

SUCCESSSES AND FAILURES OF CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES ACCORDING TO DECISION-MAKERS: EVIDENCE FROM POLISH CITIES

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Abstract

This article offers insights into the opinions of Polish decision-makers on citizens' assemblies implemented at the local government level. The author employs interpretive, qualitative empirical research, utilizing in-depth interviews with three groups of local political and social actors, who either commissioned or participated in the implementation of nine citizens' assembly processes in major Polish cities between 2016 and 2021. The study aims to identify the successes and failures attributed to these innovative deliberative processes by respondents directly involved in their commissioning and implementation. This analysis will determine which of the elements or characteristics of the citizens' assembly most strongly affect the decision-makers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the decision to commission and implement it. As they are at the heart of modern representative democracies, their involvement and support are fundamental to the success of any change within democratic systems. Their attitudes and evaluations are therefore also crucial for the success of innovative deliberative projects, and the result of discerning these evaluations and attitudes can be a better conceptualization of future deliberative institutional designs.

Keywords

deliberative democracy, democratic innovation, deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), citizens' assemblies (CAs), local government, Poland

INTRODUCTION

Researchers of deliberative democracy and advocates of its tools perceive significant potential in the integration of deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) into a system governed by elected representative institutions. They can function as a complement to existing forms of representation (Urbinati & Warren, 2008), as well as one possible way to improve the

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epistemic quality of representative decision-making (Setälä, 2017, p. 846). Their ability to improve communication between representative institutions and citizens is also pointed out (Fung, 2006; Fishkin, 2009), and by socializing citizens into deliberative-oriented civic virtues, they perform an educational function, encouraging citizens to become more involved in public affairs. Through this path, they reach out to an increasingly broader public and support the construction of deliberative rather than confrontational conditions for public discourse (Curato & Böker, 2016, p. 178). Deliberative-based democratic innovations are seen as effective tools for (re)integrating underrepresented citizens into the democratic process, with the ultimate goal being deeper interactions between ordinary citizens and political elites (Landwehr et al., 2022).

While it is not yet two decades since citizens' assemblies (CA) have been used in politics, data coming from many corners of the world prove that this method is not only spectacular but also effective and that the recommendations developed by citizens work well in practice (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2020). Since 2016, these experimental deliberative processes have also been present in the Polish public space (Gerwin, 2018; Rytel-Warzocha, 2018; Podgórska-Rykała, 2020, 2024, 2025; Andrzejewski, 2020; Cichosz & Ufel, 2021; Krawczyk, 2021; Ufel, 2022; Ziętek, 2022; Gąsiorowska, 2023). This is a long enough period that it has come at a good time to summarise the experience with CA so far and identify the problems encountered and the benefits of including the perspective of citizens within this formula. Following this trajectory, the article offers an insight into the opinions of Polish decision-makers on the citizens' assemblies implemented in Poland, at the local government level. I base my analysis on interpretive, qualitative empirical research – in-depth interviews with three groups of local political and social actors (collectively called decision-makers – DMs) who were directly involved in the commissioning and implementation of 9 citizens' assembly processes in major Polish cities between 2016 and 2021. The article aims to identify the successes and failures that the interviewed decision-makers attribute to these innovative deliberative processes. Because they are at the heart of contemporary representative democracies, their involvement and support are fundamental to the success of any change within democratic systems. Their attitudes and assessments are therefore also crucial for the future success of innovative deliberative institutional designs, and their discernment may result in a better and more tailored conceptualization of these designs in the forthcoming years.

The article unfolds as follows. In the next section, I will discuss the results of previous research on decision-makers' views and opinions on this type of deliberative innovation and outline the research gap. Then, given that the article is based on empirical qualitative data, I will present my methodological approach, objectives, and research questions. Later, I will present the results of my empirical research, illustrating individual findings with quotes from in-depth interviews with Polish decision-makers. First, the successes and then the failures attributed to citizens' assemblies will be talked about. On this basis, I will determine which elements/characteristics of a citizens' assembly most affect the decision-makers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the decision to commission and implement it. The conclusions summarise my findings while providing an outlook for future research, and providing useful recommendations for decision-makers.

Literature review and research gap

Research conducted around the world indicates that there is a huge gap between the academic vision of DMPs, which focuses strongly on the characteristics of the process itself and the quality of deliberation (Fishkin, 1996, 1997; Fung, 2003; Smith, 2009; Warren, 2009; Dryzek, 2010; Grönlund et al., 2014; Curato et al., 2021; Farrell et al., 2019; Roberts & Escobar, 2015; Jacquet, 2017; Jacquet et al., 2020; Escobar & Elstub, 2017; Landemore, 2015; Giraudet et al., 2022), and the views of political actors on innovative deliberative processes, whose actual motivations, concerns and evaluations differ from officially declared ones (Nabatchi & Farrar, 2011; Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019; Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020; Podgórska-Rykała, 2024).

