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## SOCIAL COUNCILS – RESPONSIBLE ACTORS IN COLLABORATIVE LOCAL GOVERNANCE OR SILENT INFORMATION-PROVIDERS? EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM SELECTED CITIES\*

**Abstract:** Social councils (SCs) are local collegial actors formally created by local authorities as consultative bodies for different policy issues. The main objective of this article is to define the role of SCs in collaborative governance (CG). The paper is based on the quantitative research conducted in 65 Polish cities. The research is focused on the members of youth, senior citizen councils, and councils for residents with disabilities. The research results indicate that SCs meet many of the prerequisites of CG, however their potential to influence decisions and consensus seeking has not been entirely proven.

**Key words:** social council, advisory council, collaborative governance, city, local government

## SPOŁECZNE RADY – ODPOWIEDZIALNI AKTORZY LOKALNEGO WSPÓLRZĄDZENIA CZY MILCZĄCY INFORMATORZY? REZULTATY BADAŃ EMPIRYCZNYCH Z WYBRANYCH POLSKICH MIAST

**Streszczenie:** Rady społeczne (RS) to podmioty kolegialne, formalnie powoływane przez władze lokalne jako organy konsultacyjne w różnych politykach publicznych. Głównym celem artykułu jest zdefiniowanie roli RS w lokalnym współrzędzeniu (*collaborative governance* – CG). Artykuł opiera się na badaniach ilościowych przeprowadzonych w 65 polskich miastach. Badania koncentrują się na członkach rad młodzieżowych, rad seniorów oraz rad ds. osób niepełnosprawnych. Wyniki badań wskazują, że RS realizują wiele założeń CG, jednak ich potencjał wpływania na decyzje i osiągnięcia konsensusu nie został w pełni udowodniony.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rada społeczna, rada doradcza, lokalne współrzędzenie, miasto, samorząd lokalny

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## 1. Introduction

During recent decades people have got used to participating in the political process mainly through electing politicians. This form of political engagement, although it gives influence, and at the same time the authority to call politicians to account (Schumpeter 2010; Kateb 1992; Young 1986) has also many shortcomings. Against this background, several issues can be highlighted. First of all, the attributes of representative democracy and the bureaucratic administration that support it, are more and more frequently called into question. Already in the 1960s, it was noticed that the domination of policy making by politicians and administrators may give grounds for abuse and manipulation as well as reinforcing the exclusion of disadvantaged groups from decision making (Arendt 1965; Arnstein 1969; Pateman 1970). Nowadays, when the complexity of social issues is much higher, the question about the role of politicians and administrators is raised more consistently. The former seem to be less sensitive to public problems, and at the same time more eager to use populist rhetoric and implement easy solutions, while the latter, who frequently depend on elected representatives, cannot cope with “wicked” issues (Rittel and Webber 1974). In many countries the aforementioned problems contribute to a decrease in trust in public authorities and institutions. In addition, a great many contemporary problems which, at the macro level, are concerned with issues such as ethnicity or religion, and on a micro scale *inter alia* with the organisation of services, go far beyond the territory of a single electoral unit or the competencies of one bureaucratic organisation (see Rehfeld 2005; Hendriks 2009; Dobson 1996). Therefore, the so-called “standard account” of representation, mainly the politicians’ ability to stand for and act on behalf of their voters (Urbinati and Warren 2008), and the competency of bureaucrats to propose appropriate solutions are being questioned. Finally, some indicate that modern policy making simply must be more inclusive, as neither the state nor any other public actor has a monopoly on the provision of solutions appropriate to the complex reality of the modern world (Pawłowska 2007). Hence, the traditional, coercive “power over” should be replaced by the softer “power to” or “power with” (Hendriks 2009; Hambleton 2002; Purdy 2012).

