



Who talks and who listens? A qualitative analysis of citizen dialogues in rural Sweden

Pontus Lund, Gustav Lidén & Sara Nyhlén

To cite this article: Pontus Lund, Gustav Lidén & Sara Nyhlén (2021): Who talks and who listens? A qualitative analysis of citizen dialogues in rural Sweden, Local Government Studies, DOI: [10.1080/03003930.2021.1988936](https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2021.1988936)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2021.1988936>



© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 08 Oct 2021.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 47



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Who talks and who listens? A qualitative analysis of citizen dialogues in rural Sweden

Pontus Lund, Gustav Lidén  and Sara Nyhlén

Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid Sweden University, Östersund, Sweden

ABSTRACT

Inclusion in local policy processes through citizen dialogue has been depicted as both the solution to many democratic challenges and a democratic problem in itself. Nevertheless, it has been widely adopted throughout Europe. The hierarchically flat, co-governing setup of these instruments can be expected to clash with representative-heavy political cultures, such as that in Sweden, which raises questions about what role they end up having in this context and whether they complement representative democracy. By conducting a comparative study of two rural Swedish municipalities, we confirmed that traditional, hierarchical governance indeed dominates the studied processes. Our results also suggest that, due to skewed participation and unclear input handling, the studied instrument does not appear to constitute a viable complementary democratic institution in terms of representation. Instead, we argue that, conducted in this way, it may potentially fill a range of different purposes without aspiring to fully complement representative democracy.

KEYWORDS Local democracy; representative democracy; citizen dialogue; town meeting; rural democracy; political representativeness

Introduction

Although local political participation in between elections has been a growing phenomenon in old and new democracies since the 1960 s, there are vast differences in how much participation occurs and at what pace such elements have been introduced (Zittel and Fuchs 2007). Sweden deviates from the rest of Europe, as this development started relatively late and resulted exclusively in consultative modes (Schiller 2011), thus linking it to the country's strong tradition of representative democracy. Notably, many of the problems that in-between election participation is meant to remedy, including declining voter turnout, declining trust in institutions and politicians, and a less vibrant civil society (Putnam 1996; Rondinella, Segre, and Zola 2017; SOU series 2016), are less severe in Sweden (Karlsson 2012; Oscarsson and Holmberg 2013). Nonetheless, participatory modes, such as

CONTACT Pontus Lund  pontus.lund@miun.se  Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Mid Sweden University, Östersund, Sweden

© 2021 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

those generally falling under the umbrella term *citizen dialogues*, do exist within the Swedish context, and although municipalities are generally not obliged to use these often resource-intensive (cf. Bobbio 2019) modes of participation, citizen dialogues are still practised in different municipalities and policy fields.¹ However, extensive municipal autonomy (Ladner 2019), the unregulated forms of these modes (Lidström 2016), and their consultative role make the relation of citizen dialogues to representative democracy less clear in the Swedish context.

Crot (2010) argued that participatory modes of governance bring promises of deepening urban democracy and social change. This paper will contribute to that knowledge by highlighting rural areas. Among rural municipalities, we find a number of preconditions that speak against the use of dialogues. These municipalities have strikingly different conditions than their urban counterparts; they score higher on local government performance satisfaction, have closer politician–citizen relations (Denters et al. 2014; Dahl 1973), and, more specifically to Sweden, tend to be relatively sparsely populated and have small administrations with limited resources (Karlsson and Gilljam 2015). Consequently, the use of dialogues in these municipalities does not seem to be based on the same incentives as those presented in research based on urban areas and may, thus, serve a different purpose.

In the light of these differences, this paper focuses specifically on citizen dialogues for community development, that are featuring town meetings. The paper raises questions about the considerations around involvement in these citizen dialogues and how policy makers receive input from these participatory arrangements. Tahvilzadeh (2015b) argued that, in city contexts, the interplay between actors and processes at the supralocal and local political level are important in framing the local initiatives for participation between elections; the question remains whether this is also valid in rural contexts. The overall aim of this study is therefore to examine the role of citizen dialogues in Swedish rural municipalities by looking at citizens' participation and how input is picked up in the policy process. This implies that citizen dialogues are perceived as modes for generating participant input for the policy process. This is done with the following research questions as a vantage point:

- How is participation constituted in Swedish rural dialogue processes, and how does this appear to affect expressed participant input?
- What considerations influence the expression and channelling of input towards the policy process?

Previous research has stressed a need for legitimacy through representation, where recruitment of participants, activity during participation, and further channelling of input into policy making affects how well a mode

represents the population and, ultimately, how well it can be argued to complement traditional participation (Fung 2006; Granberg and Åström 2007; Tahvilzadeh 2015a). To answer our two research questions, we have been guided by different theoretical elements: perspectives on representation and theories about how the input is received into the policy process.

In this study, we have employed a comparative case study approach for two examples of citizen dialogues organised within rural Swedish municipalities. The research design was drawn from a nested form of analysis in which two *extreme cases* are selected to investigate how contextual settings influence otherwise similar processes of citizen dialogues. The material is composed of interviews with citizens who have participated in dialogues and with responsible municipal personnel. A thematic analysis was conducted based on this material.

Theoretical section

To address our two research questions, two types of literature are necessary: research concerning participatory modes of governance and research on the role of actors and input in the policy process.

