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Platforms, Participation, and Legitimacy

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Combining online and offline participatory processes for local policymaking

An analysis of three cases in the Netherlands

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5 Combining online and offline participatory processes for local policymaking

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Niek Mouter, Jelle Turkenburg, Julia Starrenburg and Anna Mikhaylovskaya

Introduction

Western democracies have recently experienced a proliferation of various forms of “democratic innovations”. Escobar and Elstub (2019: 28) define democratic innovations as “processes or institutions, that are new to a policy issue, policy role, or level of governance, and developed to reimagine and deepen the role of citizens in governance processes by increasing opportunities for participation, deliberation and influence”. The motivation behind these innovations arguably stems from evidence that in many countries people become more disconnected from politics and do not feel like governments are responsive to their needs (Bernholz et al. 2021, Dalton 2004, Norris 2011, Smith 2009, 2019a, 2019b). Democratic innovations are seen as a way of reconnecting citizens with political decision-making and making those political decisions more aligned with citizens’ needs and views.

An example of an often-implemented innovation is the deliberative mini-public (hereafter: DMP) (Paulis et al. 2021). In a DMP, a small group of citizens provides policy recommendations about a particular political issue after partaking in intensive and moderated deliberations (Bächtiger et al. 2018, Escobar and Elstub 2017, Niemeyer 2011, Setälä 2014). The advantage of DMPs is that they potentially offer epistemically better and socially more acceptable solutions, increase citizen involvement, and create more trust in and/or satisfaction with the democratic system (Åström et al. 2017, Escobar and Elstub 2017, MacKenzie and Warren 2012, Min 2016, Niemeyer 2011).

Despite these potential benefits, one of the most apparent drawbacks of DMPs is that they often lack a meaningful link with the broader society. In most cases, DMPs involve a limited number of citizens who are selected through lottery from a certain sample of potential participants (Escobar and Elstub 2017). Since not all citizens have been given the opportunity to partake in the process, DMPs run the risk of providing suboptimal recommendations as not all the knowledge/experience/skills of the affected citizens has been taken into consideration. Moreover, since not all citizens affected by the decision/policy have been given the opportunity to provide input, it is possible to argue that the public (and the politicians/decision-makers) cannot be reasonably expected to accept the legitimacy of the recommendations

of a DMP (King and Wilson 2022). Indeed, some researchers criticize DMPs for bypassing the broader will of society in public decision-making (Lafont 2015, 2020, Parkinson 2006). Parkinson (2006: 33), for instance, argues “What is missing from such selection processes is the legitimating bonds of authorization and accountability between participants and non-participants”. Moreover, recommendations of DMPs are usually advisory, and thus politicians can cherry-pick proposals that fit their original plans (Font et al. 2018, Smith, 2009). In this regard, some scholars argue that the issues discussed above are the cause for lacking outcome implementation of DMPs (Setälä 2017).

Therefore, there is a clear need for a meaningful link between DMPs and the broader society to increase the legitimacy of the participatory process and to better align the recommendations of DMPs with the needs of the broader citizenry. One of the possible solutions is the use of so-called online maxi-publics. In online maxi-publics, larger groups of citizens (beyond the groups that participate in DMPs) are invited to provide their input and express their opinions on a particular policymaking issue through an online platform. This allows the broader population to be involved in the participatory process. Recommendations generated by a maxi-public are passed on to the participants of a DMP, who then take them into account when forming final recommendations on the policy issue. In this way, both the input and output legitimacy of DMPs increase as recommendations of the DMP are not only based on deliberation from a small group of random citizens but also based on recommendations from the wider public (Farrell et al. 2023, Goldberg 2021, Itten and Mouter 2022, Pow 2019). Online maxi-publics can have a larger impact on decision-making than deliberative democratic designs because the recommendations are backed up by a larger part of the population (Hendriks and Michels 2024). A successful example of such a democratic innovation is the Participatory Budgeting, new style, in Antwerp in which citizens allocate a part of the budget of the municipality to policy options that they themselves developed. This process is inspired by an open-door policy (everyone can participate) and mixes offline and online deliberation and voting. Contrary to the notion of sortition, politicians in Antwerp have repeatedly stressed that everyone who wants to participate should be allowed and facilitated to participate (Hendriks and Michels 2024).