Such a solution is proposed by the governance paradigm. Its cornerstone constitutes an assumption that both decision and policy making processes should be more collaborative, integrative and inclusive. Therefore, along with politicians and bureaucrats, actors from other sectors ought to be involved in governing. This is seen both as a remedy to the shortcomings of the present democratic framework as well as a way to improve public services. Importantly, this principle significantly transforms the roles traditionally assigned to individual stakeholders (Torfing et al. 2012). They become partners who, according to the “power-to” philosophy, should share responsibility for the outcomes of the process of governing. However, the experience of different public administrations indicates that such rearrangement is not easy to perform, and that despite the governance rhetoric, the decision and policy making processes are still mainly designed and controlled by politicians and administrators.

In this article, the authors focus their interest on the scale of the contribution non-state stakeholders make to policy development and decisions undertaken locally. More specifically, the operation of selected Polish social councils (SCs), the bodies that represent the interest and/or expertise of various – social and professional – groups in decision making is examined. The selection of the three of types of SC – youth councils, senior citizen councils, and councils for residents with disabilities, was determined by their commonality in democratic states. The aim of the authors was to determine whether SCs meet the conditions to be considered actors in collaborative governance, and examine what roles they play in local policy making.

The article is organised in the following manner. First, the authors focus on defining collaborative governance, which is understood as a new, demand-driven orientation towards policy making (Gash 2016) that allows for more joined-up governing. The principles and conditions of governing in this manner as well as the difficulties it presents are discussed. Thereafter, the model of social councils that operate in Polish local government is presented. The authors pay attention to the way they are created as well as to their competences. To introduce them better, the authors also refer to similar councils that function in other countries. The foundations of the research project and the methodology of the study are then introduced. Then, the research findings are presented, which is followed by the discussion and conclusions.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

In the 1990s, in many public administrations a shift from traditional government towards governance could be observed. The core of governance stresses broad cooperation between stakeholders rooted in the public, private and civic sectors. More precisely, the paradigm can be described as “a set of coordinating and monitoring activities” that allows for the existence of collaborative partnerships and institutions (Bryson et al. 2006, p. 7; Emerson et al. 2012, p. 2). Over time, within the governance mainstream many smaller “species” have been developed e.g. regulatory, participatory, deliberative, network, interactive as well as collaborative ones. Although they share many assumptions, each puts emphasis on different issues.

The roots of collaborative governance (CG), the approach to policy making, which is of particular interest to this article, go back to the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the birth of American federalism (McGuire 2006), group theory (Bentley 2017), intergovernmental cooperation of the 1960s (Agranoff and McGuire 2003) as well as common-pool problems (Ostrom 1990; for a discussion about the origins of CG see Emerson et al. 2012). Presently CG is seen both as a management practice and as a driver for more democratic governance. According to the first viewpoint, the paradigm allows for more cross-boundary, joined-up government (Kettl 2015; Bevir 2011), and has a lot in common with public management, intergovernmental relations, public-sector network theory and horizontal network management (Wright 1978; Agranoff and McGuire 2001;

Kamensky and Burlin 2004). In the light of the latter understanding, CG contributes to democratic reconstruction: broader participation and deliberation of different stakeholders within decision and policy making processes (Ansell 2012). In this context, CG possesses the advantages of participative and deliberative governance (Fisher 2012; Dryzek 2012).

Due to its multi-faceted provenance, the nature of CG is still challenging to capture. In the literature, two main ways of defining this concept can be found. The first highlights the critical procedures/components that make collaborative governance work (Gash 2016). Here CG is perceived as a more formal, state-initiated agreement that allows for cooperation and engagement between state and non-state stakeholders. This perspective is presented *inter alia* by Ansell and Gash (2008, p. 544) who define the concept as:

A governing arrangement where one or more public agencies directly engage non-state stakeholders in a collective decision making process that is formal, consensus-orientated, and deliberative and that aims to make or implement public policy programmes or assets.

In the above definition, six crucial criteria are emphasised: 1) the forum is initiated by public agencies or institutions, 2) participants in the forum include non-state actors, 3) participants engage directly in decision making and are not merely “consulted” by public agencies, 4) the forum is formally organised and meets collectively, 5) the goal of the forum is to make decisions by consensus (even if consensus is not achieved in practice), and finally 6) the focus of collaboration is on public policy or public management (*ibid.*).