Participatory modes of governance

Although dialogue participants sometimes perceive participation as decision making, this is generally not the case, especially in exclusively consultative processes such as those in the Swedish context (Adenskog 2018). Irrespective of how representative participant recruitment and activity might appear to be, participants' input also needs to be subjected to interpretation. To affect policy, all input must be translated into written form by civil servants (Tahvilzadeh 2015a). This can be a more straight-forward task when aggregating written arguments from digital modes (Susha and Grönlund 2012) but is much more difficult in workshops or larger meetings, where all aspects of a debate may be hard to record. Combined with the ability to moderate the actual event, the translation gives civil servants significant influence over what input reaches the policy process. The ambiguity and lack of transparency in this translation process places importance on civil servants' own views of what input to prioritise (cf. Hysing 2014). Their assessment of participants' importance in the process can, in turn, be expected to depend on things like municipal policy, economic considerations, or their own views on the participatory mode.

Contrary to the aspirations, research has shown that participatory modes of governance tend to reinforce the domination of elite groups at the local level (Tahvilzadeh 2015a; Blakeley 2010; Taylor 2007). However, Fung and Wright (2003) have argued that participatory governance initiated by policy

makers who aim to empower citizens, which officially is an aim of these dialogues, may lead to social change and the strengthening of institutions of representative democracy. Some forms of dialogue have proven to cover certain groups better than other forms. Dialogues will, therefore, often consist of several venues with different groups in mind, sometimes targeting and inviting specific groups to further balance skewness in representation (Karlsson and Gilljam 2015; Setälä 2011). While a set of representative participants is more likely to reflect the preferences of the population, some modes allow both passive (spectator) and active (participator) participants, which may result in skewed input from a seemingly representative participatory event.

The impact of involvement in participatory modes is not only determined by the number of participants but also by their composition. The legitimacy of a participatory mode, as well as its results, will thus largely depend on the representativeness of its participants (Fung 2006). This is a constant headache for participation organisers, as certain groups are more inclined to participate than others (Lombe and Sherraden 2008; Bobbio 2019). For instance, finding the time to participate and the courage to express one's opinion in a public hearing may prove to be obstacles to influence (SALAR 2019b). Socioeconomically stronger groups and people with adult children tend to be more active in most political venues than less well-off and younger groups (Bartels 2017; Grimes and Esaiasson 2014; Delwit et al. 2007), which may become more apparent in less established modes, such as Swedish citizen dialogues (Wallman Lundåsen and von Essen 2015). Skewness in representation is especially likely in citizen dialogues concerning larger or more general issues, as these tend to adopt 'open-to-all', or 'invited', forms of recruitment (Fung 2006, 2015). In addition to not representing the population of affected actors, policy based on such skewed representation has been argued to possibly harm trust in the mode itself, elected representatives, and the political system in general (Tahvilzadeh 2015a).

Other modes of recruitment are practiced in issues concerning narrower groups of actors. A trend within participatory governance has been inspired by 'communicative planning' (Listerborn 2007). This consists of elaborating alternative methods for hearing citizens that complement to the 'open-to-all' invitations (Tahvilzadeh 2015b; Fung 2006). The most common occurrence is invited participation, where hearing citizens is often done through reference group work, citizen panels, and open consultation of citizens. Alternative methods focus on how the forms of participation affect who participates and, thus, which perspectives become dominant. Examples of such modes involve building on local knowledge and perspectives (Stauskis 2014) to develop society *together with* people rather than for them (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995).

Communicating the purpose of the participation seems decisive for the success of a participatory process. Participation between elections is often seen by politicians and civil servants as a way to strengthen the representative system through increased engagement and by getting input from stakeholders (Setälä and Schiller 2012; Matsusaka 2005), although the mandate of the instrument is often vague and may be circumvented when clashing with prevalent political agendas (Dryzek 2015). Somewhat paradoxically, expectations of low impact tend to, depending on the issue, hamper citizen engagement, while at the same time often promoting unrealistic expectations from the participants about their own influence and the general political impact of an indistinct process (Tahvilzadeh 2013; Granberg and Åström 2007). The reason would be that the ability to participate and give one's opinion in an otherwise representative system tends to be interpreted as a rolling back of representative power in favour of participants' direct political influence (Adenskog 2018). Participatory processes, therefore, need a certain amount of transparency about how such processes are translated into policy. This requires a carefully planned and, thereby, less flexible process from the perspective of politicians and civil servants.

Planning the process is important, as its results can clash with the politicians' expectations, which may lead to 'unwanted' or un-useful input. On such occasions, participant input does not have much impact on policy (Karlsson and Gilljam 2015). Therefore, the planning of participation, including how to relate to results and what politicians' and civil servants' own expectations of the process are, will affect not only the success of a specific process but also the trust in the representative system and how different actors view the potential and legitimacy of participatory modes.

Governance paradigms

A prominent but debated notion is the idea that decision-making has been moving from traditional, vertical, hierarchical government towards horizontal, cooperative governance (Stoker 1998). Yet, irrespective of whether hierarchy or co-governing is prevalent in a process where incompatible interests come together, involved actors are likely to compete over agenda influence rather than cooperating and seeking consensus (Birkland 2016; Kingdon 2014). Changing norms and different situations may also call for different approaches, which makes civil servants switch between paradigmatic roles. In the traditional view, civil servants are mainly expert policy-maker advisors and communicators of policy knowledge to citizens. In later perspectives, however, civil servants have been perceived as focusing on audit and manager roles or as experts in mediating and persuading different actors to cooperate for mutual interests, as actors from different public and private sectors are included in flat, network-like policy making (Sørensen and Bentzen 2020).