Notwithstanding some good examples of participatory processes in which DMPs are augmented with online maxi-publics, the increased legitimacy of these processes is only possible if recommendations made by the maxi-public are actually considered by the DMP. Hence, it is important to evaluate why the link between maxi-publics and DMPs is stronger in some cases and weaker in other cases.

In this chapter, we investigate how design choices of three Dutch participatory processes in which a maxi-public is combined with a mini-public affect uptake. We selected three cases (the municipal case of *Súdwest-Fryslân* and the provincial cases of Gelderland and Utrecht Province) that were comparable as they all focused on climate and energy policies. In all cases, a citizens’ assembly (mini-public) was preceded by a Participatory Value Evaluation (PVE) (online maxi-public – we will be using these two terms interchangeably throughout this chapter). PVE is a preference elicitation method that facilitates citizens to advise on government decisions

in an easy-to-access manner (Mouter et al. 2022). The essence of a PVE is that citizens are put in the shoes of a policymaker. They see the policy options that are considered as well as the consequences of the policy options and existing constraints. Next, they are asked to provide a recommendation to the policymaker and provide reasons for their advice.

We analyze the design choices in the three cases and explore how these choices influenced the impact of online maxi-publics (PVEs) on the DMPs' recommendations, as well as the uptake from the DMPs into the decision-making process. In the next section, we establish the particular design choices that we will be focusing on in this chapter.

Theoretical framework: design choices affecting the linkage between the digital maxi-public and offline mini-public

To start with, the first design choice that we deem important is the size of online maxi-publics and respective DMPs. Previous research has demonstrated that for further uptake of recommendations, it is important that a larger population takes part in online maxi-publics on a relatively large scale (Farrell et al. 2023, Itten and Mouter 2022, Pow 2019). The number of participating citizens has a direct effect on how recommendations are formed and on how this output is viewed from the perspective of legitimacy by the rest of the population and by decision-makers involved. Thus, if the maxi-public actually fails to attract a sufficient number of online participants and only a very limited number of citizens actually participate, then input legitimacy does not increase.

At the same time, the number of people participating in a DMP following an online maxi-public might also matter. This is because a large number of participating citizens could increase the legitimacy of the DMP recommendations, thereby improving the uptake in policymaking. On the other hand, a larger number of participants might have a harder time reaching consensus, even though they can also divide the work. In conclusion, in terms of design choices, it is important to look at how many people participated in both the online maxi-public and mini-public.

Related to this, another design choice we consider important is the time allocated for the DMP participants to digest the insights and recommendations of the online maxi-public. We expect that it can influence how DMPs manage to analyze and process the recommendations of the larger population, and how deliberated the recommendations of the DMPs are.

The next crucial design feature for incorporating the recommendations of maxi-publics into those of mini-publics is transparency and clarity in sharing maxi-publics' recommendations with DMPs. It is necessary to assess how clear and understandable the produced report was that summarizes PVE's input, how long it was, and whether it was easy for participants of DMPs to read it and reflect on it within the allocated time. When the recommendations of a maxi-public are difficult to digest for a mini-public, it might be simply unfeasible for DMP participants to properly take the perspectives of the maxi-public into account (which is especially true if the time allocated for deliberation is also limited).

Furthermore, to understand the uptake of the recommendations of the mini-public into policymaking, it is important to analyze how design choices affected the perceptions of civil servants and politicians about the studied participatory processes and their recommendations. Do policymakers find the pieces of advice of DMPs more legitimate when they are backed up with results from an online maxi-public? This is important because the perceived legitimacy of the process might influence the uptake of the recommendations into policymaking by civil servants and elected officials.

Finally, it is essential to investigate the type of recommendations produced by the PVE and DMP, as these are influenced by the design choices made by the organizers. The specificity of the advice can vary depending on how explicitly the organizers communicate what kind of input is required. When the maxi-public produces abstract recommendations, it might be difficult for the DMP to translate these into clear, specific recommendations. Conversely, when the DMP itself produces abstract recommendations, they might on the one hand be easier to accept for policymakers, but on the other hand, they might be difficult to translate into concrete policies. By clearly specifying the points on which policy advice is needed, organizers of the PVE and the DMP can choose to (not) guide both participants to provide suggestions that are more concrete, concise, and actionable, and therefore more likely to affect policies.