As previous studies demonstrate, on the one hand, DMs are the initiators of innovations (Parkinson, 2006; Podgórska-Rykała, 2025) and reach for them to solve specific public policy problems. On the other hand, they may have good reason to avoid or block them (Macq & Jacquet, 2023). The reluctance of DMs translates into the limited powers of DMPs, their insufficient integration into existing democratic practices and institutions (Ercan et al., 2017, p. 203), and an unclear role in the decision-making system (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006; Parkinson, 2012; Hendriks, 2006). There are concerns that the involvement of lay people in decision-making processes has the potential to limit the autonomy of political leaders by forcing them to make certain decisions or explaining why they do not (Macq & Jacquet, 2023, p. 158); the inclusion of assemblies based on random selection may also undermine the legitimacy of representative institutions based on elections (Vandamme et al., 2018; Jacquet et al., 2020). DMs highly value abstract deliberative norms, but when accepting practical solutions, they tend to avoid and be suspicious of more inclusive public debate (Parkinson, 2004; Nabatchi & Farrar, 2011; Baber & Bartlett, 2007). Only when opening up the decision-making process to actors outside the formal system would result in, for example, publicity, prestige, or political success, are elite representatives more sympathetic to it (Hendriks, 2011). Experiments show that DMPs can fail when DMs insufficiently engage with or ignore them (Fournier et al., 2011). Often DMs undervalue citizens' input (Hendriks, 2013) and deliberately diminish their role by delegating insignificant issues to DMPs for consideration (Parkinson, 2006), as they doubt citizens' ability to debate complex policy issues (Nabatchi & Farrar, 2011) of strategic scope (Newman et al., 2004, p. 210). On the other hand, DMs are more sympathetic to DMPs when they can observe them in person (Hendriks, 2013) or are involved in these processes (Farrell, 2014; Suiter et al., 2016; Setälä, 2017). DMs unreflectively combine DMPs with other participatory tools treating them as spectacular ad hoc innovations. This approach leads to their placement, unpremeditated by deeper reflection, on the 'emerged at the fringes of the political system' (Macq & Jacquet, 2023, p. 157) between the important but rare referendum and the frequent but irrelevant public consultation. In turn, the limited and unclear decision-making powers of DMPs are linked to subsequent failures in implementing their recommendations (Setälä, 2017).

A data review on decision-makers' motivations for reaching out to DMPs shows that they often do so for instrumental reasons, rather than to give citizens a voice. The initiators

of the Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform were motivated to minimize the impact of selfish and short-sighted calculations by political parties and individual politicians (Warren, 2008). In the Netherlands and British Columbia, an additional motivation for political parties to hold citizen assemblies on electoral reforms was to show themselves to be more democratic and progressive than their competitors (Fournier et al., 2011). In Ireland, the reasons for launching deliberative experiments can be traced to the country's dire economic situation and the desire to break out of the impasse caused by it (Suiter et al., 2016). When political leaders created the Belgian Ostelbelgien model, which is unique in the world, they hoped it would help increase the legitimacy of the German-speaking Community's current political institutions (Macq & Jacquet, 2023, p. 169; Jacquet et al., 2020). Data from Poland indicate that most of the DMPs implemented there at city levels were motivated by the need to respond to demands from NGOs (Podgórska-Rykała, 2024, 2025).

According to Macq and Jacquet (2023, pp. 158–159), one potential reason for reaching DMPs is programmatic issues and the profiles of party leaders. Comparative studies conducted in Europe show that traditional ruling parties are less favorable to initiatives that increase civic participation (referendums, deliberations, or non-election participation) than anti-establishment parties, parties of the radical left, and parties with limited access to power. This favorability depends not only on party ideology but also on factors such as the age of the political party and the period of government. The indicated variables are not without influence on the institutional inertia perceived by the researchers (Núñez et al., 2016). Similar conclusions are also drawn by other researchers (Rangoni et al., 2021; Sintomer et al., 2016; Jacquet et al., 2020; Heinelt, 2012; Junius et al., 2020). As an aside, it should only be added that all political parties voted together in favor of the Belgian solution, which was related to the specific local context. However, Rangoni et al. (2021) survey of Belgian French-speaking MPs shows that the discourses and positions of MPs are far from common belief in the many advantages of deliberation, even in a region where DMPs have become part of the political landscape. As indicated above, support for DMPs is also partly related to the level of access to political power. Members who have more individual resources and longer political experience develop a stronger commitment to the existing system and the status quo (Rangoni et al., 2021). Research also suggests people who have previously held a representative seat are less critical of electoral mechanisms (Niessen et al., 2019). At the same time, the impact of the level of marginalization in the political field can be observed in the context of support for citizen participation. However, it is more significant than gender, for example. Comparative studies of city councilors in Europe that focus on the desirability of citizen participation beyond elections show that women are more supportive of participatory reforms than men (Heinelt, 2012). Still, this result does not apply to female mayors, and there are huge regional differences (Vetter et al., 2018). Another motivation of decision-makers to run DMPs is the desire to improve communication between representative institutions and citizens (Fishkin, 2009; Fung, 2006). Research conducted in the UK by Beswick and Elstub (2019) shows that political leaders are open to organizing DMPs for the instrumental purpose of gathering more diverse information, but only under special circumstances. Political leaders thus value public participation from the standpoint of gathering information and keeping in touch with 'real people'

(Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019). They are looking for feedback, and want to see how their policies are received. However, they are never sure if it is being received well, so they prefer informal channels rather than formal participatory tools. This is because they can effectively achieve their goals in both ways, with the former being less dangerous and less conflictual, and not exposing them to having to explain themselves to disgruntled voters. The skeptical attitude of senior government officials toward the new formal participatory channels was also revealed in an earlier qualitative study by Hendriks and Lees-Marshment (2019). Data from in-depth interviews conducted in 5 countries showed that officials consider the new formal participatory channels too mechanistic and antagonistic and prefer more informal interactions instead. This is because they value interactions with citizens from the point of view of enabling them to go beyond political ‘bubbles’ through it. This approach clearly indicates that they look at participation in an instrumental way, treating it as their own tool for acquiring knowledge and information, rather than a two-way process. They are the beneficiaries of participation, not citizens. One can conclude that elites legitimize DMPs when they are a convenient tool for them “that raise, discuss and order citizens’ general concerns on topical matters” (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020, p. 649). Research conducted systematically by Hendriks in Germany and the Netherlands (2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011) shows that elected representatives tend to support deliberative processes only to the extent that citizens’ recommendations support their own policy positions. The findings of Koskimaa and Rapeli (2020, p. 649), on the other hand, suggest that elites are more likely to support new forms of citizen involvement in politics when they address issues ‘on a general level and in a nonbinding fashion’.

The data shows that even a positive assessment of public participation by elites does not necessarily mean that they are willing to share power with ordinary people. Núñez et al. (2016) point out that institutional inertia seems to be winning out over change, as established political elites show little willingness to share power. However, the data cited above from earlier surveys does not include city-level politicians in the vast majority at all, and this gap needs to be filled.