In light of such paradigmatic transitions, the idea of including actors in policy making through various modes of participation is an attribute of contemporary perspectives on public administration (Sørensen and Bentzen 2020; Kooiman 1993). Participation following this flat, non-hierarchical logic could thereby be expected to enjoy substantial influence at the expense of representative democracy. However, studies on Swedish participation have found this influence to be heavily conditioned (Karlsson 2012; Karlsson and Gilljam 2015). To have an influence, participatory modes must be compatible with and subordinate to established governance practice of the representative system. Channelling participant input will thus be heavily conditioned by prevalent political strategies and norms.

Studying participation and input

Drawing from this theoretical backdrop, a number of key assumptions can be expected to shape the prerequisites for participation and how participant input is channelled into the policy process.

Participation may vary both in physical attendance and activity during participatory events and can be expected to be skewed in favour of resourceful groups (Bartels 2017; Grimes and Esaiasson 2014; Wallman Lundåsen and von Essen 2015). This skewness is likely to be addressed by other, supplementing forms of participation rather than by adopting more costly, strategic recruitment strategies (Karlsson and Gilljam 2015; Setälä 2011).

The chances of influencing policy can be expected to increase if the issues discussed and the results do not challenge prevalent political norms, policy makers' views on governance, and the general political agenda (Karlsson and Gilljam 2015; Karlsson 2012). This is partially connected to participation being conditioned by the representative system.

Different aspects of how the processes are planned, and how politicians' and civil servants' views and expectations affect what issues are prioritised, will be decisive to the processes' outcome. Problems in planning and communication can be expected to generate either disinterest or overblown expectations from participants, which results in less representative and useful input (Tahvilzadeh 2013; Granberg and Åström 2007). Translation of input can also be expected to depend on the approach to planning.

Cases, material, and analytical strategy

In this section, we will present the empirical cases and the reasons behind choosing them, and we will discuss them in relation to their rural features. We will also present the data collection procedure and analytical strategy.

Presentation of cases

The studied processes comprise town meetings with deliberative workshops, and corresponds with *democratic innovations* (Smith 2009) in that they are council initiated and aimed towards increasing participation in policy making.

We study two rural Swedish municipalities, Gislaved and Krokomb, in order to increase knowledge concerning citizen dialogues in rural municipalities. While Gislaved is located in the southern part of Sweden, Krokomb is located in the north. They are both rural municipalities, as categorised by Eurostat (2019) classification, which is based on a combination of geographical contiguity and population density.² However, about half of all municipalities in Sweden are given the same classification as our two cases, and there are important variations in structural conditions within this group. Any claim of representativeness to the wider set of local governments is therefore challenging, thus making our aspirations more explorative.

The two selected cases vary considerably in that they represent somewhat opposite modes of local governments (see Table 1). Gislaved has a population size above the national average and has increased its population. It has a population density and average age close to the national average. At the other end, Krokomb is considerably smaller and has a lower population growth. In particular, the municipality is sparsely populated, though with the same average age as Gislaved and the nation at large. Income levels and the financial solidity of the municipal organisation are clearly above the national average in Gislaved, while both the economy of Krokomb's population and its public finances are considerably weaker.

Taken together, these two municipalities reflect that rural local governments can vary considerably. By defining our complete population of interest as Swedish rural municipalities, the strategic selection of Gislaved and Krokomb creates a desirable variation among this group of cases. Our selection strategy was therefore based on the logic of identifying cases that represent unusual values that can guide strategic selection. The selection of such

Table 1. Description of cases.

	Population size (2019)	Population growth (%), 2015–2019	Population density (inhabitants per square kilometre, 2019)	Average age	Average income, SEK (GRP, 2017)	Municipalities' financial solidity (2019)
Gislaved	29,963	2.4	26.4	41.8	418,711	68
Krokomb	14,966	1.2	2.4	41.8	239,196	41.1
Median value of all municipalities	15,978	2.6	28.4	43.7	311,580	45.8

Sources: Statistics Sweden (2020), RKA (2020)

extreme cases has been shown in the methodological literature to be specifically valuable when it comes to making comparisons (Gerring 2017; Seawright 2016).

Our empirical analysis does not focus on the municipalities *per se* but rather on the processes of citizen dialogues that they encompass. Common to both cases is that citizen dialogue is oriented towards community development. The main part of these processes is a setup with meetings, which are held in a number of smaller communities in the studied municipalities and are similar in both municipalities. In Gislaved, the current plan is to arrange meetings in ten communities from 2019 through to 2022. Two meetings, one month apart, are arranged per community. The first of these is a meeting where civil servants from different municipal departments answer questions that are sent in by the public prior to the meeting, and at the second meeting, elected representatives respond to and discuss the issues. The setup of the actual meetings started as town meetings but was improvised along the way to also include discussions in smaller groups. In Krokom, six meetings in different communities were arranged, and several of these covered two or more smaller communities. Each Krokom meeting comprised of both a town meeting and a group discussion session. Both civil servants and elected representatives attended the meetings.

In both municipalities, information about the process was sent to households beforehand. Notes from the meetings were published on the official municipal web pages and, in the case of Gislaved, were also sent to participants.

All in all, this brings us to a strategy for case selection that follows a nested strategy of three levels in which particular attention is directed towards phenomena within the principal units of analysis (Thomas 2011). First, our selection of the two cases is in harmony with our interest in rural municipalities. Second, our selection of extreme cases has made it possible to compare how citizen dialogues play out in opposite modes of rural local governments. Third, our specific empirical focus has been directed towards selecting citizen dialogues that resemble each other as much as possible. Hence, this research design builds upon the idea that the preconditions found at the second level vary, thus enabling a contextual analysis of our cases.

