everyone can truly participate, regardless of the language they speak?

What are citizens' assemblies?

Citizens' assemblies are an instrument of participatory democracy, in which a group of selected citizens, based on well-informed dialogue, advises politicians on a social issue, with the aim of making recommendations to the government in order to influence policy and decision-making (SCP, 2023). This research focuses on local citizens' assemblies and forms of citizen participation based on the same principles.

From diversity to inclusion

Representation and inclusion are important aspects of citizens' assemblies and key concepts when it comes to the legitimacy of the outcomes of citizens' assemblies (Brenninkmeijer, 2021; OECD, 2020). Professionals are committed to achieving a diverse group of participants and the best possible reflection of society. They do this, for example, through stratified methods of drawing lots with the aim of involving underrepresented residents (e.g. Van Bochove, 2025). But when you have this diverse group together, how do you ensure that everyone can participate equally and that everyone feels heard? How do you ensure inclusion? Inclusiveness in participation refers to the extent to which all relevant social groups are given an equal opportunity to participate and be heard during conversations (SCP, 2023).

Multilingualism as both a challenge and an asset

A frequently mentioned issue by professionals when striving for inclusive citizens' assemblies is dealing with multilingualism. In the highly diverse context of many Dutch cities, inclusive citizens' assemblies are by definition also multilingual citizens' assemblies. Multilingualism is an additional challenge for organising inclusive citizens' assemblies. At the same time, multilingualism is seen in academic literature not only as a 'problem' to be solved, but also as an important aspect of inclusion in the democratic process: "The incorporation of multilingualism is likely to increase participation, strengthen representation and inclusivity, which benefits the overall democratic process" (Verhasselt, 2022). This is a challenge: to achieve the common goal (recommendations), linguistic diversity must be bridged. According to the conceptual model 'Inclusive Multilingualism' (Backus et al., 2013), different tools can be used to communicate effectively in a multilingual context, such as interpreters, buddies, translations, a common language such as English, codeswitching (switching between languages) and lingua receptiva (understanding each other's language, but not speaking it). Participation professionals who organise citizens' assemblies and other forms of citizen participation are already partially using these tools, for example, by experimenting with mediators such as interpreters or buddies, and offering translations.

But how do you do this in a way that promotes inclusion? Every context in which a conversation takes place is different, and context factors determine which tool or combination of tools is most effective. At the same time, language is not a neutral tool. Among other things, language can influence participants' level of participation, is tied to culture and identity, and can influence decisions (e.g. Ringe, 2022; Keysar et al., 2012). Substantiated choices in deploying these resources are therefore important for an inclusive process.

Conflicting priorities for participation professionals

In designing and implementing inclusive citizens' assemblies, professionals also have to deal with conflicting priorities between policy ideals of inclusion on the one hand, and institutional frameworks and limited financial resources on the other. This also applies to the aspect of multilingualism: although professionals recognise that (supporting) language plays a key role in accessible participation, there is often no policy or budget to this end. Many municipalities have a policy that Dutch is the working language except in emergency situations. At the same time, professionals show a great deal of willingness to be inclusive and to give different target groups the opportunity to participate.

Research question

The objective of this research is to provide participation professionals with insights and action perspectives, enabling them to make appropriate choices regarding multilingualism in the design and implementation of future citizens' assemblies within the practical and financial frameworks.

The research question is:

What are the experiences of participation professionals and participants with multilingualism in citizens' assemblies, and what insights does this provide for making informed choices when organising inclusive citizens' assemblies?

Focus and structure of the report

We want to gain insight into how inclusion and multilingualism are dealt with in practice. We do this by combining different perspectives. We had conversations with professionals about municipal policy and their ambitions, as well as with participants and support staff (interpreters and buddies) who had participated in citizens' assemblies. We also observed conversations within citizens' assemblies to get a more complete picture. This combination of perspectives contributes to finding an answer to the research question. We examine perspectives on inclusion and being heard in general, the different resources used (*Inclusive Multilingualism*), and other themes that emerge. Inclusion starts with the target group itself: people generally want to be included, take action themselves and know exactly what their own needs are. Therefore, it is important to put them at the centre, with a view to improving the design of participation processes from the bottom up (Musgrave and Bradshaw, 2014).

After describing the research method in Chapter 2, Chapter 3 discusses the views and experiences from different perspectives: those of participation professionals, participants and support staff. In Chapter 4, we translate the findings into action perspectives: some practical recommendations for the design of future citizens' assemblies.