The second group of definitions, on the contrary, puts emphasis on qualities, principles and overriding purpose of CG. This approach can be exemplified by the work of Emerson et al. (2012, p. 2) who pay attention rather to the cross-boundary character as well as to the presence of non-public stakeholders’ initiatives. According to them, CG can be portrayed as:

the processes and structures of public policy decision making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished.

The above description highlights the “multipartner” facets of CG that includes partnerships between the state, the private and civil society sectors as well as joined-up government and hybrid agreements, e.g. public-private and private-social partnerships (*ibid.*). It also stresses the fact that CG allows for the accomplishing of goals that could not be otherwise achieved.

On the one hand, collaborative governance allows for more innovative, consensual and dialogue-based policy making. These in turn contribute to a better preparation and implementation of local/national policies. In addition, CG has a significant impact on the learning process and on the shaping of the horizons of individual stakeholders. It is also better equipped than traditional top-down policy making to resolve policy conflicts and vexing policy dilemmas connected

*inter alia* with environmental degradation, health care, aging or inequalities (Gash 2016). CG has also a synergy effect and supports community building (Lasker et al. 2001). Moreover, it has the potential to increase the legitimacy of public policies (Bevir 2011).

However, on the other hand collaborative governance faces substantial challenges. First, the diversity of the parties involved may increase tensions and dissatisfaction. Correspondingly, individual stakeholders may have different expectations both about the way the cooperation is structured as well as about its outcomes. Second, the collaboration can be easily hampered by the imbalance between resources – expertise, time, funding – that individual stakeholders have at their disposal. Additionally, there can be a clash between different “types” of knowledge e.g. scientific and practical (Gash 2016; see Bidwell and Ryan 2006). Finally, collaborative governance is still rather fluid, and thus it is often difficult to evaluate its outcomes.

### 3. Social councils – what are they and what are their objectives?

CG is an example of a solution to keep up with the trend of incorporating a variety of stakeholders into policy making, while at the same time preserving efficient structures of creating and implementing public decisions. Nonetheless, decision makers face an important dilemma. On the one hand, they want to include numerous stakeholders in the decision making process, satisfy their aspirations, leverage community knowledge, improve the quality of public policy and simultaneously upgrade output legitimacy. On the other, they want to stick to current efficient procedures, ensure the certainty of quick decision making and their reasonably effective implementation. There are numerous solutions to this dilemma – they can be found in different forms of CG, but also in deliberative and participative governance. One of them, although difficult to assign to particular form of governance (or democracy) are social councils.<sup>1</sup>

Social councils (SCs) are collegial bodies created by local, regional or national authorities.<sup>2</sup> Their members are recruited from among the residents – members of groups characterised by selected features, for example, age (the youth, the elderly), special needs (people with disabilities, unemployed), type of activity (entrepreneurs, sportsmen), or expertise (architects, urban planners); however, they also include institutional representation, such as NGOs or local authorities/administration. The activities of SCs are directly referred to the tasks/competencies performed by local authorities, though at the same time they are mostly opinion-giving and advisory in nature.

The tradition of SCs in democratic states is quite rich, starting in the 1970s, when the first youth and senior citizen councils were created (Walker 1999;

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<sup>1</sup> Other names for those forms of engaging stakeholders in policy making are: *appointed public volunteer boards* (Dougherty and Easton 2011); *local government citizen advisory bodies* (NCDD 2013); *citizen advisory boards* (Nabatchi et al. 2014); *deliberative councils* and *thematic committees* (Mendonça 2008).

<sup>2</sup> This depends on the particular country.

Augsberger et al. 2017; Finlay 2010). SCs have developed a lot since the 1990s, which seem to contrast with the academic studies of SCs, which are relatively few and fragmented (Dougherty and Easton 2011; Dougherty and Boss 2017; Fobé et al. 2013, 2017; Font et al. 2014, 2019; Nabatchi and Blomgren Amsler 2014; Walker and Naegele 1999; Wang 2001; Finlay 2010).

