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## **Whose interest really matters? The role of NGOs' representatives within local advisory councils in Poland**

### **Abstract**

The aim of the proposed presentation is to present the results of research concerning members of local advisory councils operating in Polish cities. A special emphasis will be given to one group of stakeholders engaged in local advisory councils' activities, which are representatives of non-governmental organizations. The research on participatory and deliberative democracy has become more and more popular, a variety of actors and mechanisms have emerged to enable citizens active participation in public life and to provide them with the opportunity to express their opinions on key issues (Fischer 2010, McNulty 2013, Fung 2015; Dryzek 2010; Fishkin, Mansbridge 2017, Metze 2010; Setälä 2017).

The broad range of mechanisms of civic participation is dominated by short-term solutions, with a low level of citizen engagement and restricted to specific issues or problems. There are relatively few studies on institutionalized, permanent (termed), and policy-oriented (not task-oriented) instruments such as advisory boards (Kasymova, Ferreira, Gaynor 2017; Arunkumar et al. 2019; Paisley 2016; Amsden 2007; Moulaert, Houioux 2016; Kübler, Wälti 2001; Kübler, Wälti, Papadopoulos 2004). Such entities are advisory boards, which due to their durable nature, diversified membership composition (including representatives of the public, private, civil society sectors, informal social groups, and the administration), and their position within the structure of the local system (advisory boards of local executive bodies) have a chance to actually influence the shape of public policies and decision-making in the city.

Advisory boards are highly diverse in terms of legal basis and status (mandatory, non-mandatory), the scope of tasks, number of members, and methods of recruitment. Still, their task is to provide opinions on drafts of normative acts, strategic documents, as well as projected activities of local authorities.

The conducted research included 5 types of advisory bodies, i.e. councils of non-governmental organizations, senior citizens' councils, councils for disabled people, sports councils, labor market councils. The largest number of members of these boards were representatives of non-governmental organizations (from 44.3% to 64.4% of the total number of members). The aim of the study was to find out who the NGO delegates sitting on the local advisory boards represent. Whose interest do they serve? And whether the nature of membership varies depending on the type of advisory board? The hypothesis adopted for the purposes of the study is that although members of advisory boards (including those from the NGO sector) are supposed to represent the local community, they consider their participation in the board as an opportunity to benefit the NGO they feel attached to (because of their work for or cooperation with). Being a member of the advisory board is associated with prestige, direct contact with local authorities, as well as access to information about planned activities and distribution of public funds, including those assigned to support non-governmental organizations.

Quantitative research was conducted in 65 cities, and qualitative research (based on interviews with councils' members) in 16 cities. The theoretical framework of research is based on the research approaches such as participatory and deliberative governance (Chhotray, Stoker 2009; Mitlin 2004) and the interest group theory (McFarland 2010).