2 Method

In order to answer the research question, a qualitative research approach was chosen. Within this research, it was examined during several citizens' assemblies how communication and deliberation take place in a multilingual context.[1] To obtain as complete a picture as possible of how multilingualism is experienced and shaped within citizens' assemblies, triangulation was used in the data collection. This process combined various forms of data collection, including observations, interviews with participants, supporters and organisers, and document analysis. By combining these sources, patterns surrounding multilingualism can be looked at from multiple angles.

Case studies

Within this research, five participation processes in which multilingualism played a role were examined. These participation processes included participants for whom Dutch is not their first language and who were supported by a buddy or interpreter. Each process involved five or fewer participants in total. This involved three citizens' assemblies and two district panels[2] within three different municipalities in the Randstad and in North Brabant. The level of depth and type of data collection in each process varied: in some cases both interviews and observations were conducted, while in other cases only interviews with stakeholders were conducted. This variation was related to the practical feasibility of the research and the duration of the participation process.

Data collection

Desk research on municipal policy
Desk research was conducted to gain insight into municipal policy and vision in the areas of inclusion, participation and multilingualism. For this purpose, documents and websites from sixteen municipalities and provinces were analysed. This included, for example, vision documents, participation or inclusion policies, inclusion agendas and programmes, and information on municipal websites about diversity, inclusion, and language policy.

Observations
To understand the course of participation processes related to inclusion, 10 meetings were attended and observed. With use of an observation schedule, specific attention was paid to communication with and between participants. Specific attention was also paid to the use of various resources deployed to bridge multilingualism. During the meetings, participants were approached to take part in interviews about their experiences.

Interviews
A total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted, including two group interviews. All interviews - with the exception of the two group interviews - took place online. This involved examining the issue from different perspectives:

• Six online interviews were conducted with participation professionals on inclusion and language policies, ambitions and challenges. Participation professionals work at the strategic level within municipalities. They have an advisory role and are often involved in the implementation of citizens' assemblies.

• Because interpreters and buddies are an important link and are also intensively involved in the process, their experiences and perspectives on multilingualism and inclusion were also asked in interviews. Two interviews were conducted with buddies, two group interviews with a total of four

[1] The data was collected within citizens' assemblies and district panels, which were anonymised to protect participants' privacy. The Municipality of The Hague did not organise a citizens' assembly or a comparable form of participation within the scope of this research during the study period, but was involved in the policy research and in the organisation of a knowledge-sharing session for practitioners.
[2] The district panels consisted of a group of approximately 250 randomly selected residents who met for a day to discuss a topic that is important to the district. As with citizens' assemblies, dialogue – the conversation – is central.

interpreters and one individual interview with an interpreter.

• Finally, participants' experiences of inclusion were identified. In online (semi-structured) interviews with fourteen participants, in addition to questions about general experiences with the citizens' assemblies, specific questions were asked about experiences with regard to inclusion. Using a topic list, the participants were asked to what extent they felt heard during the citizens' assemblies, their experiences with the various 'resources' deployed, and whether they felt they could participate equally, based on the elements of inclusion (Movisie, 2021). The two buddies who were interviewed were also participants and they were asked some of the same questions as the other participants. The participants interviewed were largely participants for whom Dutch is not their first language, as well as some Dutch-speaking participants who worked in groups where multilingualism played a role. The interviews with participants for whom Dutch is not their first language were conducted in English and the other interviews were conducted in Dutch. The interviews lasted half an hour on average.

Analysis

The collected interview and observation data were analysed using qualitative thematic analysis in the ATLAS.ti programme. The coding started from the themes from the topic list (closed coding). At the same time, open coding was done to leave room for new themes and insights that emerged from the data itself. This combination of deductive and inductive analysis made it possible to identify both predefined and unexpected patterns.

In addition, a data session was set up with members of the research team, during which the coded data was jointly discussed and interpreted.

In this report, quotes from interviews originally conducted in Dutch were translated into English. The aim was to achieve a translation that remains as close as possible to the original meaning and formulation.

Meeting with participation professionals
On 4 March 2025, preliminary results from the research were shared in a meeting with twelve participation professionals from various municipalities involved in designing and organising citizens' assemblies and other participation processes. During this meeting, the findings were jointly reflected upon, with specific attention to the role of multilingualism in citizens' assemblies. The participants brought in their own practical experiences and brainstormed together about possible solutions and areas for improvement for dealing with multilingualism in participation processes. The insights from this meeting have been incorporated into the formulation of action perspectives.