Thus, to summarize, when we look at design choices and evaluate the linkage between the online maxi-public and the mini-public, as well as the uptake of both processes, we need to look at the following: how many people take part in both the maxi-public and mini-public? What kind of recommendations do they produce? How easy to digest are the results and recommendations of the maxi-public and how much time has the mini-public to study the results of the maxi-public? How do civil servants and politicians involved perceive the combination of PVEs and DMPs? All of these design choices might matter greatly for DMPs' ability to take PVEs' input into account and for the general uptake of the final recommendations by the governmental bodies and policymakers.

Methods

To better understand how design choices of participatory processes influence the impact of online maxi-publics (PVEs) on the DMPs' recommendations, as well as the uptake from the DMPs into the decision-making process, we conducted interviews, studied evaluation reports, and made our own observations during the meetings of the three mini-public cases studied. Regarding the interviews, one was held by two authors of this chapter with two civil servants who were key in organizing a provincial DMP case in Gelderland (referred to as GELD in the results). Furthermore, we also analyzed six interviews with key stakeholders in the municipal DMP case in *Súdwest-Fryslân* (referred to as SWF in the results). These interviews were with civil servants, organizers of the mini-public, an alderman, and a member of the mini-public and held by one of the authors. These interviews were also used by Itten and Mouter (2022). Finally, an interview was held by one author with a

civil servant and an organizer of the mini-public involved in the provincial case of Utrecht (referred to as UTEVAL in the results). We interviewed civil servants and a politician involved in the organization of mini-publics as they have a good view of how the participatory approaches affected policymaking. We interviewed organizers of the mini-publics as they have a good view of how the results of the maxi-publics translated into the pieces of advice of mini-publics and can also explain why certain design choices were made.

The interviews were semi-structured. We asked interviewees about the design choices that were made, the impact of the maxi-public on the produced recommendations by the mini-public, the impact of the overall participatory process on decision-making, and the perceived added value of combining the mini-public and maxi-public. We summarized the interviews and inductively analyzed the interviews, and an evaluation conducted by the province of Utrecht (2024) to identify how the design choices affected the relationship between the digital maxi-public, the DMP, and the impact on decision-making. Next, we provide a brief overview of the three Dutch DMP cases studied.

Case descriptions

The energy transition of the municipality Súdwest-Fryslân

The goal of this participatory process concerned the formulation of a future energy strategy for the municipality. The citizens involved in the participatory process were given a “carte blanche” by the municipal council to come up with such a formulation. In the process, two DMPs were combined with a maxi-public. First, a DMP of 45 citizens developed the content of the PVE. The DMP developed six scenarios for the energy strategy of the municipality and participants in the PVE would be asked to allocate points toward these scenarios. Next, 1,356 citizens (2% of the population) participated in the PVE. The outcomes were interpreted by a DMP of 12 citizens who translated the outcomes of the maxi-public into recommendations. The 12 citizens were selected from the 1,356 citizens who participated in the PVE. They met three times during which they discussed the results of the PVE, consulted experts, and drafted their recommendations. This second DMP defined five principles that are, in their view, imperative for the energy transition of the municipality. Finally, after the results were made public, it was noticeable how high the uptake from this participatory process was. That is, the principles defined by the mini-public were used as an assessment framework for the climate policies of the municipality. Civil servants continued to seek contact with the DMP regarding the interpretation of the principles considering the decision-making on new plans. For instance, in the new policy regarding small wind farms, the DMP was consulted to reflect on the extent to which the principles were respected. The responsible alderman stated that before the participatory process, there was a lot of issue polarization, but after the participatory process and the unanimous adoption of the recommendations by the council, this stopped (Itten and Mouter 2022).

The climate policy of the province Gelderland

The DMP of the province of Gelderland was asked to improve the Climate plan of the province. This participatory process started with a PVE in which 3,363 citizens (0.15% of the total population in the province Gelderland) provided advice on the composition of the Climate plan. 2,500 of those 3,363 citizens originated from a representative sample that was invited by mail or drawn from an online panel. The other 750 participated in an open consultation. In the PVE, participants saw 12 measures and were asked how much the province should invest in each measure. They also saw the costs of their advice as well as the impact on CO₂ emissions. Moreover, citizens were asked to explain their choices. The DMP subsequently convened for four days to provide advice to the province of Gelderland on how to adjust the Climate plan. This DMP consisted of 150 persons who were selected from the 3,363 PVE participants. The 150 citizens were selected in such a way that they provided a good representation of the population based on gender, age, and education level. The DMP followed a typical design where the participants first get used to the process and their fellow participants, then get familiar with the topic and ultimately deliberate about and vote on the developed advice. Results of the PVE were presented during the first and the second day, and on the third day, the DMP received feedback on their initial proposals based on the outcomes of the PVE. These PVE results were presented to the DMP participants in such a way that for each measure an overview was provided by the arguments used by citizens who advocate and criticize the measures. Moreover, a list of dilemmas following the results of the PVE was presented to the DMP as inspiration for the dialogue.

