Citizen Participation as Evidence? The Missing Link between Consultation and Decision-Making in Polish Local Governance

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Abstract: The aim of the paper is to examine how processes of citizen participation – or their absence – shape decision-making in local public policy in Poland. The analysis is based on empirical material collected in 2021–2022 during field research conducted in municipalities of the Lublin region. The study draws on observations and documentation of public consultations, as well as interviews with representatives of local administrations and community actors.

The findings reveal a significant gap between the declarative commitment of local authorities and the formal procedures of participation on the one hand, and the actual influence of citizens on public decisions on the other. This raises questions about how citizen input is treated as a meaningful component of local decision-making practices. Although the existing legal framework provides for a range of participatory instruments, their implementation by local governments is often superficial and reactive. The opinions and recommendations voiced by residents are rarely incorporated systematically into subsequent stages of policy implementation.

The analysis demonstrates that the lack of coherent feedback mechanisms and systematic reporting of consultation results limits the potential of participation as a source of knowledge about local needs, preferences, and the social effects of public actions. Consequently, local policy processes remain weakly evidence-based, and their legitimacy is open to question, leading to a decline in public trust.

In the context of the evidence-based policy-making framework, the results indicate the need to develop structured feedback mechanisms, transparent reporting standards, and procedures that prevent merely symbolic forms of participation. Implementing such measures could transform consultation data into actionable evidence that improves decision-making processes, strengthens the quality of local public policies, and enhances citizens' trust in local institutions.

The paper contributes to the broader debate on the relation between participatory public governance and knowledge- and data-driven policymaking, suggesting that the inclusion of citizen perspectives is a key condition for rebuilding the quality of local democracy.