Knowledge session with professionals
On 19 June 2025, the research findings were shared in a knowledge session with 30 professionals from various departments within the Municipality of The Hague. During this session, participants jointly reflected on the findings in relation to the question: ‘When is participation good enough?’

3 Results

In this chapter, we will discuss the main findings of the research. We will discuss different perspectives on inclusion, in particular multilingualism in citizen participation and citizens' assemblies. We start with the perspective of participation professionals involved in municipal policies around inclusion. How do their municipalities deal with multilingualism in participation processes? Next, we focus on the experiences of various stakeholders with multilingualism in the practice regarding citizens' assemblies. What were their expectations beforehand, what did they think of the various working methods and support options, and did they think that participants speaking other languages could participate equally? It also addresses the perspective of support (interpreters and buddies).

3.1 Inclusion and language policies in municipalities

Institutional frameworks: current language and inclusion policies

Many Dutch municipalities focus on inclusion and diversity through policies and action plans. In their inclusion policies, municipalities express the importance of participation, equal opportunities and that everyone counts. The municipal websites contain quotes that reflect the following:

***"We are working towards a city where everyone counts. Every resident deserves equal treatment and equal opportunities."* (Website municipality, s.d.)**

Although many municipalities are committed to inclusion and diversity, there is little attention paid to multilingualism in policy documents. However, according to the literature on social inclusion, multilingualism is an important part of inclusion policy because it promotes equal access to participation and enables cultural recognition, among other things (e.g. Piller, 2012; Musgrave & Bradshaw, 2014).

Language policy in municipalities is generally based on Dutch as the working language. Reference is often made to Section 2:6 of the *Algemene wet bestuursrecht*, which states that the use of other languages is only permitted in exceptional cases, such as emergencies. In practice, however, this formal framework is increasingly under pressure, as municipalities increasingly respond to language dynamics and needs within their community. For example, one participation professional stated in an interview:

"The communications department initially did not approve of us putting text in another language on the website because of the language policy. We then argued that it is very important in citizens' assemblies because of its inclusivity and representativeness. But this is not something that can be challenged in every participatory process, because it is quite the hassle."

Professionals emphasise that multilingualism is necessary to achieve municipal goals in highly diverse Dutch cities, such as promoting participation, inclusion, and citizenship.

Financial frameworks

Municipalities want to be as inclusive as possible, but also face financial constraints in their options, according to professionals:

"If money, financial resources, had no influence at all and were available in abundance, then much more could be done in the area of inclusion, for example."

That is why it is important that municipalities gain insight into how they can effectively use their existing resources to truly promote inclusion. To do this properly, it is important to look at it from the perspective of the participants. Their experiences show what works in practice and what does not.

3.2 Inclusion in practice: participants and support staff on their experiences with multilingualism

From the policy on inclusion and multilingualism in participation we now move to practice. Here we focus on the experiences of participants with a first language other than Dutch (non-native speakers) who received support from an interpreter or buddy during citizens' assemblies or district panel discussions.. In addition to their experiences with translations, we look more broadly at their experiences, such as their expectations beforehand and the interaction with other participants. Interpreters, buddies and other (Dutch speaking) participants also share their perspectives.

Expectations of participation

Expectations play a big role in how participants experience a process. From the conversations with non-native speakers it appears that they have different expectations regarding the facilitation of multilingualism.

Several participants expressed their appreciation for the effort the organisers made to welcome everyone, and, as one participant put it, to make them "feel important". Some non-native speakers were surprised that they had been invited to take part in the citizens' assemblies. For example, one of the participants says that in the country where they come from this would probably not be facilitated:

"I felt very included, this was a kind of experience we don't usually have in the country I come from. There they will choose participants who speak the language. They were genuinely interested in my input here. Which was very nice, to be honest."

The presence of interpreters was also a welcome surprise for several participants:

"I definitely felt included with the interpreters, I really appreciated that there was live translation available. This was not something I expected."

Some participants had higher expectations of how they would be included as non-native speaker. For one of the participants, it started with the invitation letter. According to her, the organisers have not sufficiently considered the fact that participants from other languages will not quickly open a letter with a text in Dutch on the envelope:

"If it's not a bill and it doesn't look super pressing with numbers - that always means money - then we ignore it. We throw it away. (...) So yes, if you don't send it in English..."