Social councils or similar bodies operate in many European states (see more in Radzik-Maruszak 2020). In Finland, the creation of these bodies, which are sometimes also labelled as user councils/boards, takes place primarily on the initiative of central or local authorities. There are three types of mandatory social councils – youth (*Nuorisovaltuusto*), seniors (*Vanhusneuvosto*) and these for people with disabilities (*Vammaisneuvosto*) that operate in each Finnish municipality (see more in LGA 410/2015). The key role of these bodies is to provide a voice to the aforementioned social groups, often excluded from decision making, as well as to improve the quality of local services. In Spain, social councils are often recognised as advisory bodies; however, the original Spanish nomenclature is much more complicated and extensive. The bodies began to be created at the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s on the wave of democratic changes and the transition from Francoism towards the rule of law (Bueso 2009; after Rico Motos et al. 2017). Presently there are many types of social councils that function in almost every area of Spanish public administration (Assodem 2020). The bodies are almost always constituted of politicians and representatives of the central, regional or local administration as well as the members of associations. Interestingly, however, lay citizens are rarely involved in their work. By contrast to Finland, they are neither mandatory nor grounded in statutory regulations. In Belgium, social councils are created at all levels of the state: federal, regional, community and municipal. Their establishment is, on the one hand, related to a consensual attitude towards policy making, and, on the other, constitutes a manifestation of a strong tradition of neo-corporatism (Fobé et al. 2017). Additionally, these bodies aim to contribute to a better coordination of public policies. At the regional level, their activity is devoted *inter alia* to socio-economic issues, science and innovation, mobility, education or spatial planning (see more in Fobé et al. 2017). Youth councils operate at the community and municipal levels (see Pudar et al. 2013).<sup>3</sup>

In Poland, there are many types of social councils/committees; however, in this article the authors have only studied three of them: the aforementioned youth, senior citizen councils, and councils for residents with disabilities. A brief description of the characteristics of these SCs is presented in Table 1. Although, by law, all SCs are created by local authorities, it is noteworthy that only councils for residents with disabilities are mandatory due to the provisions of the 1997 Act on Vocational and Social Rehabilitation and Employment of Persons with Disabilities. Youth and senior citizen councils are barely mentioned in the Law on Municipal Government as potential organisations that could represent the

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<sup>3</sup> Selected results of empirical research of SCs in Belgium and Spain are presented in the discussion part of this paper to compare them with Polish SCs.

interests of these respective social groups. All the SCs that were studied share an opinion-giving and advisory function, albeit consultation of councils for residents with disabilities is required (in all issues addressing people with disabilities), while in the case of the other two SCs it is optional. It should also be noted that local statutes do not regulate the way the SCs operate, but they authorise local authorities to adopt bye-laws regulating this issue.

Tab. 1. Characteristics of the SCs studied in this article

	Youth councils	Senior citizen councils	Councils for residents with disabilities
Range of legal regulation	Low	Low	Medium
Status of the SC (optional/mandatory)	Optional	Optional	Mandatory
Number of members	From over a dozen to several dozen	Over a dozen	5
Represented stakeholders	High school students	65+ citizens and their organisations	Local NGOs, local authorities, public institutions
Field of interest	All issues related to young citizens	All issues related to senior citizens	All issues related to citizens with disabilities
Core function/s	Integrating students; promotion of civic virtues and principles of self-governance; participation in decision making	Advising, opinion-giving and initiating activities aimed at and tailored for senior citizens	Opinion-giving on: local programmes and draft resolutions in terms of their impact on the citizens with disabilities Inspiring activities related to the integration of people with disabilities and implementation of their rights. Evaluation of implemented programmes
Consultation	Optional	Optional	Mandatory

Source: developed by the authors.

#### 4. Research proceedings

Before conducting the survey, the authors performed desk research – an academic literature review and analysis of national law as well as selected local bye-laws regulating the functioning of SCs being researched. Some results of this stage of the research have been already presented.

