

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Pondering the Promises & Problems of Participatory Policy-Making: Lessons Learned from Experiences in Four European Countries

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To effectively address grand challenges, such as decarbonization, digitalization and demographic change, engagement is required from diverse actors across policy-making, private business, academia and civil society. Contemporary transformation literature emphasizes Participatory Policy-making (PPM) instruments as critical tools in this process. PPM purportedly enhances both the effectiveness and efficiency of public policies while simultaneously strengthening their legitimacy – a function particularly valuable for socially contested policy issues. However, critical perspectives highlight various theoretical and practical concerns associated with PPM implementation.

This article aims to contribute to deliberative theory and practice by presenting a risk-based perspective on PPM that examines intended effects in relation to unintended consequences and contextual factors. Drawing on the lessons learned during PPM projects in Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, and Switzerland, we explore the opportunities and challenges of introducing PPM instruments at the local level within transformative societal processes. Specifically, we investigate the implementation of a set of participatory instruments – such as stakeholder workshops, Delphi surveys, focus groups and citizen panels – over a three-year period from 2021 to 2023. We identify four key contextual conditions influencing the prospects for successful PPM: Local political situation, trust and social capital, institutional commitment, and deliberative capacities. Based on these findings, we develop a set of guiding questions, aimed to support practitioners to develop deliberative strategies that anticipate and mitigate unintended negative consequences, such as the deceleration of essential policy changes or the erosion of political legitimization.

Keywords: deliberation; participation; responsible innovation; citizen panels; transformation; legitimacy; case studies

1. Introduction

New forms of Participatory Policy-making (PPM) are increasingly employed across Europe to foster and strengthen deliberative democratic processes, from the international and national level down to local policy-making (Bächtiger et al. 2018; OECD 2020). PPM approaches are regarded particularly valuable when policy challenges are unprecedented, complex, and contested, as they promise to generate innovative, and widely accepted solutions. This explains why PPM is considered essential for navigating societal transformation processes, such

as green energy transitions that require broad societal consent (Loorbach 2016; Willis et al. 2022).

However, research indicates that inadequately designed or executed PPM may produce considerable unintended consequences for policy-making processes. These arise, for example, when participants perceive the participatory process as unbalanced or believe their contributions have minimal influence on policy outcomes (Brown 2018; Goodin & Dryzek 2006; Peelle et al. 1996). The aim of this article is to develop a risk-based perspective on PPM that allows to anticipate, assess and mitigate potential problems involved in the introduction of PPM. The central research question examines under which conditions the intended effects of PPM can be expected to outweigh the unintended consequences regarding effectiveness, efficiency, and legitimacy.

To address this question, we first provide a review of recent academic debates surrounding the anticipated intended and unintended consequences of PPM. We then outline our qualitative methodical approach and introduce four exploratory case studies on local PPM

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projects in Bulgaria, Greece, Spain, and Switzerland that form the empirical foundation of this article. Our analysis specifically examines the interaction between various participatory instruments and the local institutional and cultural contexts in which they were implemented. By considering the perceptions of diverse stakeholders across all four territories, we illuminate several context-sensitive factors that influence PPM introduction, including amongst others, trust, institutional commitment and deliberative capacities. On this basis, we finally develop a set of guiding questions designed to support practitioners who want to embark on the adventurous journey of PPM and discuss the limitations of our study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The three promises of PPM

Deliberative democracy is founded on the participation of citizens and broader societal stakeholders in policy-making processes. Deliberation is understood as debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants (Chambers 2003). Stakeholders in this context are those societal actors or groups affected by policy-making who have a potential interest in shaping the policies (Freeman 2023). Consequently, new forms of PPM have gained prominence in many countries across all political levels, from international to local politics (King & Wilson 2023; OECD 2020). This trend encompasses a diverse and heterogeneous array of instruments. Some tools seek to engage experts and committed institutional stakeholders, such as Delphi studies, stakeholder workshops, or expert world cafés (Curato et al. 2020). Other instruments directly consult citizens, for example through citizen panels, assemblies or juries, or mini publics. Going even further, co-creation approaches provide for the direct involvement of citizens and other stakeholders in democratic decision-making processes (Ansell & Gash 2008). While these instruments vary considerably in their legal mandate, purpose and organization, they share a common feature: all are connected to aspirations to address or mitigate perceived weaknesses in established structures and practices of representative democracy (Dahl 2008; Lafont 2017). Previous research has developed numerous arguments favoring PPM. Building on political governance literature, we differentiate between three main effect dimensions of PPM instruments: effectiveness, efficiency, and legitimacy of policy-making (Fung 2006; Scherer & Voegtlin 2020).

First, involving a broad range of stakeholders is supposed to improve *effectiveness*, understood here as the ability to solve societal problems (Andresen & Hey 2005). For example, Goodin and Dryzek (2006) argue that innovative engagement formats often influence the outcome of policy-making processes constructively. Particularly when addressing local challenges, utilizing local assets and local knowledge is considered essential. This directly relates to recent discussions on the impact of different forms of policy-making (Gastil et al. 2012; Willis et al. 2022). Secondly, participatory elements are