During the citizens' assemblies, this participant, like many others, was grateful for the effort made in using interpreters, but sometimes the thought crossed her mind: if you're going to do it, do it right. For example, some of the information sources were translated into English, but not all:

"Yes, they had done their best. They had sent documents in English the night before, but not the most important document. Anyway, that main document, of course, was about 90 pages. (...) I was one of the people who did not have all the information. What are we talking about then? Why are we here in the first place?"

The expectations of many non-native speakers were not that high. They were surprised at how much effort had been made for them and were especially grateful for that. Some non-native speakers had higher expectations and focused on what could have been done better, as they did not feel treated equally throughout the process.

Experiences with ways to bridge multilingualism

Using the theory of ‘Inclusive Multilingualism’, we examined the different experiences with the use of tools to bridge multilingualism. In this research we focus on: 1) Translation; 2) Translation by means of interpreters and buddies; 3) English as a shared language; 4) Code-switching and lingua receptiva. We discuss them per 'tool' below.

Translations
In the different cases we saw that information was partially translated. These included, for example, invitations, presentation slides and advisory texts. During the citizens' assemblies themselves, the information was mainly translated into English, while other languages were sometimes used beforehand. Yet, as also noted by participants, not all information was translated. For instance, the invitation was not always available in multiple languages, and translations were also sometimes missing during the assemblies themselves. For some participants this made it difficult to follow the process properly. At one of the citizens' assemblies we observed, participants had to walk around at one point to look at advice on flipcharts on the wall. The interpreters were unable to support everyone at the same time, causing some participants to miss parts of the information. This affected their ability to participate fully.

When participants were asked if they felt included in the citizens' assemblies, translations were also mentioned several times. For example, this participant indicated that she was unable to attend a particular session because the translation was not good enough:

“The only session where I felt like I really couldn't participate was the one where they printed out all the advice and people started putting sticky notes on it. Because that was the trickiest session, I think. They did give us a translated version, but that translation wasn't that good. And I didn't really know what we were doing."

In several cases, a lack of translation or an inadequate translation limited the accessibility for - and equal participation of non-native speakers in the participatory process.

Interpreters and buddies
In each case, interpreters or buddies were used to support non-native speakers. The interpreters hired are professional interpreters who translate spoken language simultaneously (at the same time). They do this during plenary sessions as well as group discussions. Participants wear headphones and interpreters whisper into a microphone. Buddies are participants who have volunteered to support non-native speakers. They do not translate simultaneously or completely, but often provide a summary translation during the conversation or afterwards.

Using buddies and interpreters is not a matter of *one size fits all*. Both ‘tools’ have advantages and disadvantages depending on context, situation and preference of participants. First, the role of a buddy differs from that of an interpreter. An interpreter will purely translate, while a buddy can also help with understanding and carrying out assignments. For example, one of the interpreters indicated that confusion arose about her role and what she could do for the participant in question:

“*It is a shame, which the municipality did not properly emphasise to the target group for whom I interpreted, that the role of an interpreter was not properly explained. The participant saw me as a kind of assistant who was also allowed to do and decide things."*

Interpreters can, however, support low-literate participants by conveying information in understandable language. However, they cannot have any substantive involvement in the process or assignments. However, a buddy is also a participant and can be substantively involved.

One participant indicated that they appreciated that the buddy not only translated for them, but also that they connected with the buddy both in regards to the issue and as a sparring partner:

“I connected with the buddy. Also because we live in the same community and we connect on substantive topics. He's not just a translator for me. He is also a resident with his own voice, and translating was his secondary role in the meeting, for me anyway.”

Using buddies also has disadvantages. It can be stressful for buddies since they need time to translate, but also participate in the conversation themselves, one buddy indicated. It also happens that the participant for whom the translation is being done does not fully participate in the conversation because most of the translation is done afterwards. After all, a buddy is not a professional interpreter and usually cannot translate simultaneously. As a result, the participant's perspective was not always properly presented, the buddy of this participant indicated:

“There are also a number of participants who prefer not to speak English (...). But then the participant whose buddy I am won't be able to participate in the discussions, which means that you are actually constantly translating. At a certain point, it makes much more sense for such a group dynamic that you translate afterwards and then they can say what they think about it. But then they are not immediately sparring with just one person. And in the end, the outcome wasn't necessarily something that was very close to their ideas, I think.”