In trying to resolve the dilemma suggested by the title of the paper, the authors referred to the essential elements of CG indicated by Ansell and Gash (2008). Several of those essential elements have been already addressed. In the previous

section, the authors determined that SCs are: a) initiated by public agencies (local authorities); b) formally organised and act collectively, following the statutory regulations; c) focused on public policies, also indicated in respective laws. Therefore, three other essential elements are still left to be verified:

- 1) whether SCs include non-state actors;
- 2) whether SCs are directly engaged in decision making and are not only consulted by public agencies;
- 3) whether SCs' decisions are made by consensus.

To find the answers to the above questions, empirical research was performed. The research focused on the three SCs that we mentioned previously, and it was performed in 65 Polish cities with county rights.<sup>4</sup> The survey was conducted from April to October 2018. A standardised questionnaire was used and distributed among SC members. The authors used both official and unofficial channels to identify and contact SC members.<sup>5</sup> The survey was performed with CAWI, CATI and PAPI techniques. Some basic data concerning the number of SCs that were included in the study and their members is presented in Table 2. The return rate was almost the same for all three SCs; however, the share of the respondents from the each council is different. This was mostly due to the statutorily determined number of members of councils for the residents with disabilities (always five), and the fact that members of the youth councils, who accounted for over 50% of

Tab. 2. Basic data on the research

	No. of SCs (total)	No. of SCs participating in the study	No. of SC members (total)	No. of returned questionnaires	Survey return level %	% of all respondents
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Youth councils	48 <sup>a</sup>	41	1197 <sup>a</sup>	387	32.3 <sup>a</sup>	51.3
Senior citizen councils	59 <sup>a</sup>	38	842 <sup>a</sup>	271	32.2 <sup>a</sup>	35.9
Councils for residents with disabilities	61	41	307	97	31.6	12.8
Total	168 <sup>a</sup>	120	2346 <sup>a</sup>	755	32.2 <sup>a</sup>	100

<sup>a</sup> due to difficulties in accessing information on youth and senior citizen councils in selected cities and the number of their members, some of data that is given are approximations.

Source: developed by the authors.

<sup>4</sup> In Poland, there are three levels of territorial government – municipalities, counties and regions. Among them there are 66 cities having one authority and performing the tasks of both municipality and county. Although the capital city Warsaw is one of them, it was excluded from the research as it has a different structure of local government.

<sup>5</sup> The authors studied information placed on the websites of city authorities and/or the websites of the SCs, where they existed. Local public servants were also addressed and requested for information on SCs. In the case of youth councils, Facebook (FB) was widely used. The researchers also used the snowball technique asking SC members whom they were able to contact for information on other members.



the respondents, are easily accessed and mobilised through social media. This does not seem to be the case for members of senior citizen councils.

The questionnaire consisted of 21 problem-related, closed, both single- and multiple choice questions, and an additional seven questions that seek to determine the demographic characteristics of SC members. As a result of the survey, extensive research material was created that addresses the various aspects of SCs and their activities (for a more thorough analysis of research results see Pawłowska et al. 2020). The results presented below are limited to those issues which allow for the determining of the previously mentioned three essential elements of CG that may answer the dilemma posed in the title of this paper. The authors only analysed the problem-related and single-choice questions.

## 5. Findings

An indispensable and measurable factor of CG is the engagement of non-state actors in decision making forums. An important advantage of SCs is the variety of stakeholders represented by their members (Table 3). NGOs and SC members representing just themselves are almost equally represented in the SCs that were investigated, and together they constitute over the half of their members. The rest of the members represent a significant minority, the public sector (local and national authorities and public institutions). However, the representation is distributed unevenly among the SCs that were studied: non-state actors are most numerous represented in senior citizen councils, while local authorities are noticeably present in councils for citizens with disabilities. Public institutions are strongly represented in the youth councils, but even more members of those councils indicated they represent themselves.

Tab. 3. The share of local stakeholders among SC members (N = 738) (%)

	Youth councils	Senior citizen councils	Councils for residents with disabilities	All examined SCs
NGO	9.2	45.4	59.8	29.1
Local authorities	19.7	18.5	28.9	20.5
Individuals	33.8	25.8	6.2	27.2
Public institution (school, culture club, health centre, etc.)	35.1	7.0	3.1	20.6
National authority	1.6	0.4	2.1	1.2
Entrepreneur	0.3	0.7	0.0	0.4
Other	0.3	2.2	0.0	1.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: developed by the authors.