anticipated to improve the *efficiency* of policy-making, primarily because fewer obstructions and delays are expected when political decisions are based on a broad societal consensus (O'Faircheallaigh 2010). Especially when facing unprecedented policy challenges, collaborative approaches might yield more timely solutions by drawing on the resources and knowledge of diverse actors (Janssen & Helbig 2018). This leads to the third intended effect of PPM, the increase of *legitimacy* of policies (Dryzek & Niemeyer 2008; Jäske 2019). In this sense, Jassner (2008: 421) argues: 'Even if a policy is implemented and achieves its objectives in an efficient and effective fashion, the policy can fail in terms of legitimacy. Failure in policy legitimacy may subsequently compromise the long-term goals and interests of authoritative decision makers by eroding society's acceptance of their legitimate claims to govern.' Particularly in the context of societal transformation processes, transparent and inclusive policy-making is often seen as key for ensuring societal approval for major shifts in society's goals, practices, norms, and governance approaches (Jansen 2003). In the face of long-term structural changes, such as the drastic societal transition occurring in coal regions or rapid digitalization, new governance practices are considered necessary to ensure inclusiveness and create ownership of transition, especially in countries with traditions of centralized governance structures (Loorbach 2016; Motos et al. 2021; Topaloglou & Ioannidis 2022). In this regard, the European Commission highlights that the transition processes governance should be established in a participatory manner to address the problems identified (European Commission 2020). The legitimizing function appears particularly crucial given growing political polarization and conflict surrounding transformative policy projects in different European countries. These conflicts have been manifested in pro-transformation movements, such as the climate camps and extinction rebellion, as well as anti-transformation movements, for example the Gilets jaunes movement or European farmer protests (Monnery & Wolff 2023; Nature Food 2024; Temper et al. 2020). When addressing highly contested topics, PPM carries the promise that political decisions are not imposed by remote bureaucrats but deliberated in transparent and inclusive processes (Hammond 2019; Willis et al. 2022).

2.2 Critique of PPM

Compared to the desirable effects of PPM, less is known about its potential unintended consequences. An unintended consequence can be defined as an effect of purposive social action which is different from the desired effect at the moment of carrying out the act, and the want of which was a reason for carrying it out (Merton 1936). We argue that the main unintended consequences of PPM mirror its three main intended consequences discussed previously, creating a three-dimensional space in which we can put the consequences of PPM in relation to the status quo in a given context (see **Figure 1**):

The first point of critique relates to the alleged *ineffectiveness* of many PPM processes. According to this critique, PPM processes tend to suffer from a lack of factual knowledge required to find appropriate solutions for

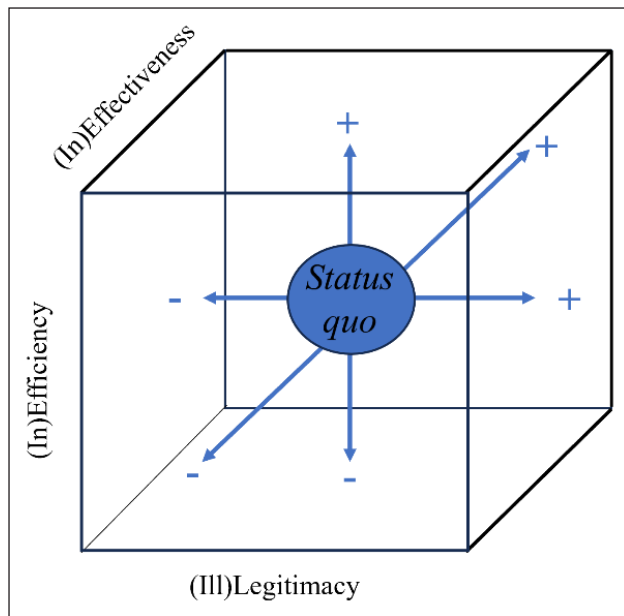


Figure 1: Key dimensions of the consequences of PPM for local policy-making (own depiction).

complex political challenges. Consequently, results tend to be unrealistic, trivial, and ultimately often ignored by politicians (Cherry et al. 2021; Willis et al. 2022). Second, involving additional stakeholders is often considered to increase the complexity of political processes, potentially slowing down decision-making and creating *inefficiencies* (McVea & Freeman 2005). Particularly when political challenges are pressing and solutions must be found quickly, deliberative processes might delay a prompt policy response. New engagement methods are sometimes criticized for placing too much emphasis on the process itself rather than on achieving real outcomes. This can result in endless meetings and consultations without any concrete progress (Kujala et al. 2022). Since stakeholder engagement formats typically do not replace established democratic processes and structures, they require an additional investment. Financial expenditures for organizers typically include fees for venues, catering, professional moderators, and the like. Beyond these costs, considerable time investments are necessary for setting up and conducting participatory processes. For stakeholders themselves, PPM means requires a considerable effort. Many PPM formats necessitate repeated in-person attendance for extended periods, often during evenings or weekends, while financial incentives offered are typically symbolic than compensatory. The question then arises whether these efforts yield sufficient benefits for both organizers and participants.

A final point of critique suggests that PPM undermines the *legitimacy* of established democratic processes. According to this argument, PPM formats are vulnerable to influences from well-organized pressure groups with particular interests. Consequently, PPM instruments can be coopted by influential stakeholder groups or obstructed by actors pursuing their own agenda and interests (Davies 2007; Niessen 2019; Rietbergen-McCracken 2011). While many PPM formats aim to ensure a robust democratic representation, for example through stratified sampling, and professional moderators are trained to make the

voices of all participants be heard, there is no guarantee that processes will not be dominated by a few opinionated stakeholders (Young 2002). This risk is particularly pronounced when participatory instruments do not resonate with the local political culture. Policy-makers may engage with stakeholders who align with their interests while ignoring others. Such selective engagement can lead to accusations of bias and clientelism (Griffin et al. 2021).