Material and procedure

The material collected is of a different character. In each case, a number of semi-structured interviews were conducted with 1) civil servants, 2) elected officials, and 3) participants in citizen dialogues. The first two categories were all involved in planning and arranging the dialogues. Interviewees were selected through a form of snowball sampling (Denscombe 2016; Patton 2002), where key actors were either contacted directly or referred to by the

municipal administration and were, in turn, asked about who was involved in the process. Due to the small size of each municipality's administration, the number of relevant actors was limited, thus leading to differences in the size of these informant groups between cases. Our recruitment of citizens who participated in the dialogues followed two strategies: they were either contacted due to their membership in local organisations or through snowball selection. A larger number of participant informants in one case reflects that a larger number of meetings were arranged.

Respondents were contacted by email or by telephone, and interviews were conducted both face to face and by telephone. The quotes that appear in the text were translated from Swedish by the first author and have been reproduced verbatim, except for editorial changes. An interview guide was applied in which the questions were based on the theoretical framework. In Appendix, a compilation of informants is presented.

Analytical methodology

Data analysis was performed through a mainly deductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006; Attridge-Stirling 2001; Bryman 2018). The deductive aspect was derived from the study's theory-centric structure, which was decisive for collecting data and formulating interview questions. The analysis, therefore, began with four overarching, theoretical themes. The method was flexible, allowing emphasis on theory while also enabling us to spot and make use of new themes relevant to the research questions. These were generated throughout the analysis when several extracts of relevant data did not seem fit into any existing theme. Themes also branched into subthemes to allow relevant distinctions and the fine-tuning of unmanageably large themes.

Transcriptions and field notes, carried out by the first author, were instrumental in the first part of analysis: (1) familiarising yourself with the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). This process, which included repeatedly reading through the material, gave a sense of the meaning of the material as a whole. The coding process – (2) generating initial codes – started with the categorisation of themes and resulted in codes such as 'planning of dialogue was improvised' or 'tense atmosphere due to school closing down'. For step (3) searching for themes, quotes and sentences were extracted and grouped according to themes that related to the aim of the study. Some of the initial codes were renamed during the process, while others were merged to form new themes. When reviewing the themes, (4) all quotes and extracts were reviewed to ensure coherence and theoretical associations. In the last stage, (5) defining and naming themes, we controlled the material to ensure relevance and consistency to the aim of the study. At the end of this procedure, four main themes were extracted.

Thematic analysis

The analysis has resulted in four identified themes which jointly relate to the research questions: i) recruitment and input expression, ii) views on inclusion and representation, iii) purpose and impact of planning, and iv) aggregation and translation of input. These will be presented in detail below, and we have chosen to discuss the municipalities in relation to each theme.

Recruitment and input expression

The first theme refers to how participants' representativeness was stressed as a precondition for gaining relevant input and is, thus, vital for the participatory mode to function as a legitimate complement to representative democracy (Fung 2006; Setälä 2011). Recruitment strategies seem to have been affected by political agendas and economic and practical considerations. As stated, consistent differences exist between groups regarding their tendency to participate in political venues (Tahvilzadeh 2015a; Blakeley 2010; Taylor 2007; Karlsson and Gilljam 2015), and activity among participants may vary considerably (Fung 2006; SALAR 2019a).

In both cases, participants seem to have been more than a merely passive audience, something central to Fung's (2006) argument on representativeness in participation. The two municipalities took slightly different approaches to handling passive activity. In Krokrom, participants said meetings ended without having time to discuss all participants' issues, which raises questions about the equality of the participation. In contrast, the Gislaved meetings were described as planned for meetings to go over time if needed. However, participant-, elected representative-, and civil servant informants in both municipalities expressed that opportunities for active participation were equal and framed the meetings as characterised by little competition among participating actors' interests. One Gislaved participant summed this up: 'I think everyone was able to make their voice heard. Then, there are those who talk more than others, obviously, and that can have both good and bad consequences' (Informant 5). Informants from Gislaved constructed this consensus as a result of a relatively homogenous population and, thus, homogenous interests in these parts of the municipality. This would mitigate the expected skewness from invited participation. In contrast, during the Krokrom meeting, equal participation may have been negatively affected by necessary priorities among issues due to lack of time (Fung 2006; cf. Kingdon 2014).

Another factor which seems to have affected participation is the engagement of civil society (Putnam 1996; Rondinella, Segre, and Zola 2017). Informants from both municipalities describe civil society, partially as platforms for engaged citizens but also as catalysts for local engagement, co-creators of the process and as pools of knowledge about local issues and

actors. In Gislaved, informants described how local groups were consulted prior to the meetings, for example, about priorities in participant recruitment. While they described how this seemed to have helped spur engagement, this could also be argued as empowering already strong actors (Lombe and Sherraden 2008). Krokoms informants described a less institutionalised approach, where civil society was not consulted but instead included in the general invitation to the meetings. On a more general note, the relation between the municipality and civil society was described as a relatively similar continuous dialogue in both municipalities, making these actors, or some of them, a form of semi-official local representatives. A Gislaved informant described this as a natural step: 'They had a strong community centre association, so they become our counterpart in [this area]' (Informant 1).

While this empowerment appears to have been pivotal to engaging local communities (cf. Dahl 1994), it is also potentially harmful, as further empowering already influential groups (Wallman Lundåsen and von Essen 2015) speaks against the dialogues' legitimacy as a complement to representative democracy.