The DMP ultimately formulated 44 recommendations for the province of Gelderland. Each recommendation consisted of various elaborations and sub-recommendations. The province of Gelderland responded in an elaborate explanatory note of 43 pages in which they explained how the province processed the recommendations of the DMP (Province of Gelderland, 2024). The province adopted 22 recommendations, with more than half of the elaboration points. With adoption, the province means that they are following up on the recommendations or are already doing it. Nineteen recommendations were partially adopted, meaning that a quarter to half of the points of elaboration given by the DMP are or will be implemented. Three recommendations were not adopted, with less than a quarter of the elaboration points being adopted.

When looking closer at the explanatory note, it is not clear in which way the recommendations of the DMP actually *changed* the policies of the province. More specifically, it is not clear whether the public budget is reallocated, a new policy is started or an existing policy is stopped. This is partly because many of the recommendations of the DMP merely confirmed existing policies of the province. Examples are recommendation 3.1: “We advise the province to set up better participation processes, to make participation interesting and attractive to residents and to ensure that residents get something out of it”, and recommendation 4.1: “We recommend the province to create awareness and influence citizens’ behavior by engaging in on people’s intrinsic motivation to want to do the right

thing (motivation), keeping people well informed by clearly communicating what climate-friendly choices are (information) and allowing them to put these choices into practice (capacity)". In all these cases, the province responded to the recommendation by summing up the policies they are already conducting. On the other hand, the province did not adopt recommendations by the DMP that were more ambitious than existing policies an example being recommendation 4.3: "We recommend that the province lobbies for national laws and regulations to make consumers consume less and more consciously". The province responded that they would not adopt the recommendation. The same held for (sub)recommendation 7.3 to make public transport more affordable and (sub)recommendation to treat nature as a legal entity.

Choosing wind energy locations in the province of Utrecht

The province of Utrecht carried out a PVE and a DMP to determine the most promising areas for wind turbines. Nearly 6,965 residents of the Utrecht province first participated in the PVE. 2,271 participants were selected so that the results were representative of the province's population in terms of gender, age, and education. 4,694 participants participated in an open consultation. In the PVE, participants weighed up several potential consequences of wind turbines and were asked to choose four times between two possible locations. They were informed about the consequences for each location. Based on these choices, it was possible to measure how participants weighed impacts relative to each other. In the second part of the PVE, participants could divide 100 points between ten design requirements that the province could consider when making choices about locations of wind turbines. If they felt the province should take a design requirement into account a lot, they gave a lot of points. If they thought the province should take little account of another design consideration, they gave few or no points. Subsequently, a DMP of 70 participants evaluated the (un)desirability of locations for onshore wind energy based on the results of the PVE. These 70 citizens were selected from the PVE participants in such a way that they provided a good representation of the population based on gender, age, and education level. The DMP consisted of four sessions where citizens first got to know each other and familiarized themselves with the topic, after which the second and third meetings focused on more content processing and prioritization of recommendations. In the final session, a preliminary draft of proposals was discussed and ultimately voted upon. Results of the PVE were presented during the plenary session to the mini-public participants. Furthermore, during the first, second, and third sessions, dedicated summaries about specific sub-topics were developed and presented.

The outcome of this DMP process was that participants identified eight criteria that the province can use when choosing between wind sites. These criteria were also ranked from most important to least important. The order was very similar to the outcomes of the PVE consultation. Policymakers used these eight criteria to rank 99 potential locations for wind turbines and to choose the 27 most favorable locations among the 99 locations (Table 5.1).