If engagement processes lack transparency, with limited access to information or decision-making processes, stakeholders may question whether their input genuinely matter or merely used for ‘window-dressing’, effectively to justify predetermined decisions (Langer & König 2023; Nguyen Long et al. 2019; Quick 2021). When stakeholders perceive that policy-makers engage with them merely to fulfill a requirement or to appear socially responsible, without genuinely considering their input, this not only risks demotivating future stakeholder engagement, but can also undermine trust in democratic institutions and processes more generally. Finally, mechanisms in place to hold policy-makers accountable for the promises or commitments made during stakeholder engagement are often absent. If communication processes lack transparency or clarity, stakeholders may become disillusioned (Edwards & Fredriksson 2017).

Despite the extensive literature on the opportunities and challenges of new PPM, limited research has addressed the conditions for successful implementation of PPM in different political and cultural contexts. Empirical research predominantly takes the form of single case studies, while comparative analyses remain scarce (Geißel & Heß, 2018). Moreover, most research provides little guidance for practitioners regarding how to anticipate, assess and mitigate risks involved in PPM. This study aims to address this gap by exploring the introduction of similar participatory elements in local policy-making across highly diverse national and local settings, each addressing different societal challenges and transformation processes, while identifying general conditions that should be created before the introduction of PPM.

3. Method

To address our research question, we draw on findings from the European research project RRI-Leaders, conducted from 2021 to 2023. The project aimed to explore strategies to strengthen anticipation, inclusiveness, reflexivity, and responsiveness within territorial innovation systems, by encouraging local stakeholders to take ownership in the design of solutions, thereby turning them into agents of transformative change in different policy areas (Samara et al. 2024). The authors were active participants in the project.

The project encompassed four distinct European territories: the region of Western Macedonia (Greece), the city of Sabadell (Spain), the municipality of Thalwil (Switzerland), and the city of Sofia (Bulgaria). As will be discussed in detail in the empirical part, these cases not only represent diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds but also significantly different political traditions. For example, governance structures in Bulgaria continue to be influenced by the country's communist heritage, characterized by a high level of political

centralization. Similarly, in Greece, important political decisions predominantly follow a top-down approach, with limited local political power and few opportunities for stakeholder engagement. In contrast, the autonomous region of Catalonia, where the city of Sabadell is situated, enjoys considerable local policy-making authority, although deliberative processes remain underdeveloped. The Swiss political system, meanwhile, features strong local autonomy complemented by a rich tradition of direct public engagement in local policy-making. This diversity creates an ideal setting for studying participatory elements across varied local contexts.

The PPM instruments were applied to context-specific societal transformation processes connected to grand challenges: In each territory, a project partner (either a local innovation agency or the municipal administration) organized the participatory processes using various methods to gather diverse stakeholder perspectives. The implementation followed a multi-stage approach: First, interviews and focus groups with various stakeholders were conducted to collect ideas for promising policy options. Subsequently, Delphi studies presented these options to expert panels from multiple disciplines (Diamond et al. 2014). The third step involved organizing stakeholder workshops and ‘world café’ events in each territories, aimed at engaging stakeholders in discussions and knowledge sharing for collaboratively developing policy proposals. Next, citizens from different backgrounds were invited to a Citizen Review Panel (CRP), deliberating on the policy recommendations (Bidstrup et al. 2024).¹ The CRPs were empowered to evaluate the proposals and suggest amendments. Finally, the recommendations were presented to and approved by local policy-makers in a series of endorsement workshops. In total, nearly three hundred participants, including representatives from academia, industry, government, and civil society, engaged in PPM activities across the four territories (see **Table 1**).

The case studies presented in the subsequent chapter draw on the insights gained during implementation of these diverse PPM instruments. They reflect our experience during PPM implementation, substantiated by stakeholder statements from various project stages regarding their perception of intended and unintended effects. Data sources include written statements by groups of citizens participating in the CRPs, semi-structured interviews with policy-makers and other stakeholders, and feedback from endorsement workshops that were all part of the project. The

research team analyzed these diverse resources following an interpretative description approach to qualitative data, which ‘seeks ways of thinking about and organizing the insights that become emergent as one works iteratively with data, such that new insights and possibilities for understanding can be illuminated, considered, and further developed’ (Thorne 2014: 10). **Table 2** provides an overview of the sources used.

4. Findings

In this section, we present the insights from different forms of participation in local policy-making in Greece, Spain, Switzerland and Bulgaria. For each case, we first introduce the policy challenge at hand and the transformative process that the application of PPM instruments was supposed to support. To provide an in-depth understanding of the specific political contexts in which these instruments were tested, we provide a brief overview of the status quo of governance arrangements relevant to the transformational process. Finally, we present key insights gained during the implementation of the different PPM instruments over the course of the project. The four cases point out the potential benefits of PPM in tackling the complexities of transformative processes. However, the case studies also show PPM constantly interferes with contextual factors, repeatedly leading to unintended consequences for the deliberative processes.

4.1 Case study 1 – Western Macedonia

The Region of Western Macedonia (RWM) is located in the northwest of Greece, with a population of approximately 260,000 inhabitants. For a long time, the local economy has been built around lignite-related activities (JDTP 2020). In accordance with the EU strategy towards energy transition, in year 2019, the Greek government committed to achieving climate neutrality by 2050 and announced its National Energy and Climate Plan (NECP), which includes a lignite phase-out by 2028. Obviously, reducing lignite mining and power generation has strong social and economic impacts for Western Macedonia. Zero-lignite production in 2028 is expected to bring decline of the regional GDP by 26% with an annual loss of revenue of €1.2 billion and a loss of 21,000 direct and indirect jobs (World Bank 2020).

Status quo in Western Macedonia

Traditionally in Greece, regional policy-making has leaned towards a largely centralized approach. While there is some degree of local governance, the central government

Table 1: Number of participants from the quadruple helix per territory.