The little existing evidence on the attitudes of political elites suggests that they are not enthusiastic about increasing citizen participation, despite the optimism of some deliberative scholars (Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019). Although we are witnessing an increase in the quantitative use of DMPs, in many cases elected representatives merely tolerate them and see them as a necessary evil. Negative attitudes among them can very realistically destroy their potential and lead to them becoming “powerless facades” (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020, p. 649). To ensure that this does not happen and that DMPs, which are only in the development phase, are not pushed aside from the mainstream and become a ‘*separate table*’ only to formally satisfy the expectations and hopes for greater involvement of more active people, research efforts should be made to seek effective ways to strengthen institutions in political processes coordinated by institutions of representative democracy.

The need to seek a deeper understanding of the motives, expectations, and evaluations of decision-makers who reach for democratic innovations, as well as to explain their concerns and reasons for resistance to power-sharing and the implementation of inclusive decision-making procedures (Hendriks, 2013; Hendriks & Lees-Marshment, 2019;

Macq & Jacquet, 2023; Podgórska-Rykała, 2024) should be reflected in the research carried out in this area. The pressing necessity to complement research on decision-makers' views on deliberative innovation emerges especially in countries and regions where deliberative mini-publics are not sufficiently institutionalized (Rangoni et al., 2021), and Poland is one such country (Podgórska-Rykała, 2024). To fill with empirical input the research gap thus outlined revealed in the well-established theory of deliberative democracy, the paper adopts the optics of decision-makers, on whom it depends whether deliberative innovations are implemented in the public sphere and how. Research in this direction is justified, as a more complete understanding of the views of decision-making elites helps to more effectively conceptualize current and future institutional designs within deliberative democracy, with a particular focus on finding effective ways of integrating DMPs into the contemporary system of representative institutions.

Methodological approach, aims, and research questions

The paper offers insights into the opinions of Polish decision-makers on citizens' assemblies. It is characterized by a political research approach. The empirical data used comes from qualitative interpretative research conducted in 2022, in which the tool was an in-depth interview. Nine deliberative processes (citizens' assemblies), carried out in the 7 largest Polish regional cities (Gdańsk², Lublin³, Łódź⁴, Warszawa⁵, Wrocław⁶, Kraków⁷ and Poznań⁸) between 2016 and 2021⁹, were studied. This provided an overview of the unique opinions of 3 different groups of respondents representing – from the point of view of the tool under study – 3 key groups of decision-making actors in cities. These were: (1) as representatives of elected representative bodies – the chairpersons of the city councils who were in office at the time the CA took place in the city (in two cases they were councilors delegated by the chairpersons); (2) as representatives of the executive administration in the cities – high-level officials who, on the orders of the city mayors, were responsible for commissioning the organization of the CA and cooperating with the organizations carrying out this task; (3) as representatives of civil society – representatives of NGOs

2 Gdansk, 2016, Heavy rains in the city and proposals to address climate change; Gdansk, 2017, Ways to improve air quality in the city; Gdansk, 2018, Ways to support civic participation in the city.

3 Lubin, 2028, What can be done to breathe clean air in Lublin?

4 Łódź, 2020, Greenery in the city.

5 Warsaw, 2020, How to increase the energy efficiency of Warsaw and the share of renewable energy sources in the city's energy mix?

6 Wrocław, 2020, How to improve mobility in Wrocław to enhance quality of life and climate protection?

7 Poznań, 2021, How can Poznań authorities act to address and adapt to climate change and the climate crisis?

8 Krakow, 2021, How can the City of Krakow and citizens reduce energy consumption and increase the use of renewable energy?

9 A detailed characterization of the studied cities and CA processes was included in the author's earlier work (Podgórska-Rykała, 2024, pp. 34–40), which also partly uses other excerpts from the survey results, and it seems that it would not be appropriate to repeat here the already published information in this section.

coordinating the CA process that took place in the city.¹⁰ The respondents included a total of 22¹¹ people deliberately selected and individually invited to give interviews, given that they were the ones who played a key role in the process of planning and implementing the CAs. For this article, they are collectively referred to as 'decision-makers' (DMs).

Using empirical data from individual in-depth interviews, the article aims to identify the successes and failures that decision-makers attribute to citizens' assemblies. Their identification will make it possible to determine which elements/characteristics of deliberative processes most affect satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the decision to reach for the decision-making deliberation method under study. To achieve the objectives set out in the article, three research questions were asked: (1) What do decision-makers consider to have been the greatest success in relation to the implementation of a citizens' assembly in the city? (2) What do decision-makers think was the biggest failure in relation to the implementation of a citizens' assembly in the city? By answering these two questions, it was possible to determine (3) Which elements/characteristics of the citizens' assembly most affected the satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the decision to implement it.

As the interviews were very extensive and the respondents were asked – depending on the category of interviewees – almost 40 questions, only extracts from the data were used in this article, representing the respondents' answers to two of the questions asked (corresponding to the research questions of the paper) – about the successes and failures of the assembly as perceived by the respondents. Insofar as this was justified by concern for the reliability of the research results, statements from respondents answering other questions, but relating directly to the research questions posed in this text, were also used. The data extracted in this way is analyzed and discussed in the following sections of this article, and quotes from the interviews are provided to illustrate the argument. To ensure anonymity, respondents were labeled with serial numbers and an abbreviation revealing only the category of the respondent: CC stands for city council presidents/councilors delegated by them, NGO stands for NGO representatives and O refer to officials. In most of the topics covered, the respondents' narration forms a coherent whole, and where the respondents' statements differ significantly from each other – this was clearly indicated.

Successes of CAs in Polish cities as assessed by decision-makers

This section will present data on the successes that respondents attribute to the citizens' assemblies held in their cities.

It should not go unnoticed that the vast majority of respondents to the question about the greatest success of CAs answer that they consider the very fact that a CA took place in

¹⁰ An exhaustive explanation of further methodological issues, including the procedure for collecting empirical data, is discussed in the author's earlier work (Podgórska-Rykała, 2024, pp. 29–34), which also partly draws on other extracts from the results of this study.