Table 5.1 Overview of characteristics of the case studies

	<i>Súdwest-Fryslân</i>	<i>Gelderland</i>	<i>Province of Utrecht</i>
Number of participants maxi-public	1,356 (2%)	3,363 (0.15%)	6,965 (0.53%)
Type of insights and recommendations produced by maxi-public	Prioritization of six scenarios for the energy strategy of the municipality including an analysis of values underlying this prioritization.	Prioritization of 12 policy measures including an analysis of arguments underlying this prioritization. List of dilemmas following from the results of the PVE.	Insights on how citizens prioritize several impacts and design choices in the selection of locations for wind farms.
Role of the mini-public	Mini-public 1: developing the PVE Mini-public 2: translating results of the PVE into recommendations.	Translating results of the PVE into recommendations.	Translating results of the PVE into recommendations.
Goal of the mini-public	Provide recommendations for sustainable energy policies.	Provide recommendations of adjusting the Climate plan.	Provide criteria that can be used for selecting sites for onshore wind farms.
Number of participants mini-public	Mini-public 1: 45 Mini-public 2: 12	150	70
Number of meetings mini-public	3 meetings of around 3 hours	4 days	4 meetings of around 5 hours
Type of recommendations mini-public	5 concrete principles that were considered crucial for the municipality's energy transition.	44 recommendations for the revision of the Climate plan.	List of 8 criteria which should be used for the prioritization of wind energy locations.

Results

In this section, we discuss several design choices and aim to understand how these choices affected the uptake of proposals of the maxi-public into the recommendations of the mini-public, as well as how the latter translated into policies.

The large number of participants in the maxi-public increased input legitimacy

A first design consideration that appeared important across the three cases is that combining an online maxi-public with a DMP ultimately results in more input

legitimacy. Various interviewees argued that through the online maxi-public, more citizens were granted the opportunity to provide input for the policymaking process (SWF1, 2, 3, 4, 5, GELD1). For example, a civil servant in the Súdwest-Fryslân case said:

you include a broader range of voices in the process, which enables you to deal with the criticism that participatory processes always have limited reach. It also adds substantive quality because you get a broader range of values that are important via the DMP.

(SW5)

Furthermore, the results derived from the PVE helped to set the problem statement and question for the DMP participants. Besides, because the DMP participants were often selected from those who filled out the PVE, they already had some basic knowledge about the topic. This, ultimately, led to a better start of the DMP (GELD1). Similarly, in the evaluation report about the participatory process for the province of Utrecht, the large number of participating citizens in the maxi-public was conceived to be a strong point of the whole process (Province of Utrecht 2024). A civil servant from the province of Gelderland also argued that the maxi-public not only allowed more citizens to be involved in the participatory process but also another group of citizens who usually do not participate in DMPs (GELD2). The advantage of having a more diverse group was also shared by a moderator of the DMP in Súdwest-Fryslân, where “PVE allows one to get the opinion of as many people as possible. Filling out such a PVE also has a lower threshold than participating in a DMP. It thus enables more people to be involved” (SW6). More generally, the same interviewee said: “through a PVE before the DMP, we get a broader public where we can get the information from”. Taken together, it can be argued that preceding a DMP with an online maxi-public alleviates the critique on DMPs that the will of the broader society in public decision-making is bypassed (Lafont 2020).

DMP produces nuanced recommendations and a “human factor”

Interviewees also appreciated the added value that a DMP brings by translating the insights of a PVE into policy recommendations. The nuanced and qualitative output that flows from the deliberations among DMP participants furthermore complemented the more numeric PVE output: “as the participants then look for a middle ground when formulating the advice. You can also find that in statistics, however, you then miss the deliberations amongst the participants and the experts” (GELD1). It also injects the overall participatory process with its “soul, passion and inspiration” which are important to how elected officials will evaluate its outcomes (SWF4). Without the DMP, the outcomes of the PVE alone could have had less impact on elected officials since it would amount to a report from a researcher who is often not from the community affected by the policy process (SWF 2, 4). Instead, when the PVE outcomes are combined with DMP participants interpreting its results, it has the potential to act as “the voice of the people” which in turn

resonates with the elected officials in terms of them assigning more credibility to the outcome (SWF2) and feeling the need to do something with it (SWF4). As an illustration of this, an interviewee of the municipal DMP case in Súdwest-Fryslân, said: “a municipality is there for its inhabitants. Why would you only let professionals present what people think? It is much more powerful when it is someone from the community itself” (SWF3).

The interviewees who are involved in the DMP case in Gelderland also acknowledged that the benefit of an offline DMP on top of an online PVE is that policymakers’ support for the overall participatory process improved since they saw in real life how citizens deliberated about the policies and formulated recommendations (GELD1). Another observation was that “PVE has the potential for interpretation by elected officials. They could start to cherry-pick the results. We wanted to let DMP participants do the interpretation instead. Otherwise, you get an interpretation that reflects the political party’s standpoints” (SWF6). Hence, the risks of the participatory process being subject to political cherry-picking whenever their results are known (Smith 2009) seem to be lower when PVE and DMP are combined, in contrast to a situation in which only a PVE is facilitated.