Stakeholders involved per territory	Western Macedonia	Sabadell	Thalwil	Sofia	Total
Policy-makers	27	12	20	37	96
Business	23	14	6	13	56
Academia	33	28	7	14	82
Civil Society	3	11	8	36	58
Total	86	65	41	100	292

Table 2: Main sources and participatory policy-making instruments used for the analysis.

Territory	Name of instrument	Type of stakeholders involved	Number of instruments applied across territory	Time of implementation
Sabadell				
	In-depth interviews	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	17	Online, in-person, March–April 2021
	Focus group/mapping	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	25 April 2021, online
	Participatory workshop	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	15 Jul 2021 online
	3-round Delphi Survey	Policy experts per territorial policy area, NGOs, business, academia	1	Feb–April 2022
	World Café	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	14 Jul 2022 in-person
	Focus groups for territorial audit	1 FG per type of quadruple helix stakeholder (academia, business, public bodies, NGOs)	4	Nov 2021, online
	Citizen review panel	Citizens (random sample)	1	June 2023
	Stakeholder workshop	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	June–July 2023
	Interviews for case narratives	Local government, policy experts	4	May–August 2023
	Endorsement event	Local government, stakeholders	1	December 2023
Sofia				
	In-depth interviews	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	26	April–May 2021, online/in-person
	Focus group	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	Online, 13 May 2021
	Participatory workshop	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	15 Jul 2021, in-person
	3-round Delphi Survey	Policy experts per territorial policy area, NGOs, business, academia	1	Feb–April 2022
	World Café	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	27 June 2022 in-person
	Focus groups for territorial audit	1 FG per type of quadruple helix stakeholder (academia, business, public bodies, NGOs)	4	Nov–Dec 2021, online
	Citizen review panel	Citizens (random sample)	1	14 May 2023
	Stakeholder workshop	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	15 June 2023
	Interviews for case narratives	Local government, policy experts	4	June–Jul 2023
	Endorsement event	Local government, policy experts, NGOs	1	13 Dec 2023
Western Macedonia				
	In-depth interviews	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	28	Feb–May 2021
	Focus group/mapping	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	Online, 14 May 2021
	Participatory workshop	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	19 Jul 2021, in person
	Delphi Survey	Policy experts per territorial policy area, NGOs, business, academia	1	Feb–April 2022
	World Café	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	30 June 2022 in-person
	Focus groups for territorial RRI audit	1 FG per type of quadruple helix stakeholder (academia, business, public bodies, NGOs)	4	Online/in-person
	Citizen review panel	Citizens (random sample)	1	May–June 2023
	Stakeholder workshop	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	May–June 2023
	Interviews for case narratives	Local government, policy experts	5	May–August 2023
	Endorsement event	Local government	1	December 2023
Thalwil				
	In-depth interviews	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	19	Feb–April 2021, online/in-person
	Focus group/mapping	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	April 28, 2021, online
	Participatory workshop	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	14 Jul 2021, online
	3-round Delphi Survey	Policy experts per territorial policy area, NGOs, business, academia	1	Jan–April 2022
	World Café	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	14 Jul 2022 in-person
	Focus groups for territorial RRI audit	1 FG per type of quadruple helix stakeholder (academia, business, public bodies, NGOs)	4	10–11–12 November 2021, in-person
	Citizen review panel	Citizens (random sample)	1	June 2023
	Stakeholder workshop	Academia, business, public bodies, NGOs	1	June–July 2023
	Interviews for case narratives	Local government, policy experts	5	June–August 2023
	Endorsement event	Local government, policy experts	2	November–December 2023

has historically held significant authority in shaping and implementing regional policies (Demetropoulou et al. 2019). When a Committee for Just Development Transition was installed in 2020, this followed a rather top-down approach. The Committee comprised of representatives of national ministries, while several key stakeholders, such as the mayors of the transition regions, representatives of local communities, and NGOs were missing (Green Tank 2021, Topaloglou 2020). Further, marginalized groups, small businesses, informal sector workers, and minority communities were also not adequately represented (Topaloglou & Ioannidis 2022).

Experiences in PPM in Western Macedonia

Against this background, most participants viewed the PPM instruments tested during the RRI -Leader's project as effectively supporting the energy transition process for Western Macedonia. Involving academia, industry and civil society was broadly regarded well-suited for gaining diverse perspectives and securing the inclusiveness and legitimacy of the decision-making process. To this end, a local policy-maker stated that 'ensuring that the local community's views, needs, and aspirations are actively integrated into the participatory process is crucial for the success and acceptance of the energy transition framework'. The consulted experts agreed that instead of relying solely on central state-driven policies, involving local actors fosters a more decentralized and contextually relevant approach to the energy transition in Western Macedonia.

At the same time, non-governmental organizations involved in the project complained about limited access to information, power imbalances between different stakeholders, political resistance due to different political interests and lack of trust among the main actors. Further, the PPM elements faced difficulties involving segments of the population that are historically marginalized or less represented in decision-making processes (i.e., lower levels of education or digital literacy). The insights learned from the CRP added a grassroots perspective to the discourse. Engaging directly with residents provided an intimate understanding of the aspirations, concerns, and needs of the community. At the same time, involving citizens directly was sometimes regarded as inefficient by some politicians, because they tended to lack knowledge of the possibilities and limits of local policy-making. Therefore, as one citizen in the CRP stated: 'capacity-building programs should be offered to empower community members to actively participate in the decision-making process'. This should include training on relevant topics, providing educational materials, and facilitating discussions to enhance understanding and engagement.