Politician and civil servant informants expectedly regarded the risk of skewed participation (Fung 2006) as being remedied through various methods, including supplementing participation and targeting different audiences (Karlsson and Gilljam 2015; Setälä 2011). This was described by informants as easing the need for more resource-intensive targeted recruitment, which they viewed as hard to justify financially and practically. These supplementing forms of participation are beyond the scope of this study, but in cases where there is less representation, they will inevitably need to be performed better in terms of representativeness. This seems to be more pressing in Krokoms, whereas Gislaved's claim on relative homogeneity generally does not seem to apply.

Views on inclusion and representation

The second theme concerns the levelling between the representative system and the aim to involve stakeholders in issues which affect them (Setälä and Schiller 2012; Matsusaka 2005; Dahl 1994). Involved actors' views on what issues are suitable for 'delegating' to participatory modes can be decisive for a process's outcome and relates to how it is planned. Arguments about the gains and risks of involving actors in policy making are likely to affect how different actors and input from these actors are valued.

The integrity of representative democracy throughout these dialogues was acknowledged by all interviewees and, as it appears, by most participants, although the dialogues' mandate was occasionally misinterpreted and overrated. One informant in Krokoms said: 'It can be hard for some to recognise this, that representatives are elected every four years, and it is we [...] who have

been entrusted to make decisions on some issues' (Informant 12). This is in line with earlier experiences and the general Swedish view of this form of participation as having a subordinate role (Department of Justice 2001; Karlsson and Gilljam 2015) and has, thus, likely affected views on which participants are important and what issues are deemed as suitable for discussion. Nevertheless, informants explained that the aim was to involve stakeholders in policy making in local issues. In Gislaved, ways of accomplishing this were more articulated due to the municipality's more developed plan for inclusion. Variations in the municipalities' planning, however, did not seem to profoundly affect the general views on which issues were prioritised. Few topics were considered unsuitable by any of the informants. In Gislaved, having participants send in questions and issues prior to the meetings seemed to be regarded as a viable way to partially delegate the agenda regardless of the issue. Views on controversial issues' suitability for inclusion appeared to differ between the municipalities. Gislaved civil servants emphasised the need for dialogue in difficult or disputed issues to avoid the damaging effects of not having a discussion. This was contrasted by how one Krokoms participant and one civil servant viewed demands for a dialogue on a proposed school relocation plan:

If you plan on closing a school, then there should not be a dialogue about it. There should be a decision based on something else, and then, you inform about it. But you should inform well ahead of time so that people will have an opportunity to react on it'. (Informant 7)

Local engagement was not only seen as ways of connecting with, or getting input from, citizens. In Gislaved, local actors were encouraged to co-run projects, which was meant to spur more engagement on investments that are co-owned and run by the local community. Although in more general terms, this local community-centred approach (Cornwall and Jewkes 1995; Dahl 1994; Stauskis 2014) was also expressed as important by Krokoms politicians and civil servants, which appears to display a willingness to include citizens and even delegate certain issues. Yet, while inclusion in local issues was deemed important, they simultaneously stressed that this must not be allowed to overshadow the interests of the municipality as a whole. As one Gislaved politician put it: 'It can be, in the heat of the moment, that you promise more than you can keep and you only consider ... the interests of one part of the municipality, which may not be in the municipality's interest' (Informant 4). Both politicians and civil servants mentioned the risk of partisan and client-oriented politicians (Esaïasson and Lindberg 2014) as especially great in rural municipalities. Following this line of thought, too much or irresponsibly arranged and utilised inclusion could be argued as creating inequality rather than mitigating it. This risk may add to the notion of dialogues as more of a tool for representative democracy, rather than a complement (Karlsson 2012).

Purpose and impact of planning

The third theme deals with the plan for the process and how this was presented to participants, effectively setting the course for input and input handling. Policy makers tended to regard goals other than inclusion as equally important (Karlsson and Gilljam 2015), which was not always made clear to participants (Fung 2015).

The purpose of these dialogues seemed to follow general patterns for similar processes described in the literature (Setälä and Schiller 2012; Matsusaka 2005; Adenskog 2018), but they also appeared to be affected by their rural context (cf. Dahl 1973; Denters et al. 2014). In addition to coping with declining engagement in traditional political parties and civil society, these dialogues aim to soften competition between municipal areas, address historical disagreements between communities, get input on local priorities and pressing issues, and spread information about the municipal administrative organisation. While part of this, for instance, the need for acceptance and support for unpopular but necessary policy, applies to local participatory modes in general (Tahvilzadeh 2015b), some of it is context specific, as exemplified by one Gislaved politician: 'People [in these areas] don't see themselves as part of Gislaved's municipality, but as passive, somewhere in the periphery' (Informant 3).

The decisive differences between the two municipalities' processes seem to be their political preconditions and Gislaved's longer experience of arranging dialogues. In Krokomb, political turbulence had resulted in the abrupt resignation of the head of the executive board, a key initiator of the process, and this appears to have led the dialogue to start out as a largely improvised, civil servant-driven process. One Krokomb informant described the process:

Krokomb municipality will not stop without politicians who steer and work with citizens [in their role as] representatives. Decisions will be made and the work will continue anyway, but everything is run by civil servants. [...] It becomes pragmatic. It becomes ... solutions from the perspective of various functions, but you largely lose the big picture. (Informant 7)

Although both municipalities adopted a 'learn-as-you-go' approach, this was more encompassed in aspects of the Krokomb process. Informants from all three categories narrated this as leading to misunderstandings about the purpose of the Krokomb dialogue (cf. Tahvilzadeh 2015a; Granberg and Åström 2007) and to a couple of meetings being dominated by the elected representatives who attended.