During plenary sessions, it is difficult for buddies to translate due to the noise pollution this causes for other participants. This is an advantage of interpreters over buddies, as participants hear the translation through headphones. One participant indicated that they did not find translating during a plenary presentation helpful:

"Actually, it was not that efficient. She is not a professional interpreter. Sometimes she would start explaining something when I didn't need an explanation. And that can also be disruptive for other people who want to listen.
So it was a bit uncomfortable."

Interpreters can translate directly and offer a good working method in plenary sessions to provide participants with all the information. However, in group discussions, the use of interpreters does not guarantee that participants feel they can participate equally:

“It was difficult, because the interpreters spoke softly so as not to disturb the others during simultaneous translation. But that's always a problem, because you hear the people with a microphone in Dutch, and you really try to concentrate and understand what the interpreter is saying.”

While both interpreters and buddies can provide valuable support for non-native speakers, participants' experiences show that neither form of support automatically leads to full and equal participation.

English as a common language

English often serves as a ‘lingua franca’: a common language used as a means of communication for people with different native languages. In plenary sessions, interpreters were fully supportive. In the group discussions, in many cases the interpreter was either not used, or they had a supporting role in parts of the discussion. In the groups we sometimes switched to English because this was often more efficient than using an interpreter. Dutch-speaking participants also made an effort to be inclusive towards those participants who were supported by an interpreter. Non-native speakers also indicated that they would be more likely to contribute and participate if the conversation were conducted in English:

"My honest answer is: if more people spoke English, it would be much easier for me to express certain things in English."

However, in the group interview with interpreters, several interpreters indicated that they observed that some participants could not keep up well when switching to English. Participants were more reserved in their input or sometimes speech confusion arose:

"What I found difficult was that when a group switched to English without consulting each other, you noticed that one or two of them couldn't keep up because they just couldn't speak English well enough. These participants do not dare to admit this and that is just very sad to see. The difficult thing about that as an interpreter, I think, is that it is not my job to interrupt the conversation at that moment and say 'I'm still here if you need me', even though you can actually see that something is going wrong."

This picture was also described in interviews with participants:

"There were situations where they just switched to English in my group, and this was difficult for some participants."

This did not only concern Dutch speaking participants, but also participants who used interpreters in a language other than English and whose native language is not English.

Switching to English in group discussions encouraged some participants to actively participate in the discussion. At the same time, it could also create new exclusion mechanisms because other participants did not always feel comfortable speaking English.

Code-switching and lingua receptiva

In addition to using English as a common language, we saw that participants also regularly switched between languages, mainly between English and Dutch. This is what we call code-switching: alternating between two or more languages or language varieties within one conversation, sentence or even utterance. It often happens spontaneously, especially with multilingual speakers. What also happens is that everyone expresses themselves in the language in which they feel most comfortable, this is called lingua receptiva. We saw this happen regularly during deliberation in several cases. Sometimes this was stopped by interpreters or moderators, as they preferred the conversation to be in one language and through the interpreter.

Some participants said they could appreciate switching between languages:

"I noticed that most of them really tried their best to put us at ease. So it was really nice to see that they could just switch from Dutch to English, just because they wanted to communicate with us."

The respondent quoted below indicates that they had a wonderful experience with an older Dutch woman who didn't speak much English, but tried anyway. It was much more about the experience of someone making an effort for you than about the level of the discussion:

"There were ladies or other people at other tables for whom English was not easy. And they then said: 'No, I prefer to speak Dutch'. And then when I said something, they replied in their basic English. And I had a great experience! I think it was during the second meeting, with an older lady. We were talking about the plan for a kind of shuttle cart that could take elderly people from door to door and make their lives easier. (..). She spoke Dutch, and every time I said something,

we had a kind of dialogue, she spoke partly in English, partly in Dutch, trying to communicate with me."

Participants then consulted with each other to see whether it was still understandable for everyone, according to this participant:

"Yes, that was quite nice of them, that some residents occasionally switched to English when discussing their experiences. And they also explicitly asked: 'Is it okay if I switch to English so that everyone can understand?' I think two of the residents did, but the others just spoke Dutch, because that was the language they felt most comfortable with. I think that was good."

These examples show that spontaneously switching languages and using a lingua receptiva can not only be functional, but also have a connecting effect and contribute to inclusive communication.

Language groups

As indicated earlier, interpreters are expensive to hire, especially when interpreting in multiple languages. Interpreting is a demanding profession; interpreters take turns, so interpreting one language requires several interpreters. In practice, we observed during meetings that several participants are supported by one interpreter. This means that in group discussions these participants must stay together. Sometimes participants can choose different topics, but participants who use an interpreter are asked to choose a topic jointly so that they can stick together. Moreover, it may be easier for them to sit together in groups, because then they are able to speak English among themselves. This division into ‘language groups’ is sometimes seen in the literature as a possible ‘solution’ for bridging multilingualism.