Overall, the findings show how the specific political context of Western Macedonia has posed both opportunities and challenges for these newly introduced forms of PPM. On the one hand, the active participation of diverse stakeholders was generally welcomed to make decision-making more transparent, and accountable, potentially enhancing the legitimacy of transition policies. On the other hand, the success of these engagement strategies hinges on their compatibility with the local

context of Western Macedonia, where parts of society lack necessary information, but also trust among different stakeholder groups is weak.

4.2 Case study 2 – Sabadell

Sabadell is the 25th most populous city in Spain, and the 5th most populous city in the region of Catalonia, with a total population of 215,760 (2022). Due to its strategic geographic position in the industrial area of Vallès and its proximity to Barcelona, the city has a rich history as a vivid industrial hub. However, Sabadell is getting rapidly older. Today, 31% of citizens are in the age group of 65 years and older. Therefore, the municipality has identified Active Ageing as a key societal challenge (Ajuntament de Sabadell 2021).

Status quo in Sabadell

Public participation is generally a rather new phenomenon in Sabadell (Subirats 2003). During the last two legislatures the City Council of Sabadell has been working on a new set of measures to embrace multiple participative options. As part of this transformative process, the City Council recently approved the Public Engagement Regulation (*Reglament de participació ciutadana*), including a planned virtual platform for citizens to join, participate and decide about the city matters. At the time of writing, these measures had not been implemented.

Experiences in PPM in Sabadell

The introduction of PPM instruments during this project turned out to be challenging in Sabadell, mainly due to the weakly developed participatory culture related to local politics, which is rather typical for Catalonia and Spain more generally (Parés et al. 2012). Participants stated that many people assumed tax payment as their main contribution to the city, rather than their participation in designing and improving the city. In consequence, while stakeholders from academia and business found it rather easy to engage in the deliberative process, many citizens appeared to be unfamiliar with PPM formats. Nonetheless, those who participated broadly welcomed the opportunity to bring in their perspectives. This became particular visible during the CRP. Despite some citizens showing a reactive attitude towards the city's policies, most of them saw citizen involvement as an important condition to effectively manage demographic change in Sabadell. This issue was also debated during an expert workshop that highlighted that more information should be provided to empower elderly citizens to engage in local decision-making.

Overall, the participatory elements tested during the project exposed a significant demand for stakeholder engagement in Sabadell. Especially, more direct involvement of citizens was broadly regarded as key step for effectively addressing demographic change. Still, new ways of public engagement need to be explored since those proposed in the project did not fit in the local context. In this regard, some citizens noted having troubles participating in a face-to-face eight-hour event, which turned out particularly burdensome for elderly citizens.

The Delphi Study, which was composed of multiple long questionnaires, was perceived as overly complex. Different stakeholders agreed that another kind of formula needs to be implemented in Sabadell to engage more stakeholders in the participatory processes by lowering the bar for their engagement.

4.3 Case study 3 – Thalwil

Thalwil is a prosperous suburb of Zürich, Switzerland's commercial and financial center, with 18,400 inhabitants. Small enterprises in the service sector dominate Thalwil's economy. In the context of Switzerland's energy transition to net zero by 2050 and the Canton of Zürich's even more ambitious goal of net zero by 2040, Thalwil is pushed to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels and nuclear fuels imports which currently account for roughly 70% of the energy mix (Bundesamt für Energie 2022). Because in the Swiss federalist system, the municipality is responsible for many policies, including spatial planning, mobility planning, building regulations, energy planning, and waste management (the principle of subsidiarity), achieving net zero by 2040 creates significant challenges for local policy-making.

Status quo in Thalwil

Local governance in Thalwil is characterized by the principles of a semi-direct democracy, as in the rest of Switzerland. Citizens not only elect the municipal council, but also various committees in charge of specific topics, such as the spatial planning committee or the environment committee. Nonetheless, most individual projects still need popular approval. Because of this, participatory processes are well-established for contentious planning and construction projects. For these projects, Swiss law mandates that plans must be published for public consultation and that relevant parties have legal means to protect their interests. In some instances, formal participatory processes for public projects are supplemented by informal methods like online surveys, public information events or on-site project presentations to ensure popular support and reduce the chances of legal challenges (Heimann et al. 2023).

Experiences in PPM in Thalwil

In Thalwil, expert consultations were generally perceived positively. Most policy-makers appreciated the focus group discussions, because they provided a deliberative environment focused on effective solutions and free of party ideologies that tend to dominate in the municipal council meetings. However, several participants criticized the inefficiency of the deliberative meetings, which often lasted several hours, and pointed to the substantial (financial and human) resources needed to organize participatory formats. They voiced concerns of a significant delay in the policy-making process that could slow down the larger transformation. During the Delphi survey, it was difficult to keep the experts and stakeholders engaged over the course of the project. Also, the world café was met with some reservations by local experts and policy-makers. While it was generally regarded as necessary to develop best practices collected in the Delphi study

into effective measures, participation in the world café was rather low. In particular, the participating policy-makers provided mixed feedback regarding the efficiency and legitimacy of this process step, in comparison to established governance arrangements.

In contrast, the CRP was generally well received by participants and policy-makers alike. For example, one group of participants stated at the end of the CRP that she regarded the dialogue between policy-makers and citizens as very important as citizens' readiness and willingness to change individual behaviors would be decisive for the success of the transition. The engagement of non-Swiss citizens was particularly appreciated by the participants and by some policy-makers. At the same time, it turned out to be difficult to recruit young people and people with lower levels of education. Participants agreed that the success of the event ultimately depends on the question of how far the results would ultimately have an effect on policy decisions, voicing the expectation that the collected ideas will be turned into concrete actions, but also that the municipality of Thalwil should institutionalize such formats of participation events. Notably, several citizens who were not selected for participation reacted with discontent and anger towards the municipal administration. This points to a risk of PPM 'backfiring' regarding the legitimacy of established participation processes in the Swiss political system.