¹¹ In one case, the NGOs jointly implementing the CA asked for the partner organization perspective to be included in the research as well – as a result, the participation of NGO representatives was one more than for the other two categories of interviewees.

their city to be its greatest success. This assessment is somewhat related to the fact that the organization of as many as 5 of the 9 CAs studied coincided with the occurrence of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, some of the processes investigated took place online, which was not only new but also a difficult challenge for their organizers. This is evidenced by the sample statements quoted below:

- *'The success was definitely that the CA (...) took place in a sanitary regime, in a remote form, with such a great sense of teamwork.'* (2-NGO).
- *'(...) CA took place in our city despite the raging pandemic and that can be considered a success.'* (11-CC).
- *'It was certainly a success to meet a gigantic challenge, as this was the first CA in Poland organized in a remote, online form.'* (8-NGO).
- *'I would consider it the biggest success that the CA took place despite the pandemic because it certainly took a lot of organizational effort.'* (12-CC).
- *'In my opinion, the biggest success is that this CA took place at all because let's not forget the pandemic.'* (13-CC).
- *'The success is that for the first time ever we did the first citizen CA in (...). That sounds very cool. When you look at it from the side of the organizer of the process, well it is a historical event.'* (22-O).
- *'I would consider as a success the smooth running of the CA during the pandemic period, in a stationary rather than remote mode.'* (20-O).

Officials and NGO coordinators surveyed emphasized in this context the smooth running of the CA from an organizational point of view:

- *'From my perspective, the success is the very smooth running of the CA process.'* (18-O).
- *'(...) it was a very big organizational challenge, which we managed.'* (22-O).
- *'(...) we managed to organize it efficiently, and it was nevertheless quite a big logistical undertaking (...) and I dare say on a very good level from the organizational side'* (6-NGO).

Another of the successes indicated by all respondents, from the three categories of respondents, was the high quality of the recommendations:

- *'The success (...) is certainly the very good quality of the recommendations that the participants produced. Because they are concrete, they are substantive, they are bold, they are far-reaching, they respond well to the challenges that we currently have.'* (15-CC).
- *'The big success of the CA was the content and, above all, the quality of the recommendations.'* (3-NGO).
- *'The success is the good recommendations.'* (7-NGO).
- *'(...) certainly the quality of the recommendations, that is this final product of the CA. It was possible to develop very good recommendations that were not controversial among the participants themselves. And I think that this is also a very important thing and one that can be put down as a plus for CA because practically everyone agreed with these recommendations.'* (22-O).

- *'It is a success that the CA has developed some material, some recommendations, which in many cases will help to solve problems, will help the city. (...). So, a lot of such small but cool things were worked out during the CA and in my opinion that is its value. Definitely!'* (9-CC).
- *'(...) certainly the success of the CA is precise that this direction has indeed been set and, in my opinion, this is the greatest value of the CA.'* (10-CC).
- *'Very good recommendations have been developed, and that was the main point.'* (18-O).

Some of the officials and NGO representatives recognized and were equally positive about the involvement of the participants in the CA process and their satisfaction that they were able to participate in such a project:

- *'I think the success is the very high involvement of the CA participants.'* (4-NGO).
- *'I definitely think the success was the very high involvement of the participants.'* (17-O).
- *'We managed to activate very strongly the CA participants themselves, to this probably also the circle of people from their closest environment – that is, family, acquaintances, friends (...) some of the CA participants, who had previously remained passive in this social sphere, became very active after the CA, and I would consider this to be the success of the CA'* (19-O).
- *'I think also the success was the very high involvement of the participants – from the beginning of the process until the end.'* (5-NGO).
- *'For me, the success of the CA was that at the end the participants came to us, thanked us that they could participate in something so cool, declared that they loved the city, and that the last meeting, especially in its final part, was extremely emotional. To tell you the truth I didn't expect such positive emotions.'* (18-O).
- *'Satisfaction with the participation of the CA participants themselves. Indeed, one got the impression that they were very happy to take part in the process.'* (21-O).
- *'The success was that the whole process was very friendly, making it very satisfying for all participants.'* (3-NGO).

Some of the respondents from the group of officials and NGOs also regarded as a success the strengthening of the sense of empowerment among citizens – participants in CA (interestingly, as in the case of the previous observation, councilors did not draw their attention to this success):

- *'(...) for me it was very pleasant when I heard that someone after many years of hopelessness in their life – thanks to the participation in CA – felt that they had some empowerment. For me, it was a fantastic experience. The biggest success of CA is that some of the people taking part in CA were able to feel a real sense of empowerment in their city.'* (3-NGO).
- *'The benefit was also to give people a sense of greater self-efficacy.'* (16-O).

It was not only the CA participants who became heavily involved in the ongoing process, but also city officials. According to the respondents, thanks to the CA, more units of the

city authority became involved in the dialogue with the residents. The open attitude of the officials was evaluated very positively, especially because they were the ones who feared the organization of the CA the most:

- *'For me, it is also a success that I was able to involve the vice president and the individual department heads very strongly in the CA process, even though they were initially not enthusiastic about CA.'* (18-O).
- *'It was also beneficial for the city officials because it was such a nice impetus for us to take different types of actions. (...). Although the implementation of the CA recommendations is not going smoothly, it is apparent that more and more units and cells in the city hall are reckoning with the CA recommendations.'* (16-O).
- *'I would also consider as a success the cooperation with the city, which was very good, and open. They did a tremendous amount of work during the CA (...). Also, the city staff were very much involved in the CA process, you could see that they cared about it.'* (2-NGO).
- *'What also turned out to be a success – which I was a bit afraid of – was the very mature approach of the city hall to the process itself (...) I was afraid of whether the city would want to impose some solutions on us, but absolutely nothing like that happened. It was just that the cooperation with the city was very good, the city got involved in the process, which should be counted as a positive. (...). So, this cooperation with the city council and its units worked out great in my opinion.'* (7-NGO).
- *'Personally, I am glad that we managed to approach the CA process responsibly, that we did not do it for the sake of the process only now both the mayor and the units and cells are very serious about implementing the recommendations. You can see that the CA was not used to consult the residents but has a real, real translation in the area of binding decisions and what is happening now.'* (22-O).