A counterargument, besides the fact that it can hinder the freedom of choice of participants, is that it can also lead to less diversity, which is an important element for the quality of deliberation (Caluwaerts & Deschouwer, 2013). Diversity of perspectives does not only lie in linguistic or cultural background, but it can be an important addition. An example mentioned by a participant is that they were asked about experiences in their country of origin regarding a particular issue:

"I am from another country, but yet they cared about hearing my opinion. ‘What is your take on it? How do they do that in your country? And tell us more. That was actually pretty good."

One participant also indicated that, in their view, a diversity of perspectives is better for diversity in the conversation:

"Of course, we have a limited number of interpreters. It is therefore not possible to have one per English speaking participant. But still, I feel that if you look at diversity, it is better if groups are completely mixed, without these kinds of criteria.”

These findings illustrate that working with language groups is understandable from a practical perspective, but at the same time it poses obstacles to the freedom of choice of participants and the diversity of perspectives that is important for the quality of deliberation.

Role of the moderator in inclusive conversations

In addition to various resources used to bridge multilingualism, a good moderator is also important in inclusive conversations. For example, the moderator ensures that everyone has a chance to speak, including quiet or less language-savvy participants.
Participants also expressed their appreciation for these moderators:

“They encourage us to talk and to put forward the ideas we had. So yes, I really liked that concept."

But in multilingual conversations there is an additional role to play, for example when switching between different languages in a conversation. An interpreter indicated that they see an important role for moderators when a conversation switches to another language such as English, to check whether everyone is still following along:

"Make sure that moderators know, when a conversation involves non-native speakers with interpreters, that they should not only pay attention to whether they are following along, but also, if the conversation changes languages, that they should pay attention to whether Dutch participants are still following along."

Of course, the above also applies to participants with a first language other than Dutch whose native language is not English. In addition, it was indicated that moderators can play an important role in making participants feel welcome. For example, a non-native speaker indicated that it would have been helpful if the moderator had indicated that it was okay to express themselves in English:

“But if the moderators simply mention 'feel free to ask questions in English too', then that is encouraging. Especially for people who don't speak Dutch, to actually do that.”

Moderators also play an important role in recognising and addressing less visible differences in inclusion. These could be cultural differences, for example, but it could also concern introverted or participants with lower linguistic proficiency. Cultural background or personal differences can influence how participants express themselves, how quickly they respond, or how comfortable they feel taking speaking time, etc. This requires moderators to be alert to different communication and interaction styles, and to adjust the pace of the conversation where necessary. This allows them to slow down by giving space to participants who need more time to prepare for an answer, or to speed up when the conversation stagnates.

4 Discussion and recommendations

Based on our findings, we make four recommendations that can contribute to more inclusive designs of citizens' assemblies. This provides professionals with tools to reflect and decide how they can best design inclusive citizens' assemblies (and similar forms of participation).

1. If you do it, make sure you do it right

Many municipalities have ideas and ambitions about inclusion, which include participation and the involvement of different groups in society. However, multilingualism is not an explicit part of this. Many municipalities even have a ‘Dutch-only’ language policy, while the reality is that a significant proportion of residents do not speak Dutch or have some command of Dutch, but not enough to properly understand or express complex information, such as in the context of citizens' assemblies. This is at odds with the pursuit of inclusion, as exclusion based on language can lead to the very groups one wants to involve being excluded from participation and not being heard. In addition, financial and organisational frameworks play a role: ideals of inclusion often clash with limited resources, meaning that not everything that is desirable turns out to be feasible.

This contradiction between the pursuit of inclusion and the limitations of language policy leads to a dilemma when organising citizens' assemblies. When pursuing inclusion as much as possible, fundamental and consistent choices will have to be made about how the participation process is designed. Facilitating participation for non-native speakers through interpreters and buddies is an important step, but it is not enough. Often, (written) information, such as invitations, instructions or background documents, remains only available in Dutch. This can leave participants who speak a different language at an informational disadvantage, undermining their (sense of) full participation.

The pursuit of inclusion is characteristic of citizens' assemblies, so it is important to convey from the invitation that residents, regardless of their language, are welcome and can fully participate. This starts with the choice of language: if you really want to reach a broader and more diverse group, sending out invitations only in Dutch is not enough. At the same time, a multilingual invitation creates expectations that the further process will also be accessible and inclusive. This requires well-considered choices and a realistic alignment between what you promise and what you can actually deliver.