While most policy-makers generally agreed that CRPs can help identify pressing local issues, a few of them doubted that citizens without expert knowledge could contribute much to effective policies. At the same time, they admitted that the established formats of public information events tend to attract the same, predominantly male and older crowd of long-term residents, which, according to several policy-makers, deters the political participation of younger people, women and new residents, ultimately undermining the legitimacy of the policy-making process.

4.4 Case study 4 – Sofia

Sofia is the capital of Bulgaria and the country's largest political, financial, and cultural center, with approximately 1.3 million inhabitants. Similar to many other major cities, Sofia is confronted with significant economic and social challenges in urban development. Municipal policies in recent years have focused on new urban transitions towards sustainability, particularly building on digital innovations in administration and entrepreneurship (European Commission 2019).

Status quo in Sofia

Overall, participation processes are a relatively new phenomenon in Bulgaria, only evolving in the past two decades, parallel to society's transitioning to liberal democracy and market economy; the country's accession to the EU in 2007 accelerated the process (Zankina 2018). By law, public consultations are mandatory prior to the adoption of strategic documents, facilitated by an online platform. Nonetheless, participation tends to be limited to a minority group of 'citizen activists'. This affects representativeness and calls in question the legitimacy of the participatory process, which often fails to empower

policy beneficiaries, especially when it comes to traditionally underrepresented and marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities and migrants (Kovachev et al. 2018).

Experiences in PPM in Sofia

Evidence from the project suggests that PPM formats are in general conducive to a more transparent process of policy-making and allow for deeper understanding of societal issues and aligning the citizens' expectations with policy agendas in Sofia. As one stakeholder noted, the participatory process stimulated an 'ongoing [agile] reflection upon and reevaluation of policy goals and implementation targets'. As a civil society representative shared in a focus group, the entire process played out as a form of 'social contract' between all actors, creating a sense of 'shared responsibility, transparency and accountability'. The notion of participation as shared commitment surfaced repeatedly in the motivation letters of the applicants for the CRP, stressing the importance of 'promoting transparency in prioritizing infrastructure projects' and the 'fair allocation of budgets to both the central and peripheral areas'.

The Delphi, the CRP and stakeholder workshops were generally regarded instrumental to acquire more nuanced understanding of city challenges and adapt more effectively to them. To note, civil society and academia were actively engaged, while business representatives were mostly absent. According to a city council advisor, formats such as Delphi surveys are important for 'translating research into actionable ideas' and ensuring that 'policy design is backed up by credible [external] expert analysis and input'. But while participatory formats were perceived to reduce the distance between citizens and the local government, their potential to stimulate efficient and effective incubation and acceleration of policy solutions was found to be moderated by pre-established trust and institutional cultures for collaboration. In this sense, several citizens suspected a hidden hierarchy between the various groups of participants and between the PPM formats themselves. As a participant in the CRP stated, 'the administration [sometimes] tends to withhold information' from the public or 'communicates selectively' on certain issues. Further, in some instance, participants appeared to be uncertain in how far politicians were truly committed to principles of public participation.

5. Discussion

The four exploratory case studies provide several interesting insights into the practices of PPM in different contexts. Across Western Macedonia, Sabadell, Thalwil, and Sofia, we observed how the three key dimensions identified in the literature review – efficiency, effectiveness, and legitimacy – manifested in practice, often revealing tensions between intended and unintended consequences.

Legitimacy: Context-Dependent Success

Across all case studies, stakeholders generally welcomed participatory formats, viewing them as legitimate complements to established democratic processes. In settings undergoing transformative changes like Western Macedonia's energy transition, the legitimizing function of PPM appeared particularly strong, supporting theoretical

arguments regarding the importance of transparent and inclusive approaches during major transitions (Jansen 2003; Loorbach 2016). However, legitimacy challenges varied significantly by context. Issues of power imbalances, limited transparency, and mistrust of political intentions emerged across multiple cases, echoing critiques about PPM's vulnerability to manipulation (Langer & König 2023; Quick 2021). A recurrent theme was the difficulty of ensuring inclusivity, as marginalized communities often faced barriers to participation, potentially leading to power asymmetries in participatory democracy (Gaventa & Cornwall 2008). An interesting finding not fully anticipated in the literature was the potential for PPM to actually decrease legitimacy when creating perceived inequalities in access to participation, as evidenced by negative reactions from excluded citizens in Thalwil. This suggests that poorly implemented participatory mechanisms risk undermining the very legitimacy they aim to enhance.

Effectiveness: Knowledge Integration versus Implementation Gaps

The effectiveness of PPM showed mixed results across our cases. While stakeholders often acknowledged the value of integrating diverse knowledge sources into decision-making, supporting arguments by Goodin and Dryzek (2006), perceived effectiveness varied significantly with what we may term stakeholder 'readiness' – their familiarity with and capacity for deliberation. The cases revealed clear patterns regarding stakeholder engagement: academics and civil society representatives consistently participated, while business representatives and certain citizen groups proved harder to engage. Implementation gaps emerged as a significant risk to effectiveness across contexts. Stakeholders frequently expressed concern about whether their input would ultimately influence policy decisions, echoing theoretical critiques about PPM potentially being ignored by decision-makers (Cherry et al. 2021; Willis et al. 2022).