Resolving the question of whether SCs are directly involved in decision making is, however, much more complex. If we stick to the statutory regulations, they are opinion-giving and advisory bodies: they do not participate in making decisions. This means that they do not directly shape decisions nor are they responsible for their results. However, SCs provide information that helps to determine public decisions, they scrutinise them by reviewing their drafts and local policy programmes and examine the reports on their implementation. Instead of asking how SCs are involved in decision making (which most probably would end with citing the law), the authors asked about the most common issues that are considered by SCs. The results of this line of enquiry are presented in Table 4.

Tab. 4. The most common issues considered by SCs during their meetings (N = 749) (%)

	Youth councils	Senior citizen councils	Councils for residents with disabilities	All examined SCs
Problems reported by residents	25.1	35.4	13.4	27.3
Matters that SC wants to submit as an initiative to local authorities	24.0	37.3	8.2	27.2
Draft decisions (resolutions, ordinances) of local authorities submitted to SC for its opinion	27.1	15.5	59.8	26.8
Action plans submitted by local authorities for the opinion of SC	14.7	5.9	13.4	11.4
Reports on the implementation of public policies submitted by local authorities	4.4	1.8	3.1	4.1
Other	4.7	4.1	2.1	3.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: developed by the authors.

The data show that SCs go beyond their statutory function of opinion-givers, and instead discuss problems affecting the local community and act on their own motions by submitting their own proposals. The results of this question are distributed unevenly among the SCs. Meetings of the councils for residents with disabilities are dominated by opinion-giving, while the two other councils are more focused on problems of the respective age groups and their own projects.

Another question posed to respondents considered the immediate result of the above activities – how often are the opinions of the SCs taken into account by local authorities (Table 5)?

Tab. 5. The frequency with which the local authorities take the SCs opinion into account (N = 755) (%)

	Youth councils	Senior citizen councils	Councils for residents with disabilities	All examined SCs
Always	29.7	30.3	55.6	33.2
In more than half of the cases	30.0	30.6	16.5	28.5
In half of the cases	12.4	9.6	2.1	10.1
In less than half of the cases	5.4	8.1	1.0	5.8
Never	1.8	1.1	5.2	2.0
Hard to say	20.7	20.3	19.6	20.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: developed by the authors.

Over 60% of all the respondents indicated that SC opinions are taken into account either always or in more than half of the cases. This is a significant amount, and might indicate that the SC advice is highly effective. However, it should also be noted that 20% of respondents have no idea if SC opinions are taken into account by the local authorities or not.

A further question considered the long-term results of SC activities. The respondents were asked to indicate the most important benefit resulting from the SC activity. The answers to this question are presented in Table 6.

Tab. 6. The most important benefits resulting from SC activity (N = 744) (%)

	Youth councils	Senior citizen councils	Councils for residents with disabilities	All examined SCs
Better recognition of local problems	35.9	40.6	24.7	36.1
Possibilities to adjust public activities to the needs of residents	31.3	35.3	49.5	35.0
Opportunity for residents to express their views on the city's problems	26.8	19.2	10.8	21.8
Ensuring the residents' control over decisions taken by the local authorities	3.4	4.1	11.8	4.8
Ensuring the transparency of the decision making process	2.3	0.8	3.2	2.0
Other	0.3	0.0	0.0	0.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: developed by the authors.

The two answers that received the highest score from every SC were that there was a better recognition of local problems, and the possibility of adjusting public activities to the needs of residents. Of particular attention is the fact that almost half of the surveyed members of councils for residents with disabilities indicated that the most important benefit is the possibility to adjust public activities to the needs of residents, while a significant percentage of the respondents from youth and senior citizens councils indicated better recognition of local problems.

Finally, we asked about the way in which decisions were made by SCs. The respondents were simply asked how they adopt opinions. The answers are presented in Table 7.