Recommendations for participation professionals:

- Send invitations and announcements in multiple languages, tailored to the municipality's demographics, so that non-native speakers also feel immediately addressed and welcome.
- If you invite people in multiple languages, make sure the follow-up process is also accessible: translate essential information, such as background information, instructions, and agendas, into relevant languages.

2. From facilitation to feeling welcome

Participants' experiences show that they are generally well-facilitated to actively participate, and that, for example, through the use of interpreters and buddies, they appreciate the effort made. This type of support is important and enables participants to participate. While much attention is paid to enabling participation through the use of interpreters and buddies, the aspect of feeling welcome as a non-Dutch-speaking participant often remains underexposed. This is evident, for example, from the fact that

some non-native speakers participated less actively in the conversation. The feeling of being welcome is an important part of inclusion and contributes to people really feeling part of the citizens' assemblies. Inclusion is more than providing interpreters or translating documents; it is also about connection and creating a shared sense of belonging (e.g. Musgrave & Bradshaw, 2014). This requires more than technical solutions: it requires a design that consciously takes into account linguistic diversity as an essential part of the participation process.

Relatively small adjustments to the design of the meeting can already make a difference. For example, consider greetings in multiple languages upon arrival, or explicitly identifying and appreciating linguistic and cultural differences within the group. Moderators can also play an important role here, for example by recognising that there are multiple languages in the group, providing space to express yourself in the language in which you feel most comfortable, and actively paying attention to different communication styles.

Such adjustments require little or no additional resources, but can make a big difference in the perceived sense of inclusion. They help to break through an implicit 'us-them' dynamic and help to approach participants as one collective, recognising multilingualism as a strength rather than an obstacle.

Recommendations for participation professionals:

- Incorporate multilingualism into the design and implementation of the process. For example, by greeting people in multiple languages, by identifying and appreciating diversity within the group. If the design and policy allow it, it is worth considering offering some parts in multiple languages.
- Moderators play a key role in creating an inclusive conversation environment where participants feel safe to participate. Ensure that the training or briefing focuses on how they can contribute to safety for participants and cohesion in the group when talking to multilingual participants. This can be done, for example, by highlighting the linguistic diversity at the table and emphasising that everyone can express themselves in the language in which they feel most comfortable.

3. Not an ‘one size fits all’ approach, but continuously adapting to context

The choice of a particular communication tool, such as an interpreter, a buddy or the use of English, is not a *‘one size fits all’* solution that works in every situation. Each context has its own characteristics, needs and challenges that influence what the most appropriate form of support is at that time.

In practice, there are a number of aspects that are worth considering for all citizens´ assemblies. For example, it is important that moderators receive training on how to deal with multilingualism in groups. They play a crucial role in identifying moments when, for example, language changes can lead to in- or exclusion. In addition, they can be trained in cultural sensitivity so that they can better recognise different communication styles and accommodate diverse ways of participation.

In terms of support options, practice shows that buddies can be a valuable (and cost-effective) alternative to interpreters, especially in small group discussions. Through their involvement with participants, they are able to contribute to a sense of inclusion. At the same time, buddies do not translate simultaneously and therefore translate less accurately than professional interpreters. This makes them, especially in plenary sessions, of limited use. Their own participation may also be compromised. To avoid the latter, buddies who do not participate in the participation process themselves as already happens in other types of participation processes could be considered. (Support) variety, tailored to the type of meeting, is important.

Interpreters are valued by participants for their accuracy and professionalism. However, the use of interpreters may also impose unintended limitations, for example because participants feel less free to move between groups or conversations. If there is sufficient budget, hiring multiple interpreters per language should certainly be considered. Bringing together non-native speakers for practical reasons does not benefit the quality of deliberation and the exchange of perspectives. In the future, the use of AI translation tools may play a complementary role, especially for meetings with a more limited budget.

Recommendations for participation professionals:

- There is no universal solution for language support. Choose the most appropriate format for each meeting and per target group, such as interpreters, buddies, or the use of a common language like English. The possibilities of AI translations can be explored at small-scale meetings with a smaller budget.
- Ensure that moderators are trained to recognise situations in which language (use) can lead to in- or exclusion. Also train them in cultural sensitivity and how to deal with diverse communication styles, so that they can consciously accommodate different ways of participating.
- Try to allow room for participants to naturally engage in inclusive conversations: participants often switch languages naturally, use lingua receptiva, and check with each other whether everyone is still following along. This can contribute to an open and inclusive atmosphere.