Efficiency: Resource Demands and Process Management

Efficiency concerns were prominent across all cases. Stakeholders consistently noted the substantial time and resource requirements of participatory processes, supporting theoretical critiques about PPM potentially delaying decision-making and creating inefficiencies (McVea & Freeman 2005). Format design significantly affected efficiency perceptions, with overly complex or lengthy processes proving particularly problematic in contexts like Sabadell, where elderly participants struggled with extended engagement formats. Maintaining stakeholder engagement throughout multi-stage processes emerged as another efficiency challenge. This suggests that the resources required for effective PPM extend beyond initial investments to include ongoing efforts to sustain participation, potentially creating additional inefficiencies not fully captured in existing literature.

Cross-Cutting Contextual Conditions

Our analysis reveals that the success of PPM across all three dimensions – legitimacy, effectiveness, and efficiency –

are fundamentally mediated by several key contextual factors that operate across the different case studies.

1. **Political situation:** The established participatory tradition in Switzerland contrasted sharply with emerging participation in Bulgaria and Greece or the weakly developed participatory culture in Spain, creating different baseline conditions for PPM implementation. These variations align with Healey's (2006) argument that participatory governance must be understood within specific institutional contexts and historical trajectories. In contexts with strong traditions of direct democracy like Switzerland, PPM must demonstrate clear additionality to existing processes, while in contexts with emerging participatory cultures, basic capacity-building becomes a priority. As Ansell and Gash (2008) note, the starting conditions for collaborative governance significantly impact its trajectory and success. Further, also issue salience plays a role. For example, in Western Macedonia, where energy transition directly threatened livelihoods, stakeholder motivation to participate was high despite other barriers. In contrast, the more diffuse challenge of active aging in Sabadell generated less immediate engagement. This aligns with observations by Fung (2006) that problem complexity and salience significantly impact participation dynamics.
2. **Trust and social capital:** Limited trust among stakeholders and toward government intentions undermined PPM effectiveness and legitimacy in multiple contexts, particularly in Western Macedonia and Sofia. This supports Putnam's (2000) argument that social capital – networks of trust and reciprocity – forms a critical foundation for effective civic engagement. In contexts where historical experiences have eroded trust between citizens and authorities, or among different stakeholder groups, PPM faces significant barriers regardless of methodological design.
3. **Institutional commitment:** The level of institutional backing influenced perceived legitimacy and effectiveness of participatory processes across our cases, confirming previous research (Font et al. 2016; Geißel and Heß 2018). In particular, promises and commitments made during stakeholder engagement should be followed through to maintain legitimacy. If an organization fails to act on the feedback and suggestions provided by stakeholders, it can damage the perceived legitimacy of the engagement process (Glynn et al. 2018).
4. **Deliberative capacities:** Stakeholder ability to engage effectively emerged as a key factor across all cases. In accordance with earlier research (e.g., Manes-Rossi et al. 2023), previous experiences with PPM were supportive during the implementation phase. This links to Dryzek's (2009) concept of 'deliberative capacity' – the extent to which political systems possess structures that enable authentic, inclusive, and consequential deliberation. Our findings reveal significant variations in deliberative capacity both between contexts and among different stakeholder

groups within the same context, even when formal access was provided, potentially causing 'internal exclusions' (Young 2002).

These contextual factors interact with each other and with the specific design choices of PPM instruments, making PPM doubtlessly a complex and also risky business. To improve the fit of new engagement forms within the specific local context, approaches that consider regional needs and realities appear essential (Rico Motos et al. 2021). To better anticipate and mitigate potential unintended consequences of PPM, we subsequently propose a set of guiding questions to be addressed prior to the introduction of participatory elements.

6. Conclusions and Implications for Practice

The aim of this article has been to provide a risk-based perspective on the potential and problems involved in implementing PPM. Our case studies demonstrate that across different local contexts, the introduction of PPM is broadly perceived as beneficial to democratic policy-making. However, our findings also reveal that realizing these benefits requires careful attention to design, implementation, and contextual factors. A one-size-fits-all approach to participation likely produces unintended consequences that undermine the very goals PPM aims to achieve.

Format adaptation is crucial – lowering participation barriers in contexts with limited participatory traditions while ensuring additionality in contexts with established democratic processes. This should involve conducting thorough context assessments to identify existing political dynamics, power structures, and social norms that might impact engagement outcomes prior to embarking on the adventurous journey of PPM. To support this, we propose a series of guiding questions for PPM, based on the insights gained over the course of the project (see **Figure 2**). This checklist provides guidance for practitioners considering the introduction of participatory elements, helping to anticipate and mitigate potential unintended effects.

The first question relates to the political backing at the outset of the project: Is there sufficient political support for introducing PPM? If yes, we advise obtaining a clear political commitment before proceeding. If political support is absent or uncertain, attention should be given to securing support, as this is a key precondition to avoid unintended consequences, particularly related to insufficient uptake of results. The second guiding question concerns the format of stakeholder involvement. If primarily experts and interest groups are to be involved, attention should focus on fair selection and transparency to prevent powerful pressure groups from dominating PPM. If citizens are to be directly involved, the focus should be on building trust and inclusivity, particularly considering marginalized groups to ensure legitimacy. In a third step, we need to verify whether all relevant stakeholders have the factual and procedural knowledge and skills to engage in a fair deliberative process. If this cannot be assumed, additional investments in capacity building may be necessary to improve stakeholder readiness. Next, the initiators should verify that sufficient resources (funding, time, expertise) are available for the