The activation of residents and the good reception of CA by residents were also counted by respondents as successes of CA, although only two respondents considered them to be the greatest success, while for the others they were only additional benefits, supplementing the above achievements. It is also worth mentioning that the success of CA was mainly attributed to the activation of residents by officials and NGO activists, while councilors did not pay much attention to it:

- *'CA's biggest success was the activation of some of the residents.'* (19-O).
- *'The biggest success of CA was to build up quite a broad awareness of a significant part of the residents of our city around CA and what deliberation can be and that it is worth working on. Even after the CA we also worked on it (...) in educational workshops (...). And this was always met with a very positive reception.'* (5-NGO).
- *'In terms of benefits, I would point to the activation of some of the residents.'* (16-O).
- *'It has been a success to generate a lot of interest in this form of participation in the community.'* (3-NGO).
- *'The success of CA in (...) is its good reception by our residents, by different communities.'* (21-O).

The councilors surveyed particularly noted that one of the successes of the CA was the education (not only civic) of residents and the strengthening of the flow of information. The educational value was also recognized by respondents from the other survey groups:

- *'You could benefit from very useful information, given in a condensed form by experts. I think this is a very good and important thing. (...) this educational aspect in my opinion is very important. This is exactly the very positive effect of organizing the CA.'* (14-CC).
- *'The success of CA (...) has been the knowledge-building element and this is always the good side of any consultation process. (...) CA provides an excellent opportunity for information exchange.'* (11-CC).
- *'(...) the success is this educational value of the CA, a powerful dose of objective knowledge from experts on climate change.'* (4-NGO).
- *'The success of the CA is precisely the educational aspect, i.e. that both participants, as well as parties, observers, activists, and residents who observed the CA, were able to learn about the mechanisms of governance and decision-making in the city, the functioning of the city, some new trends in this regard.'* (6-NGO).
- *'Also, civic education, because I know that quite a lot of people followed this CA of ours, there were online broadcasts and indeed our CA had a very big educational value'* (16-O).

Summarizing this section, respondents primarily pointed to successes such as (1) the smooth conduct of the CA from the organizational side, particularly highlighting the challenges of the remote form which was related to the implementation of the process during the pandemic, and (2) the very good quality of the recommendations. Only in second place were the benefits seen in the form of activating residents, as well as the strong involvement of all parties, including participants and the city hall in the CA process, and the strengthening of the sense of empowerment among residents, although (particularly surprisingly) these "social" aspects were not noted at all by councilors. In addition, the importance of the educational value of the deliberative process was highlighted, noting that it is not only about civic education but also about increasing knowledge of the decision-making process, as well as the specific topic of the CA deliberations (e.g., the climate crisis). What is striking is that respondents first enjoyed organizational successes, secondly appreciated benefits such as the quality of outcomes (recommendations), and only last (and not all) referred to achievements in terms of strengthening cooperation, participation, and citizen empowerment in the city.

Failures of CA in Polish cities as assessed by decision-makers

Regarding failures, the majority of respondents unhesitatingly enumerated elements of the processes that could be improved in the future and which, in their opinion, projected not only the perception of CA but also its effects. The data shows that it was easier for respondents to point out failures than successes and that they quantitatively indicated more of them.

The failure of the city authorities to implement the recommendations adopted by the CA was the most frequently identified failure by respondents. At this point, it should be noted, that because great recommendations were considered one of the main successes, the greater failure was their systematic non-implementation. This was pointed out by respondents from all three categories of interviewees:

- *'Failure (...) in terms of implementation of recommendations. (...) I think that this implementation of CA recommendations should be better organized, here there must be a person in charge of this in the office, who would only deal with the coordination of the implementation of these tasks between the various cells of the office.'* (16-O).
- *'would consider it the biggest failure (...) that the opportunity to create CA among residents as an excellent participatory tool was wasted by not implementing the voted recommendations. And this opportunity was missed by both the mayor, city councilors, and the magistrate. Well – this CA effect is starting to fizzle out. (...) in my opinion, this is the biggest minus and loss.'* (5-NGO).
- *'As for the failures, unfortunately, it should be pointed out that very many recommendations have not been implemented.'* (4-NGO).
- *'Failure to implement recommendations that were accepted as binding.'* (12-CC).
- *'There is a lot of dissatisfaction that you don't see results when it comes to the implementation of recommendations, there is a very serious concern that these recommendations will never be implemented and this can be frustrating, especially for the Participants themselves.'* (6-NGO).
- *'(...) we were able to implement all the recommendations.'* (18-O).

However, respondents noted that the failure to implement the recommendations is actually a failure of the city authorities, not of the CA process itself:

- *'Failure can only refer to either slow implementation of the recommendations, or not implementing them at all, because this projects very strongly on the perception of CA in the public space, but it is not really CA anymore. Because, after all, the CA ends when a decision is made on the recommendations, and then the implementation stage begins, which is already the responsibility of the city council. And certainly, this stage of implementation of recommendations is the thing that is limping along, but it is absolutely not related to CA.'* (1-NGO).
- *'The lack of implementation by the city of the recommendations that have been developed, but if you think about it so deeply – is this really a failure of the CA? Well, no! This is not a failure of the CA but a failure of the mayor. After all, it is the mayor who pledged to implement CA's very specific recommendations. And the CA is in no way to blame for the fact that the mayor is ignoring the recommendations, even though he had previously committed to implementing them.'* (15-CC).