Alignment of maxi-public recommendations with DMPs’ tasks

When studying the three cases, another observation that can be made is that they differed in the type of insights that were produced by the maxi-public. In Súdwest-Fryslân, the maxi-public provided a prioritization of six scenarios for the energy strategy of the municipality, including an analysis of values underlying this prioritization. This input was also deemed “scientific sound and representative” (SW1) and its exclusion would make it difficult for DMP participants to “uncover the general interest of citizens, which would otherwise be done based on assumptions” (SW2). The results of the PVE in Súdwest-Fryslân also allowed the DMP participants to give better policy proposals on behalf of society (SWF6) and “everything was supported by research” (SW2). The value-driven output of the PVE thus provided some guidance for the DMP participants (SWF4).

In Gelderland, the maxi-public provided a prioritization of 12 policy measures, including an analysis of arguments underlying this prioritization. Moreover, a list of dilemmas following the results of the PVE was presented to the DMP participants as inspiration for the dialogue. In this regard, interviewees also mentioned that the PVE resulted in “better informed DMP participants about how citizens would generally make difficult trade-offs” (GELD1).

The maxi-public in Utrecht provided insights into how citizens prioritize several impacts and design choices in the selection of locations for wind farms. An interviewee confirmed that the outcomes of the PVE were very useful for the DMP participants in drafting their recommendations (UTEVAL). We furthermore observe in this case that the insights delivered by the maxi-public were closely aligned with the assignment of the mini-public which is “to provide criteria that can be used for selecting sites for onshore wind farms”, whereas in Gelderland the output of the maxi-public was not well-aligned with the assignment of the mini-public: “provide

recommendations of adjusting the Climate plan”. This can explain why there was a gap between the 44 recommendations of the Gelderland DMP, on the one hand, and the information produced by the maxi-public, on the other hand.

Time for DMPs to process the insights of the maxi-public

A key challenge for combining an online maxi-public with a DMP is ensuring that the DMP participants have enough opportunities to digest the results of the maxi-public. DMP participants are generally required to already engage in a lot of activities during the DMP and they could thus lack time to adequately process a lot of information during this process (SWF4, 6, UTEVAL, GELD (A)). This was also reflected in a quote by an interviewee in the case Súdwest-Fryslân: “You must be careful with statistical numbers. This is for the average citizen difficult, so you must watch out for not giving too much information to them otherwise this will take up too much time in the DMP” (SW4). Similarly, an interviewee concerning the Gelderland case said:

it was a bit too much to even look at what was in the PVE report. Or we should have made the DMP connection with the PVE outcomes stronger ourselves. It was now optional and less leading. The most we did in these four days was really cram and scrap.

(GELD1)

This appeared less of an issue in the case of Súdwest-Fryslân where most of the 12 members of the DMP had studied the full PVE report. In the case of Gelderland, where the 150 members also needed time to study the existing Climate plan, to get to know each other and to deliberate in groups that needed to communicate outcomes with each other, only some members of the DMP read the full report on the results of the PVE. This implied that some DMP members did use the dilemmas inferred from the PVE in their deliberations, whereas others did not seem to use those PVE results at all (GELD1). In this regard, an involved civil servant in the case of Gelderland suggested that in a future DMP the PVE “should be strongly connected with the DMP. It was now optional and less leading” (GELD1).

Actionability of the recommendations of the DMP

Another observation that we find relevant is that the uptake of the results of online maxi-publics and DMPs also seemed to depend upon how clear and actionable the final recommendations were formulated. For example, in the case of Súdwest-Fryslân, DMPs ended up formulating five concrete principles that were considered crucial for the municipality’s energy transition. The process in Utrecht produced a list of eight criteria that should be used for the prioritization of wind energy locations ranked in order of importance and the mini-public in Gelderland produced 44 recommendations that ranged from abstract to very specific and from confirming ongoing policies to implying a clear policy change.