Tab. 7. The mode of adopting opinions (making decisions by SCs) (N = 755) (%)

	Youth councils	Senior citizen councils	Councils for residents with disabilities	All examined SCs
Voting	85.5	77.1	62.9	79.6
Consensus	7.8	15.9	28.9	13.4
Hard to say	6.2	2.2	1.0	4.1
By circulation	0.5	2.2	4.1	1.6
Other way	0.0	2.6	3.1	1.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: developed by the authors.

The majority of respondents indicated that voting is the way their SC adopts a decision. Consensus seeking is more practised in the councils for residents with disabilities than in the other two councils. It is noteworthy that the popularity of voting as the method for making decisions does not preclude consensus, as in a number of bye-laws regulating SC procedures, voting is indicated as the mandatory way of adopting opinions. According to the authors, voting may constitute the final ‘sealing’ of a decision on which SC members have already reached consensus. Also, the high percentage of respondents from the councils for residents with disabilities indicating consensus might be the result of the small number of their members (i.e. only and always five), which makes reaching a common standpoint easier.

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

SCs are not new actors on the local scene, however in the 21<sup>st</sup> century they have been pushed into the shadow by more spectacular forms of participation and deliberation such as participatory budget and deliberative polls. Scholars have stayed almost silent about their operational practices, and they do not seem eager to study SCs as actors in local governance.

In this article, the authors were interested whether the SCs could prove themselves as actors in local co-governance. To answer this question, the authors

employed the approach of Ansell and Gash (2008), who defined the six essential elements of CG. The analysis of legal conditions for SCs already gives the ground to indicate that they present the features of being initiated by public agencies, that they are formally organised and act collectively, and they are focused on public policies. The three other features were examined in the survey addressed to SC members.

The results of the research show that a considerable share of non-state actors in all the SCs that were studied meets another of Ansell and Gash's (2008) criterion of CG. Yet, the substantial presence of the public sector in SCs is worth mentioning, especially that some scholars add to the above CG prerequisites the inclusion of elected or appointed decision makers who "share their authority with others" (Fagotto and Fung 2009, p. 28). It is worth noting, though, that the share of particular stakeholders in Polish SCs considerably differs from the patterns observed in other countries. In Spanish SCs, public officials and politicians constitute altogether 29% of SC members, while representatives of NGOs – 37%, and residents – only 2% (Font et al. 2019). Whilst the composition of SCs in Spain is not regulated by any national law, in Belgium decrees detail the number of particular stakeholders in the SCs. Among those investigated by Fobé et al. (2013), only one includes representatives of public authorities. Thus, in respect of membership, Polish SCs are somewhere between well-regulated Belgian councils and not regulated (in national law) Spanish councils.

The presence of local officials in SCs can be essential as SCs are not provided with decision making powers, and instead they have a consultative role on matters of public policy that are addressed to the selected social group which they represent. However, even consulting is not mandatory in the case of all SCs, as the obligation to consult decisions of local authorities is limited to the councils for residents with disabilities. With respect to the role the SCs play in local decision making, a consistent pattern has emerged from the data. While members of youth and senior citizen councils indicated problems reported by residents as the most common issue considered by their respective SCs, giving opinions on draft decisions of local authorities dominated the activities of the councils for residents with disabilities (Table 4). Consequently, members of youth and senior citizen councils value the recognition of local problems (informing public authorities) the most as the benefit of their activities, while members of councils for residents with disabilities indicate that the most important benefit of their SC is the possibility to adjust public activities to the needs of residents (affecting local decisions) (Table 6).

The way the decisions of the SCs are adopted does not fit Ansell and Gash's (2008) definition of CG. Mostly respondents indicated that voting, and not consensus seeking, was the way that opinions are adopted. And again, the councils for residents with disabilities stand out from the other SCs by having consensus seeking more often than other SCs. Voting does not, however, preclude consensus in the SCs that were studied, as this might be dictated by the SC regulations, and not by the lack of a discussion or deliberation at the meetings of a SC, or the decisions being imposed by a majority on a minority. Interestingly, the research

of Spanish SCs revealed that members of SCs without voting provisions are less satisfied with the extent to which their contributions are taken into account, contrary to members of SCs with voting provisions, who perceive a significantly higher proportion of the advice provided by the SC that resulted in policy changes (Font et al. 2019, p. 14). On the other hand, Belgian SCs, which can decide upon the application of internal procedures, in most cases prefer reaching consensus between stakeholders (Fobé et al. 2013). In this respect, Polish SCs seem closer to their Spanish counterparts.