Participants' perceptions of the dialogues' purpose were harder to deduce from the interviews, as informants' recollections were mixed. According to participant informants, the purpose appears to have been affected by the clarity of adverts and the complexity of workshops. Krokomb participant

informants also stated that the seemingly absence of a coherent plan affected all aspects, as this prevented municipal representatives from communicating a clear purpose.

Aggregation and translation of input

A final theme revolves around the more tangible aspects of documenting and preparing input to become more aggregated and part of policy making, provided that the preconditions for expressing input have been met. During this translation, there is a risk of misinterpreting information in favour of prevalent political goals and, thus, weakening its impact on policy (Tahvilzadeh 2015a, 2013).

In both cases, informants described a similar fashion in all meetings for documenting input, with one person responsible for taking notes and one or several civil servants summarising the material. However, part of the meetings were workshops in smaller groups, and, thus, notes were only conducted during plenum summaries. This is potentially problematic in light of the literature's emphasis on the process of translating input into the basis for further processing and, ultimately, decision making (Tahvilzadeh 2015a). In the interviews, Krokomp participants appeared to be sceptical about whether all views and comments made the cut, and one of them said that the official summary documents confirmed these concerns:

I could see that this is not how you write PM notes. [...] Someone who wasn't [at the meeting] could never understand what that writing means. That's a shortcoming, in my opinion, that this was not better documented. (Informant 14)

One of the Krokomp politicians had a different narrative and said 'positive feedback' was received on summaries from some of the meetings.

Plans for handling input diverged between the two cases. In Krokomp, interviews indicated that there has been no real plan for what to do with the input once collected, partially due to time constraints. Participant informants were critical about the lack of planning and feared this may damage the public's interest in further participation: "Well, we haven't had enough time [to prepare the meetings]", the [organiser] said. Which felt like ... why should we take the time to come here [...] when they haven't allocated time to prepare?" (Informant 13).

These appear to be valid concerns, as results from improvised or less thought-through participation have proven to be unpredictable (Tahvilzadeh 2015a; Karlsson and Gilljam 2015). Still, input was described as having tangible effects, for example, by changing municipal policy on closing down schools in sparsely populated areas. There was also a consensus among interviewed Krokomp politicians and civil servants that input from citizen

participation somehow needs to materialise into policy, although the forms of this have yet to be outlined. One Krokø informant summed this up: ‘My personal opinion is that a citizen dialogue needs to result in something more than merely an abstract of everyone’s opinion’. (Informant 11). While a successful dialogue depends on this outline, the ambition of utilising input saves the process from pitfalls, such as branding one-way communication as ‘dialogue’ (Fung 2015).

The process in Gislaved was described as having a more concrete, institutionalised plan for handling input, where the civil servants responsible for arranging the meetings forwarded issues directly to the relevant municipal committees. Civil servant and politician informants said the issues were then processed by committees and, if deemed feasible, included in existing budgets. The civil servant informants described two main obstacles to this. First, the lack of dedicated administrative resources means that issues move slowly through the municipal machinery, leading to frustration among engaged citizens. Second, this setup does not handle costly investments very well. The lack of a dedicated budget means that mainly smaller issues will fit into already-set committee budgets. However, larger projects are likely to spill into the fields of several committees (e.g., infrastructure and environment) and may need to involve the municipal council or the municipal executive board. Neither aspects was built into the process, which seemed to rely on small-scale ‘quick fixes’.

The civil servants also stated that they were aware of the problems of asymmetrical power among participants and the need to balance stronger and weaker voices (Fung 2006; Wallman Lundåsen and von Essen 2015; Taylor 2007). As stated above, civil servants and elected representatives pointed out the risk of interpreting the consensus in one geographic area as the view of the entire municipality, especially since individual politicians may align themselves with various interests and will sometimes see themselves as representatives of their home village or area rather than the entire municipality. These evaluations and balances are decisive for how different actors’ input will be handled and will thus affect a dialogue’s representativeness.

Conclusions

This study set out to examine what role citizen dialogues seem to have in relation to the representative system in rural municipal contexts by addressing how participation is constituted in rural dialogue and what considerations appear to influence the expression and channelling of input towards the policy process. By looking at these aspects of the processes, three main findings about the studied form of citizen dialogue in rural areas emerged, which add to the current knowledge of the field. A key finding is that the studied processes followed several expected patterns. One such area,

participation, was skewed in favour of resourceful groups and relied heavily on other forms of participation to mitigate this skewness. However, this study does not reveal what kind of measures for mitigating such skewness have been undertaken or to what extent they have worked to reduce any inequalities.

A second key finding regarding the implications of how the processes were planned shows that, when communication among organisers was sparse and the purpose of the dialogue was unclear, this appeared to be damaging in both the short and long term. The material reveals a problem that is not easily solved. For example, a less worked-through handling seemed to have expectedly negative implications, while a more structured operation unexpectedly showed signs of suffering from a lack of flexibility. Most of these planning-related problems were either affected by or were products of the rural preconditions of these cases. Rural contextual factors appear to have played a role both prior to and during the processes. The design of the process to include a number of meetings held in several small towns or somewhat urban centres was due to the rural preconditions of far distances and municipalities comprising potentially competing centres. Interviewed informants, both politicians and civil servants, were cautious regarding the risk of spurring partisan and client-oriented ideas (cf. Esaiasson and Lindberg 2014), which indicates an awareness of the challenges being amplified in rural communities in which relations between local stakeholders and citizens are generally closer (Denters et al. 2014). However, a third key finding of this study is that, despite vast differences in preconditions, the role of rural citizen dialogues appears to be conditioned, first and foremost, by the same constraints as its urban equivalent. No political decisions appear to be made outside the framework of representative democracy, which suggests that these dialogues are actually set within a much more traditional setup than later governance perspectives of hierarchically flat co-governing (Sørensen and Bentzen 2020; Pierre and Guy Peters 2000; Kooiman 1993). The results from the material are consistent on this matter, regardless of which actors are included in the process and what networks or ties exist between them. These findings confirm the subordinate position of dialogues (Karlsson and Gilljam 2015; Karlsson 2012; Tahvilzadeh 2015a; Smith 2009; Setälä 2011), indicating that their role is not that of a competitor but rather something else altogether. Drawing on the empirical material, the studied form of citizen dialogues, when successful, does appear to aid local democracy in a number of ways, for example, by providing policy makers with local knowledge, increasing local engagement and easing tensions within municipalities. Paradoxically, as these traits appear to be more relevant in rural municipalities, the dialogue processes also seem more challenging to plan and execute for smaller administrations. Furthermore, the unclear representativeness of its participants and the largely improvised