In the case of Súdwest-Fryslân the interviewees experienced that the five principles were directly actionable as “everybody started to refer to the advice. City council members and civil servants started to refer to the advice. Also action groups and citizens” (SWF1). In Utrecht, the eight criteria were used a month after the recommendation of the mini-public to select 27 sites for wind energy. In Gelderland, it took the province one and a half years to respond to how the recommendations influenced policies. The implementation of this DMP process proved in the end to be a challenge because (a) some of the suggested policies went beyond the current climate strategy proposed and (b) elections had taken place a few months after the recommendations were made by the mini-public, among which some remained rather abstract and thus were difficult to follow-up by newly elected politicians (GELD1).

Perceived legitimacy of the recommendations of the participatory approach

The output of the combination of a PVE with a DMP also carried more weight in not only the eyes of elected officials (SWF2) but also those citizens who did not take part as “people perceive that the outcomes of this process are not just some opinions but really the result of a well-developed process” (SWF4). The sequencing of diverse citizen engagement methods in the case of Súdwest-Fryslân by design enabled “the incorporation of checks because, at all stages, other groups of citizens are involved” (SWF2). The fact that citizens had complete ownership of the process and the outcomes in the case of Súdwest-Fryslân also improved the legitimacy of the process (SWF1). Another interviewee of that same case also thought that a PVE or a DMP alone would be more vulnerable to critique that the process was influenced by civil servants and the fact that citizens were in charge in all parts of the process reduced this vulnerability (SWF3). A combination of two quotes from this interviewee specifically underlines this argument. Regarding facilitating a stand-alone PVE, the interviewee said:

a PVE is much more comprehensive than a regular survey. But it remains a survey. If you commission a survey, then in 95% of all cases the goal is that the funding body also wants support for his recommendations. Citizens don’t buy that.

While only organizing a DMP, the same interviewee said:

If you only do the citizen forum, you can always be accused of not making the selection of citizens completely independently. The information that the citizen forum receives may also be biased, or at least you can be criticized for that.

(SWF3)

Instead, the PVE now provided large groups of citizens with the opportunity to provide input which was then interpreted and translated into concrete recommendations by the DMP participants (SWF 3, 4).

Uptake of the participatory process

In all the cases studied, policymakers implemented (a large part of) the recommendations, indicating that they can overcome the issue of lacking political uptake and DMPs' outcome implementation (Setälä 2017). In the case of Súdwest-Fryslân, although appreciating it, an interviewee emphasized that the thorough process might leave little room for the city council to deviate from the recommendations: "though, we are aware of the position of the city council in a democracy. Can the council still respond negatively and be critical to this process at all?" (SWF3). Also, the general public's recognition increased due to "them identifying themselves with the recommendations because of the interpretation of the PVE results by the DMP participants. This makes sure that the outcomes of the DMP are trusted more and that is the foundation for useful advice" (SWF6). The outcomes of such a combination of engagement tools also meant that the facilitating public body experienced more legitimacy generally because they now better know what citizens want (GELD1) but also that it "made the municipality more confident. Stronger in its standpoints. Stronger towards other municipalities and the province" (SWF3).

The combination of an online maxi-public with a DMP furthermore facilitated public bodies in learning what a broad range of citizens find important (SWF 2,3, 4, 6) and enables civil servants to exit the "bubble" they are in (GELD1). A quote of one civil servant in the case of Gelderland captures their positive stance toward combining an online maxi-public with the DMP well: "I would do it again because there was still criticism as to whether we had listened to citizens. You want to check whether you are on the right track. You want to know if you haven't forgotten anything" (GELD2). The other interviewee who was part of the same process said:

I have seen that my colleagues were enthusiastic and were surprised at how well it was set up. I find that worthwhile. Citizens have become smarter too. I would only suggest organizing this every four years and not every two years because of the costs.

(GELD1)

Challenges

Apart from the positive aspects of hybrid approaches, several challenges were also highlighted during the interviews. For example, some interviewees argued that the engagement of specific socio-economic groups, such as women and citizens with relatively low income, could be improved (SWF1), as well as the engagement of youngsters (SWF2).

Another point of improvement is the increased responsibility of the facilitating public body to report frequently on the outcomes whenever a large-scale participation process is set up (SWF4, 5) and what mandate it receives (UTEVAL). As an illustration of this, it was noticed that, if a municipal council does not

implement most of the results of the process, it would not do justice to the work done. Instead, more effort should be put into frequent reporting on how the recommendations are specifically implemented. This stance is captured by the following quote: “You give people the possibility to let their voice be heard and they want to see that back in subsequent policy documents” (SWF5). Responsiveness is important and, in this regard, it was suggested to facilitate a meeting every six months (SWF5) or three months (SWF4) to review and monitor the progress made following the outcomes of the process. Hence, there is room for improvement in embedding the overall process within the larger proceedings of the facilitating public body (SWF5).