There is yet another outcome the findings of this research. The proceedings of the councils for residents with disabilities are frequently determined by the motions from local authorities. This, too, contrasts with the youth and senior citizen councils, whose members frequently nominated matters that the SC wants to submit as an initiative to local authorities as their most common activity. Consequently, the youth and senior citizen councils are more bottom-up driven, while councils for residents with disabilities are rather top-down driven. Thus, although councils for residents with disabilities seem to have more influence on the decisions made within local government, their activities are restricted by legal regulations and the competences of public authorities. The two other councils are more independent and suitable for grassroots activities, but at the same time they are less likely to have an impact on local decisions. If participation in CG could be graded, the councils for residents with disabilities would be probably assessed as a “better” actor in the local decision making, but not necessarily a more independent one.

The last but not least issue which needs to be discussed is the SCs potential – in spite of no legally recognised attributes of decision making – to effectively shape the decisions of local authorities. The data included in Table 5 reflect merely the opinions of SC members, most of whom are convinced that their advice is taken into account by local decision makers. However, a disturbingly high percentage of the respondents have no idea if their SC opinions are taken into account or not. It is interesting that the same percentage (20%) of SC members in Belgium indicated that they don’t know how often their advice influences policy (Fobé et al. 2013, p. 235). This raises the questions: what feedback, if any, do SC members get after delivering their opinion? How much of the “taking into account” is translated by local authority to the final decision? Answering these questions requires more in-depth analyses of particular cases of decision making where SCs were participants.

The SCs capacity to shape public policies is questioned in all the studies known to authors, although influencing policy is a strong incentive making people engage in SCs (Font et al. 2019). Advising and opinion-giving is the shared objective of SCs in Spain and Poland, while producing proposals is their shared outcome (Alarcón and Rico Motos 2019). In both countries, SCs seem to have a weak position in policy making. It would seem otherwise in Belgium, where the neo-corporatist tradition in which the SCs flourish is very strong (Fobé et al. 2013). But, also there, SC members “perceive the advice which they produce

only very occasionally to have an influence in any way on policy and policy-makers” (Fobé et al. 2013, p. 235).

In conclusion, the authors claim that, first, SCs have most of the prerequisites of stakeholders in CG. On the other hand, the prerequisites defined by Ansell and Gash (2008) are very demanding and few local stakeholders are able to meet them all. Second, SCs have a rather limited potential to directly affect the decisions taken by local authorities that shape local policies. Third, what follows from the above is that the role of SCs can be conceptualised as that of information-providers. Predominantly the bodies give new insights to “real” policy makers. This allows, on the one hand, for better recognition of local problems, and, on the other, for the improvement of existing policies.

Additionally, our findings exemplify the differences between SCs. Whereas councils for residents with disabilities mainly participate in opinion-giving activities, the members of youth and senior citizen councils take part in councils’ meetings and try to initiate projects important for their groups. It makes the former more reactive and the latter more proactive bodies. But, as long as the statutes do not make youth and senior citizen councils mandatory and make local authorities to consult them in defined matters, these SCs will not further develop. The quite long practice of youth councils shows that they found themselves in a “blind spot” – if not provided with new opportunities and tasks, they soon might turn into symbolic bodies.

Finally, on a positive note, we can conclude that our research findings demonstrate that despite these bodies being weak stakeholders in the process of governing, their members do not have the feeling that their voices or contributions are neglected. At the same time, based on the above findings, the authors cannot verify how genuinely social councils impact policy making, or if this collaborative, more joined-up governing truly contributes to overcoming policy shortfalls (Gash 2016). These issues have to be clarified in further research.

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