handling of input and the resulting frustration for participants and organisers alike also raise questions about whether this form of citizen dialogue is a viable political instrument for representing the citizens of a municipality.

We thus conclude that the most influential contextual aspect affecting these dialogues is arguably the context of Swedish municipalities *per se*, regardless of their placement in an urban and rural continuum. However, this study suggests that, while dominant, this aspect does not seem to rule out the importance of the rural context when studying the role of local citizen dialogues. For municipalities, the challenge remains in how to harness presumed positive effects while avoiding the pitfalls of arranging dialogues, be they urban or rural.

Notes

1. This includes everything from large and small municipalities to urban and rural, resourceful and more economically strained ones (Statistics Sweden 2018).
2. We do, however, acknowledge the different classifications of Swedish municipalities (SALAR 2017; Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth 2020).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Pontus Lund is a PhD student in political science at Mid Sweden University.

Gustav Lidén is an associate professor of political science at Mid Sweden University. He has a background in comparative politics with a specific interest in the local political arena.

Sara Nyhlén is a political scientist at Mid Sweden University, where she heads the Forum for Gender Studies. Her research interests focus on power, normalisation and intersectionality, and she uses a variety of qualitative methods, often focusing on policy analysis and policy enactment.

ORCID

Gustav Lidén  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7810-4470>

References

- Adenskog, M. 2018. *Democratic Innovations in Political Systems: Towards a Systemic Approach*. Örebro: Örebro University.
- Attride-Stirling, J. 2001. "Thematic Networks: An Analytic Tool for Qualitative Research." *Qualitative Research* 1 (3): 385–405. doi:[10.1177/146879410100100307](https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307).

- Bartels, L. M. 2017. "Political Inequality in Affluent Democracies: The Social Welfare Deficit." In *The 4th Conference in Political Economy & Political Science (Assessing Democratic Institutions)*. Toulouse.
- Birkland, T. A. 2016. *An Introduction to the Policy Process: Theories, Concepts, and Models of Public Policy Making*. 4 ed. New York: Routledge.
- Blakeley, G. 2010. "Governing Ourselves: Citizen Participation and Governance in Barcelona and Manchester." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 34 (1): 130–145. doi:10.1111/j.1468-2427.2010.00953.x.
- Bobbio, L. 2019. "Designing Effective Public Participation." *Policy and Society* 38 (1): 41–57. doi:10.1080/14494035.2018.1511193.
- Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp0630a.
- Bryman, A. 2018. *Samhällsvetenskapliga metoder*. Translated by B. Nilsson, 3rd ed. Stockholm: Liber.
- Cornwall, A., and R. Jewkes. 1995. "What Is Participatory Research?" *Social Science & Medicine* 41 (12): 1667–1676. doi:10.1016/0277-9536(95)00127-5.
- Crot, L. 2010. "Transnational Urban Policies: 'Relocating' Spanish and Brazilian Models of Urban Planning in Buenos Aires." *Urban Research & Practice* 3 (2): 119–137. doi:10.1080/17535069.2010.481217.
- Dahl, R. A. 1973. *Size and Democracy*, Edited by E. R. Tufte. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Dahl, R. A. 1994. "A Democratic Dilemma: System Effectiveness versus Citizen Participation." *Political Science Quarterly* 109 (1): 23–34. doi:10.2307/2151659.
- Delwit, P., J.-B. Pilet, H. Reynaert, and K. Steyvers. 2007. *Towards DIY-politics?: Participatory and Direct Democracy at the Local Level in Europe*, Edited by P. Delwit. Brugge: Vanden Broele.
- Denscombe, M. 2016. *Forskningshandboken : för småskaliga forskningsprojekt inom samhällsvetenskaperna*. Translated by P. Larsson, 3rd ed. Lund: Studentlitteratur.
- Denters, B., M. Goldsmith, A. Ladner, E. M. Poul, and L. E. Rose. 2014. *Size and Local Democracy*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar M.U.A.
- Dryzek, J. 2015. "Deliberative Engagement: The Forum in the System." *Journal of Environmental Studies and Sciences* 5 (4): 750–754. doi:10.1007/s13412-015-0299-8.
- Esaiasson, P., and S. I. Lindberg. 2014. "Policybaserade och klientelistiska relationer till väljarna." In *Svenska politiker: om de folkvalda i riksdag, landsting och kommun*, edited by D. Karlsson and M. Gilljam, 175–190. Stockholm: Santérus.
- Eurostat. 2019. *Methodological Manual on Territorial Typologies: 2018 Edition*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
- Fung, A. 2006. "Varieties of Participation in Complex Governance." *Public Administration Review* 66 (s1): 66–75. doi:10.1111/j.1540-6210.2006.00667.x.
- Fung, A. 2015. "Putting the Public Back into Governance: The Challenges of Citizen Participation and Its Future." *Public Administration Review* 75 (4): 513–522. doi:10.1111/puar.12361.
- Fung, A., and E. O. Wright. 2003. *Deepening Democracy: Institutional Innovations in Empowered Participatory Governance*. London: Verso.
- Gerring, J. 2017. *Case Study Research: Principles and Practices*. 2 ed. Cambridge United Kingdom; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Government Bill 2001/02:80. Demokrati för det nya seklet ("Democracy for the new century").
- Granberg, M., and J. Åström. 2007. "Deltagandets dilemman. Erfarenheter från stad-somvandling Södra Älvstranden." *Kommunal ekonomi och politik* 11 (3): 25–46.