Some respondents regretted that the CA process was a one-time event and that no follow-up to the actions taken was planned. In their view, this somewhat wasted the energy that was generated in the CA, and above all prevented effective monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations:

- *'I would see as a failure of the CA the fact that the function of a coordinator or presidential plenipotentiary for the implementation of the CA's recommendations, who would be highly empowered and have more clout than an ordinary official, was not created.'* (16-O).
- *'It seems to me that there was a lack of such a moment during the CA, an idea of what to do after the CA. I think this problem applies to most cities where CA has taken place. That is, we have an idea to do CA, CA is done, while the idea is already missing – what next? (...) the city office is left alone with these recommendations, they are often inconsistent, imprecise, and it seems to me that this is the stage that needs to be corrected. Teams should be set up in earnest to deal with the implementation of recommendations, perhaps meetings should be held with participants at this stage of the implementation of recommendations to inform them of the status of the implementation of the recommendations, so that they don't feel instrumental (...) now this stage of the implementation of recommendations causes me a sense of malaise, that there is no further continuation of this cool process.'* (4-NGO).
- *'(...) the failure is that the CAs stopped being organized, (...) that they took place and the end, period, that it's history.'* (14-CC).

According to some respondents, another failure of the CA was the ill-chosen topics. First and foremost, respondents point out that it was too broad to be covered in several CA meetings. This problem is somewhat related to the one discussed earlier, that is, ineffective implementation of recommendations. Mainly, officials noted that the overly broad subject matter of the CA resulted in a lot of multi-topic recommendations, which were then difficult to implement efficiently, but this was also stressed by other interviewees:

- *'In my opinion, the failure was the subject matter (...), it was wasted energy, (...) The subject matter (...) of the CA was monstrously extensive, there calmly could be separated from three separate topics on the CA. There were simply too many things considered in one CA, and this was a mistake because in a CA a specific topic should be specified. It largely determines whether a CA is successful or not.'* (17-O).
- *'(...) it can be considered a failure that, under some pressure from NGOs, we added a second thread (...) to the main topic. And this very much broadened the theme of the CA. (...). So I think it can be considered a failure that the CA topic was too broad.'* (20-O).
- *'The biggest failure is undoubtedly CA's too broadly chosen theme! This is without question, because from such an innocent issue a whole lot of problems arose. That is, a small stream turned into a rushing, unregulated river at some point. Yes – too broadly chosen topic, imprecisely worded – this is an obvious failure.'* (19-O).
- *'(...) in retrospect you can see that the thematic scope could have been narrower, but at the time we thought we could calmly handle this scope. Today we know that this was not the case, well, but at the time we thought it was a great idea, and this is in a sense my failure.'* (1-NGO).
- *'Too many topics discussed during the CA. There was simply too much of it! And this is also one of the reasons that a large number of recommendations are not being implemented.'* (12-CC).

Another failure of CA indicated by respondents was time pressure resulting from an unrealistic work schedule. Too little time was planned in relation to what was to be done:

- *'(...) we had to rush with this CA, time was scarce, this time was lacking for the experts, the stakeholders and the participants, who could not ask for everything – precisely because of the lack of time.'* (20-O).
- *'In general, CA is such a very time-consuming tool. If you want to carry it out very well, you have to prepare very well for it and organize a whole bunch of meetings even before the CA starts. We did not have that time, we were operating under a lot of pressure precisely because of this time pressure.'* (4-NGO).
- *'(...) we had too much money to spend in one year and we couldn't spread some of the work over the next year, and so we had to chase very hard, it was not a quiet job.'* (2-NGO).

A further failure was identified by respondents as the difficulty of collaboration between the city hall, organizations, stakeholders, and internal experts, which was partly due to the lack of previous experience and established patterns of such broad cross-sectoral partnerships. In particular, the attitudes of NGOs, who were supposed to be involved in the process in various ways, were criticized:

- *'A certain failure of the CA was that it was very difficult for us to work out a common position with some of the NGOs, with the stakeholders. There was always someone who thought that something should be done completely differently. (...). the failure of CA is that with this project some of the NGOs were not able to cooperate, by the way they were heavily hectoring each other, which was not good for the CA process itself.'* (18-O).
- *'The involvement of the stakeholders – mainly NGOs – I thought it would be much higher than it actually was. And I think it would have been worthwhile to put more work, to spend more time, to be able to reach more of these NGOs and institutions that deal with the issues that were raised at the CA.'* (NGO-3).
- *'(...) I think that in general in Poland we have a problem with public dialogue (...) some people and entities think that they have some special rights to something. They don't seem to understand that the city is a whole after all, that an expert, a party, or an official has no special rights to anything and we all have to work together and not play individually. And we, as the operator, had to keep a very close eye on this cooperation, this collaboration, to make sure that someone didn't take over this CA for their own purposes. Such attempts appeared – surprisingly – not from the city, but from activists. (...). So here it is really not the CA itself that is a failure – but the state of dialogue in Poland in general.'* (7-NGO).

A lack of cooperation and involvement was also perceived by respondents on the part of the city authorities, including the mayor, whose role was often reduced to mere representational activities. However, councilors failed to recognize problems of this kind:

- *'A lack of interest on the part of the mayor in the citizens' assembly should perhaps be regarded as a certain failure. I mean up until a certain time this interest on his part was quite high. He even promoted CA nicely, but at some point, he lost his*

heart for it. Perhaps under the influence of the recommendations that were being worked out, which did not suit him very well, he withdrew from the process. He didn't even thank the participants directly for their participation and work in CA, although he had promised to do so. And it was so sad because by doing so the stature of the event fell.' (6-NGO).

- 'The mayor was at the opening and his role was limited to that.' (20-O).
- 'The mayor was somehow not particularly involved substantively in the process. And there was not even a moment when we as organizers met with the mayor (...) there was no meeting of the CA participants with the mayor at the end. And I think that was a very big loss.' (5-NGO).

The remote form that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic conditions was considered a failure of CA by some interviewees:

- 'Certainly, this process would have had more public resonance if it had been carried out in a stationary format, and that was certainly one of the downsides of our CA, that it was carried out remotely. We know that this interaction works better when we have direct contact with local people.' (22-O).
- '(...) I am now thinking about conducting the CA in a remote form, it costs us a lot of effort. Probably the public debate in a wide range of experts and participants would have taken place much more efficiently, would have been qualitatively better if it could have taken place stationary.' (13-CC).