Conclusion and discussion

This chapter studied three Dutch cases of DMPs that were preceded by an online maxi-public consultation. Based on their examination, we conclude that the hybrid participatory approach has the potential to alleviate some of the critiques of DMPs. Through a maxi-public, a large number of citizens are granted the opportunity to provide input for the policymaking process, thereby addressing the basic critique on DMPs that the will of the broader society is bypassed (Lafont 2020). Moreover, interviewees appreciated the added value that a DMP brings by translating the insights of a large online public consultation (PVE) into concrete and applicable policy recommendations. A general observation was that solely organizing a PVE would result in room for interpretation by elected officials who can cherry-pick the results aligned with their own agenda or personal opinions. Instead, by letting DMP participants interpret the PVE output, the risks of cherry-picking are less likely to occur. Hence, the risks of participatory processes being subject to political cherry-picking whenever their results are known (Smith 2009) seem to be lower when PVE and DMP are combined compared to a situation in which only a PBE or a DMP is facilitated.

We observe that the DMPs’ recommendations in Súdwest-Fryslân and Utrecht were more influenced by the results and recommendations of the online maxi-public consultation than in the case of Gelderland. One potential explanation is that in the former cases, the insights delivered by the maxi-public were closely aligned with the assignment of the mini-public, whereas in Gelderland the output of the maxi-public fitted less with the assignment of the mini-public. This may explain why there is quite a distinction between the 44 recommendations of the Gelderland mini-public, on the one hand, and the information produced by the maxi-public, on the other hand. Another explanation is that the members of the mini-public in Gelderland did not have enough time to digest the results of the maxi-public. The 150 members must also ensure many other tasks and goals, implying that there was not a lot of time to study and reflect on the outcomes of the PVE. On the other hand, the 12 members of the mini-public in Súdwest-Fryslân had ample time to thoroughly examine the PVE report as it was

easy for them to get to know each other and it did not require breaking them up into smaller groups. As a result, one recommendation for further research is to explore the costs and benefits of different forms of democratic innovations. Based on the three cases in this chapter, combining a larger online maxi-public with a small DMP of 12 members in the case of Súdwest-Fryslân seems to be quite attractive as the representativeness of the participatory process was not contested and the members of the DMP had enough time to use the insights of the online maxi-public in a useful way.

Another point that we find relevant about output legitimacy is that the uptake of the results of the online maxi-public consultations and the DMPs also depends on how clear and actionable the final recommendations are. The recommendations of the DMPs in Súdwest-Fryslân and Utrecht were actionable and could be translated into policies directly after the recommendations were released. The DMP in Gelderland produced 44 recommendations, among which some were less clear or required deep policy changes. It thus took the province a longer period to respond to how the policy recommendations were finally integrated. Potentially, the more actionable recommendations are and the more directly they relate to the challenges that public authorities are trying to solve, the higher the probability of the political uptake. Of course, such an assumption would need to be further tested empirically by analyzing other examples and cases.

In all three cases though, policymakers implemented (a large part of) the recommendations that were made. This finding indicates that hybrid participatory processes can overcome the lack of implementation of DMPs' outcomes (Setälä 2017). The fact that most citizens could take part in the online PVE and the production of nuanced and deliberated recommendations through the DMP resulted in better recognition of the output produced by the citizens and more political acceptance as well. The combination of large-scale numeric input of citizens combined and interpreted with more small-scale deliberations made those hybrid processes come "alive" and more likely for politicians to adopt the recommendations.

Our research has, nonetheless, various limitations. First, we primarily investigated how policymakers, civil servants, and organizers of participatory processes perceived the hybrid approach. We recommend investigating in further research how citizens perceive such processes. Moreover, future research may need to find out whether our findings indeed hold in different contexts in terms of online platforms, topics, or countries. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see how cases adopting similar designs would deal with the challenges that we identified. Finding solutions would, indeed, provide new avenues to improve DMPs more generally. Doing so will enable both researchers and practitioners to grasp whether combining an online maxi-public with a DMP would provide a fruitful avenue to enhance its overall legitimacy. More importantly, however, is that it would bring us closer to addressing the question of to what extent and why hybrid DMPs would indeed provide for a cure of some democratic erosion.

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