4. Engaging with target audience and blind spots

In addition to the recommendations above, it is important that the need for support for non-native speakers is not determined in advance by professionals, but that it is explored in discussion with those involved. People naturally want to be involved and will take initiative to do so, provided they are given the space to do so (Musgrave & Bradshaw, 2014).

This requires an open way of asking questions about what participants need to participate, rather than specifically asking whether they would like to use an interpreter or buddy, for example. This prevents assumptions from being made and provides room for a personal approach.

In this research, we saw that participants naturally find ways to communicate effectively, even in the case of multilingualism. This highlights the importance of allowing room for participant input and spontaneous interaction, and learning from this.

Professionals inevitably reason from their own perspective, with its associated blind spots. This also applies to professionals who organise citizens' assemblies and other forms of citizen participation. That is precisely why it is crucial to continuously ask and test what works for participants, by talking to those involved. Additionally, it can be helpful to have sufficient diversity in the organising team so that there is more sensitivity to differences in experiences and needs of various participants.

Recommendations for participation professionals:

- Actively involve participants in determining their support needs. Ask them in an open manner what they need to participate fully. This creates a personal and effective approach that better meets the diverse needs of participants.

With these recommendations, we aim to provide professionals with tools to reflect and make informed choices when organising inclusive citizens' assemblies. Inclusion is not a checklist, but a process that requires reflection, flexibility and a willingness to see things differently. If professionals adopt this attitude, it contributes to meaningful and inclusive participation processes.

Reference List

Backus, A., Gorter, D., Knapp, K., Schjerve-Rindler, R., Swanenberg, J., ten Thije, J. D., & Vetter, E. (2013). Inclusive multilingualism: Concept, modes and implications. *European Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 1(2), 179-215.

Brenninkmeijer, A. (2021). Eindrapportage adviescommissie Burgerbetrokkenheid bij klimaatbeleid. Retrieved December 5 2023 from Adviesrapport - Betrokken bij klimaat (overheid.nl)

Caluwaerts, D., & Deschouwer, K. (2014). Building bridges across political divides: Experiments on deliberative democracy in deeply divided Belgium. *European Political Science Review*, *6*(3), 427-450.

Jacobs, K. (2021). Hoe waarborg je representativiteit en inclusiviteit bij het inrichten van een burgerforum? In: F. Hendriks, K. Jacobs en A. Michels, Nationale Burgerfora. Verkenning van nationale burgerfora als democratisch gereedschap. Essays from Frank Hendriks, Kristof Jacobs and Ank Michels (p. 24-31). The Hague: Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations.

Keysar, B., Hayakawa, S. L., & An, S. G. (2012). The foreign-language effect: Thinking in a foreign tongue reduces decision biases. *Psychological science*, *23*(6), 661-668.

Movisie (2021). *Inclusie en diversiteit: wat, waarom en hoe?* Consulted on 5 November 2024, from Essay Inclusie en diversiteit. Wat, waarom en hoe? | Movisie

Musgrave, S., & Bradshaw, J. (2014). Language and social inclusion: Unexplored aspects of intercultural communication. *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, *37*(3), 198-212.

OECD (2023). *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*. Retrieved 10 March 2023 from Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave | OECD iLibrary (oecd-ilibrary.org)

Piller, I. (2012). Intercultural communication: An overview. *The handbook of intercultural discourse and communication*, 3-18.

Ringe, N. (2022). *The language(s) of politics: Multilingual policy-making in the European Union*. University of Michigan Press.

Netherlands Institute for Social Research (2023). *SCP-reflectie op het organiseren van burgerfora: Vier aandachtspunten vanuit het burgerperspectief.* Consulted on 3 June 2025 from Kennisnotitie+Organiseren+van+burgerfora (4).pdf

Van Bochove (2025). *Citizens' assemblies zijn diverser dan je denkt, maar vermijd oneliners over representativiteit*. Consulted on 5 June 2025 from https://www.kennisknooppuntparticipatie.nl/onderzoek/leernetwerk-citizens' assemblies/longreads/default.aspx

Verhasselt, L. L. M. (2022). Multilingual Deliberative Democracy: A Theoretical Reflection on the Promise of Multilingualism for Deliberative Democracy. In *Forum* (Vol. 425).