In addition, as discussed above, individual respondents also raised technical problems, related to the not-very fortuitous arrangement of the budget allocated for the implementation of the CA, the too-late summing up of the effects of the CA, unresolved issues regarding the procedures for the implementation of the whole process of the citizens' assembly (faulty rules of procedure), the inadequate preparation of the initial phase of the organization of the CA on the part of the city hall, personal data protection regulations (RODO) in the context of obtaining an operative to draw a representative sample of residents, low willingness of residents to participate in the second draw of participants to work in the CA, failure to ensure the participation of all potential stakeholders in the CA (especially in the environmental context no willing advocacy organizations were supporting politically incorrect positions).

In summary, the list of failures that the respondents most frequently linked to the CA processes implemented in their cities includes, above all, problems related to the non-implementation of recommendations by the city authorities. However, as several respondents correctly concluded, this problem is not strictly related to CA as a tool, but rather to what decision-makers do later with the recommendations received. For it is not the CA that implements the recommendations, but the politicians, and it is up to them to decide how and when this happens. As the data show, some of the problems with the recommendations had their origin in the lack of sufficient involvement in the CA process of the city authorities, including above all the mayor, and in the overly broad setting of the subject matter of the deliberations, which also caused other problems – e.g. related to time pressure or the imperfect formulation of the recommendations themselves. Also

with regard to these problems, however, it should be emphasized that it was the city authorities who commissioned the organization of the CA and in all cases had the decision-making power in the selection of the topic for the CA, as well as the design of other elements (e.g. duration, how the process would be managed, etc.). The lack of sufficient and effectively planned follow-up after the CA was seen as another major failure of the CA. Some respondents regretted that the CA process was a one-off and that no follow-up was planned for the activities undertaken. In their view, this somewhat wasted the energy that had been generated in the CA and, above all, prevented effective monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations. Other failures included difficulties in cooperation between the office and NGOs, or the need to organise the CA remotely.

CONCLUSIONS

The research results discussed in the article have provided valuable information on the opinions of decision-makers about the CAs processes implemented in their cities. First of all, the data prove that respondents quantitatively identify more failures of various kinds than successes. There is therefore also a greater consensus on establishing a common list of successes and, consequently, a coherent catalogue of successes relating to the Polish experience is easier to construct. Although the list of failures is also partly shared by the decision-makers from the studied cities, slight discrepancies also appear.

In the category of success, the respondents perceived above all the very decision to organize CA in a city, explaining this optic by the fact that CA is a demanding (organizational and costly) innovation that only the most determined cities are willing or able to opt for. Respondents thus felt pride and satisfaction that it was their cities that had adopted CA, and what is more (referring to 5 of the 9 processes) managed to carry out CAs fairly smoothly, despite the COVID-19 pandemic raging around them. Secondly, all respondents focused on recommendations, pointing to the development of high-quality solutions as a considerable success of the processes carried out. This is in line with the essence and purpose of CAs, as they are supposed to result in concrete recommendations for public authorities. In all cases studied, the respondents equally emphasized the two successes outlined above, i.e. the efficient organization of the CAs and the high quality of recommendations. Other successes, mainly perceived by officials and NGOs, included the activation of residents and the strengthening of their sense of efficacy, as well as the openness and high involvement of all parties, including participants and the city hall. It is also worth pointing out the importance of the educational value of the deliberative process, which was highlighted by respondents from all three categories.

Summarising this brief and fairly consistent catalog of successes, it is striking that respondents first enjoyed organizational successes, secondly valued benefits such as the quality of outcomes (recommendations), and only finally referred to achievements in the form of strengthening cooperation, participation, and citizen empowerment in the city. These observations are partly in line with the research findings cited earlier as to the instrumental motives of decision-makers in reaching for deliberative innovations and the

expectations they attach to them. What is worth noting, however, is that respondents representing representative bodies did not perceive as a success greater involvement of residents, strengthening participation and cross-sector cooperation. Although it would seem that from their perspective – as representatives of the local community – this aspect should be particularly important, in reality, it was completely ignored by them. The councilors focused exclusively on the recommendations developed and possibly on the educational aspect of the process in the broadest sense, and they were decidedly stricter in their assessment of the CA process than the other respondents. Their more critical attitude can be linked primarily to the fact that they were not personally involved in the project, and were only “guests” observing the processes from the outside. On the other hand, the empowerment of residents and their greater activation were pointed out by almost all surveyed officials and some NGO activists, while the latter emphasized both technical and organizational issues, and appreciated the improvement of inter-sectoral cooperation in the city.

Turning to the failures identified by the respondents, the first point to be made is the failure to implement, or too slow, and ineffective implementation by the city authorities of the recommendations adopted by the CA. At this point, it should be noted, that given that great recommendations were considered one of the main successes, the greater failure became their unjustified non-implementation. This was highlighted by respondents from all three categories of interviewees. This problem is not typical of Polish CAs processes, as it has been recognized in many previous deliberative experiments around the world (Setälä, 2017; Smith, 2009, p. 93). Previous evidence suggests that it can have the effect of making these innovations merely spectacular and expensive discussion forums with no real impact on policy. However, this is not a weakness of CAs, but largely a failure on the part of decision-makers to live up to their commitments. Practice (not only in Poland) shows that many of the approved recommendations are either intentionally not implemented or are stuck (tucked away in a drawer ‘for the future’). This problem, referred to in the literature rather figuratively as “cherry picking” (Font et al., 2018), also arises in relation to traditional, better-established participatory processes such as public consultations. As the results of my research proved, respondents realize that the problem lies with decision-makers, but they defend themselves by arguing that in the case of innovations such as CAs, decision-makers who first face such an overwhelming amount of quality recommendations coming from laypeople may be surprised. The data proves that decision-makers generally don’t expect such significant results, and that’s partly where the problem with implementing recommendations from residents comes from later. This stays in line with my observations. For the councilors, it was the good quality recommendations that were the biggest success, and they primarily based their evaluations of the CA on this. Although the other respondents also appreciated the recommendations, it is likely that when they embarked on CA implementation, they expected these kinds of results and were not as surprised by them as elected representatives, who are at the center of decision-making processes on a daily basis. In the case of one-off, experimental CAs, it is not the CA that implements the recommendations, but the politicians, and it is up to them to decide how and when this happens. As the data shows, some of the problems with the recommendations were rooted in the overly broad subject matter of the CA’s deliberations, as well as in the lack of sufficient