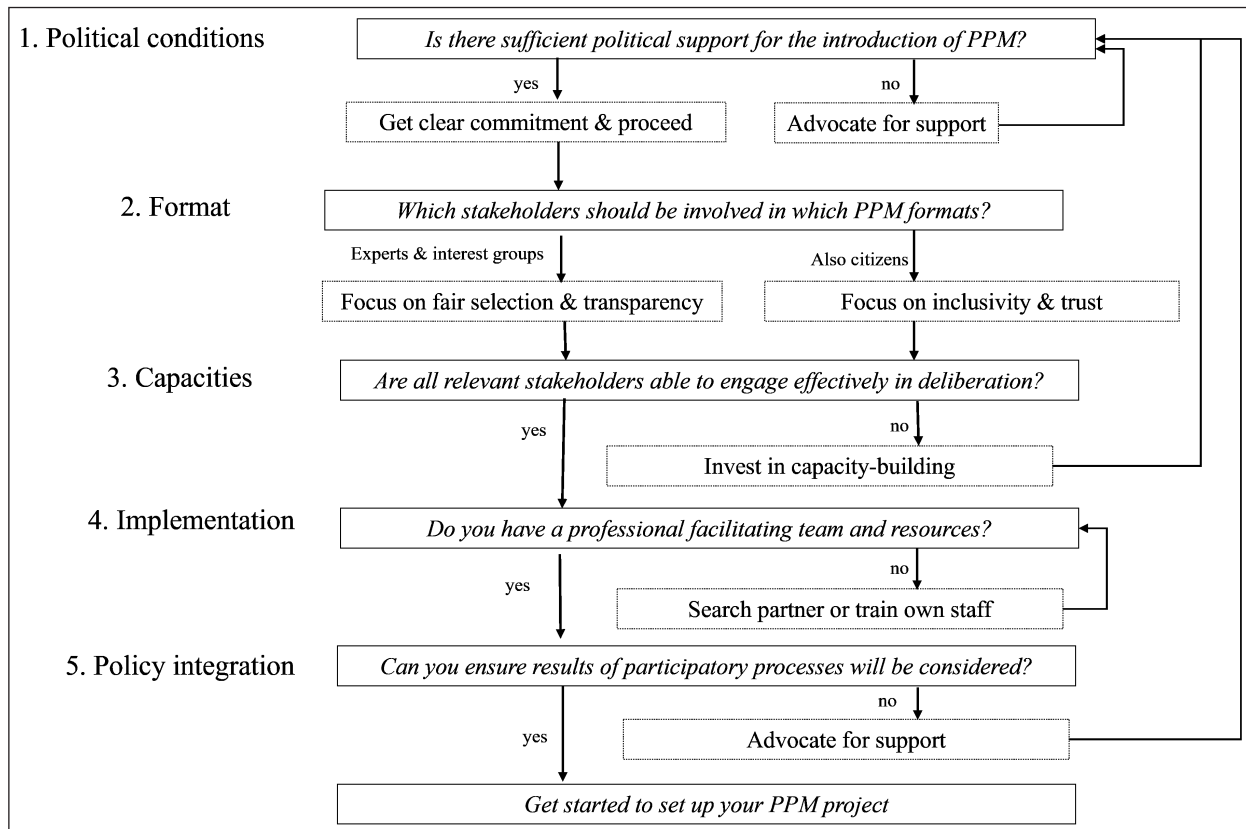


Figure 2: Guiding questions before embarking on PPM journey (own depiction).

chosen PPM format. If this cannot be guaranteed, alternative, less resource-intensive formats should be considered to maintain efficiency. Similarly, it needs to be secured before PPM is assumed that a professional team experienced with implementing PPM is ready to ensure efficiency and effectiveness. If this is lacking, potential qualified partners should be identified and/or staff trained appropriately. Finally, to mitigate risks to PPM legitimacy, ensure that results of participatory processes will be integrated into – or at least considered for – policy-making. Only if this question can be answered affirmatively should PPM projects be initiated. If not, we advise returning to stage one.

We acknowledge that introducing PPM is unquestionably demanding. In this process, local authorities must foster collaboration, establish open communication channels, and nurture trust and inclusivity as key factors facilitating a robust participatory process. Ultimately, they need to assume roles as capacity-builders, providing support for deliberation processes that address power asymmetries, which thereby ‘levels the deliberative playing field’ (Davies 2007: 779). As Peelle et al. (1996: 3) noted almost thirty years ago, ‘[public participation] success in bureaucracies involve extraordinary management efforts by agencies to bypass, compensate for, or overcome structural constraints’. Nonetheless, based on the insights gained over the course of the project, we believe that, if implemented in a context-sensitive and committed manner, PPM can hold their promises and bring added value to established democratic entities dealing with grand societal challenges, such as sustainability transformation. As Hammond (2019: 187) argues, ‘a critical deliberative public in itself contributes

to the sustainability of the society by embodying the open reflexivity and inclusive dialogue at the heart of sustainability as a cultural transformation. A society that is not deliberative in this sense cannot be sustainable.’ With sustainability transformations becoming an increasingly pressing yet contested topic, PPM offers rich instruments to advance democratic processes.

Our study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, our exploratory case studies, while providing rich contextual insights, limit the generalizability of our findings to other political contexts. Second, the study primarily relied on the perceptions of involved stakeholders as communicated to the authors during the project and is therefore prone to subjective biases and potential reactivity effects. Third, our research focused on the implementation phase of PPM without longitudinal tracking of long-term impacts on policy outcomes. Future research would benefit from systematic comparative studies across more diverse contexts and longer timeframes to better understand how the intended and unintended consequences of PPM materialize over the long run and interact with local contexts.

Note

¹ These panels were based on territory-specific recruitment plans focused on engaging diverse voices in a critical discussion, evaluation, and potential modification of the proposals drafted by the project team based on the inputs from the Delphi study and the World Cafés. The use of quota sampling process ensured a diverse sample and avoided bias in the selection process.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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