involvement in the CA process by the city government, most notably the mayor. Elites were interested in the process until participants made assumptions in line with their expectations, while when the CA's recommendations went in a different direction, politicians backed off and ignored the ongoing processes. This observation is in line with the results of earlier studies. Related to the failure outlined above is another, equally frequently cited by respondents, namely the lack of thoughtful follow-up. Respondents regretted that the CA process was a one-time event and that no follow-up was planned for the activities undertaken. In their view, this somewhat wasted the energy that had been generated in CA, and above all prevented effective monitoring of the implementation of the recommendations, as it was generally unclear who was to keep an eye on the follow-up and with what tools. Some troubles with the recommendations were also attributed to the overly broad setting of the subject matter of the CA's deliberations and the time pressure caused by this, which resulted in the imperfect formulation of the recommendations themselves. Again, it should be emphasized that it was the city authorities who commissioned the organization of the CA and in all cases had the decision-making power in selecting the topic for the CA, as well as designing other elements (e.g., duration, how the process would be managed, etc.). As the data indicate, respondents identified a number of failures, some of which could have been avoided by better grounding CA in the decision-making system and more effective follow-up planning.

To sum up and try to answer the third research question, it should be recognized that the final recommendations of the CA determine to the greatest extent the positive or negative evaluation of the implemented deliberative processes. Their high quality is indicated as the greatest success, and their non-implementation as the greatest failure. Meanwhile, among other significant failures, the overly broad topic of the CA and the lack of follow-up planning were also identified, and both problems are closely related to the recommendations.

Therefore, in order for deliberative processes of this type to have a stronger presence in the political space and for decision-makers to want to use them, effective paths for implementing good and valuable recommendations should be secured first. The problem observed in Poland with the insufficient establishment of specific paths for dealing with accepted recommendations appears in many deliberative processes around the world. It is directly related to the unclear establishment of the place of CAs in the decision-making system already in place. As data from previous studies show, such mini-publications can be both isolated from the system and integrated into it (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Hendriks, 2016; Setälä, 2017). More often, however, they are isolated. The classic argument for the 'isolation' of DMPs is to create a space for them where conditions are conducive to respectful and inclusive debate. This configuration undoubtedly provides an empirical basis for the claim that deliberative democracy is a credible alternative to practicing politics under certain institutional conditions. The downside of excluding them from the system, however, is marginalized and unclear decision-making powers. Polish cases were typical examples of DMPs isolated from the decision-making system, functioning as one-off add-ons. Evidence suggests that DMPs are most successful when they are not isolated from the system and are 'designed as one of many nodes of discourse formation that shape public policy' (Curato & Böker, 2016, p. 185). This is because deliberative

processes, despite their lack of significant technical and organizational differences among themselves, can differ significantly in their impact on decision-making. These differences are due to political will as well as other contextual factors.

In Poland, the organization of deliberative mini-publics is optional, and their design features are not tied to any legal provisions. Therefore, their organization is generally carried out on the basis of general regulations on public consultations. However, individual cities are reinforced by the experience of previous processes that took place in neighboring units. Therefore, despite specific differences, it is possible to speak of a kind of 'Polish model' of CAs, according to which, (1) CAs are one-time forms of debate focused on resolving a problem defined by the city authorities; (2) based on a gentleman's agreement with the mayor of the city, if a given recommendation receives a minimum of 80% support from the participants, it is agreed that it will be implemented; (3) so far in none of the Polish cities has a model been developed in which CA would be integrated with the decision-making process in a specific way, and thus no transparent procedures have been developed for implementing recommendations and monitoring the process.

Based on the results of the research presented in this article, two proposals for actions to strengthen deliberative innovation in public space should be recommended. The first, basic (minimal), is to include in the design of the deliberative forum also follow-up procedures, that is, a transparent and binding path according to which the recommendations developed by residents will be systematically integrated into the decision-making process. In this context, we can talk, for example, about a resolution of the city council obliging the mayor to implement a list of agreed recommendations with the definition of deadlines, the establishment of a cross-sectoral committee to monitor the implementation of recommendations, or the assignment of a task related to tracking the implementation processes of recommendations to a specific person in the structure of the office (e.g., the mayor's representative for CA follow-up, etc.). An effective path in this regard has been developed, for example, in Ireland (Podgórska-Rykała, 2023a; Farrell & Suiter, 2019; Farrell, 2014; Suiter et al., 2016; Farrell et al., 2020). The second option, advanced (maximum), on the other hand, would be to integrate the CA into the local decision-making process on a cyclical or even permanent basis, while at the same time strengthening its decision-making powers, as is the case, for example, in Belgium (Macq & Jacquet, 2023; Jacquet et al., 2020). It is not without reason that the unique model of permanent civil dialogue developed and implemented in the German-speaking Community of Belgium in 2019 is cited as the greatest success story of the institutionalization of deliberative processes. Belgium has already been followed by other countries, and models of permanent citizen assemblies have been implemented in many cities around the world, such as Paris, Aachen, and Newham (Podgórska-Rykała, 2023b). This trend must be considered very promising.

Deliberative mini-publics have enough potential to be not only valuable tools complementing other participatory initiatives but even – in the long run – to be able to reform and transform the whole institutional set-up in a more deliberative direction. Whether this potential will be realized, however, will depend to a large extent on the favor of decision-makers, for whom, as the research has shown, CA recommendations and their subsequent fate are extremely important, and therefore it is on them that the efforts of

both those commissioning deliberative processes and the organizers and coordinators of individual processes should be focused. A well-designed process must not end with a vote of support for a recommendation, because then we condemn it to failure.

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