- Grimes, M., and P. Esaiasson. 2014. "Government Responsiveness: A Democratic Value with Negative Externalities?" *Political Research Quarterly* 67 (4): 758–768. doi:[10.1177/1065912914543193](https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912914543193).
- Hysing, E. 2014. "How Public Officials Gain Policy Influence—Lessons from Local Government in Sweden." *International Journal of Public Administration* 37 (2): 129–139. doi:[10.1080/01900692.2013.836662](https://doi.org/10.1080/01900692.2013.836662).
- Karlsson, D., and M. Gilljam. 2015. "Den lokala demokratins utmaningar." In *SOU 2015:96, Låt fler forma framtiden! Forskarantologi*. 465–506. Stockholm: Ministry of Culture.
- Karlsson, M. 2012. "Participatory Initiatives and Political Representation: The Case of Local Councillors in Sweden." *Local Government Studies* 38 (6): 795–815. doi:[10.1080/03003930.2012.688036](https://doi.org/10.1080/03003930.2012.688036).
- Kingdon, J. W. 2014. *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. 2nd ed. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Kooiman, J. 1993. *Modern Governance: New Government-Society Interactions*. United Kingdom: Sage Publications.
- Ladner, A. 2019. *Patterns of Local Autonomy in Europe*. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lidström, A. 2016. "Swedish Local and Regional Government in a European Context." In *The Oxford Handbook of Swedish Politics*, edited by P. Jon, 414–428. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Listerborn, C. 2007. "Who Speaks? and Who Listens? the Relationship between Planners and Women's Participation in Local Planning in a Multi-cultural Urban Environment." *An International Journal on Geography* 70 (1): 61–74. doi:[10.1007/s10708-007-9114-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-007-9114-8).
- Lombe, M., and M. Sherraden. 2008. "Inclusion in the Policy Process: An Agenda for Participation of the Marginalized." *Journal of Policy Practice* 7 (2–3): 199–213. doi:[10.1080/15588740801938043](https://doi.org/10.1080/15588740801938043).
- Matsusaka, J. G. 2005. "Direct Democracy Works." *Journal of Economic Perspectives* 19 (2): 185–206. doi:[10.1257/0895330054048713](https://doi.org/10.1257/0895330054048713).
- Oscarsson, H., and S. Holmberg. 2013. *Nya svenska väljare*, Edited by S. Holmberg, 1st ed. Stockholm: Norstedts juridik.
- Patton, M. Q. 2002. *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*. 3rd ed. London: SAGE.
- Pierre, J., and B. Guy Peters. 2000. *Governance, Politics and the State*, Edited by B. Guy Peters. Basingstoke; New York: Macmillan; St. Martin's.
- Putnam, R. D. 1996. *Den fungerande demokratin : medborgarandans rötter i Italien*. Edited by R. Y. Robert Leonardi, J. B. Nanetti, M. Eklöf, and samhälle Studieförbundet Näringsliv och, 1st ed. Stockholm: SNS Studieförb. Näringsliv och samhälle.
- RKA. 2020. *Kommun- Och Landstingsdatabasen*. Stockholm: RKA.
- Rondinella, T., E. Segre, and D. Zola. 2017. "Participative Processes for Measuring Progress: Deliberation, Consultation and the Role of Civil Society." *An International and Interdisciplinary Journal for Quality-of-Life Measurement* 130 (3): 959–982. doi:[10.1007/s11205-015-1207-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-015-1207-z).
- SALAR. 2017. *Omarbetning av Sveriges Kommuner och Landstings kommungruppsindelning*. Stockholm: SALAR.
- SALAR. 2019a. *11 tankar om medborgardialog i styrning*. Stockholm: SALAR.
- SALAR. 2019b. *Medborgardialog i styrning: För ett stärkt demokratiskt samhälle*. Stockholm: SALAR.
- Schiller, T. 2011. *Local Direct Democracy in Europe*. 1 ed. Wiesbaden: VS, Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.

- Seawright, J. 2016. *Multi-method Social Science: Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Tools*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Setälä, M. 2011. "The Role of Deliberative Mini-publics in Representative Democracy: Lessons from the Experience of Referendums." *Representation* 47 (2): 201–213. doi:10.1080/00344893.2011.581080.
- Setälä, M., and T. Schiller. 2012. *Citizens' Initiatives in Europe: Procedures and Consequences of Agenda-setting by Citizens*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Smith, G. 2009. *Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sørensen, E., and T. Bentzen. 2020. "Public Administrators in Interactive Democracy: A Multi-paradigmatic Approach." *Local Government Studies* 46 (1): 139–162. doi:10.1080/03003930.2019.1627335.
- SOU series. 2016. *Låt fler forma framtiden! Betänkande av 2014 års Demokratiutredning – Delaktighet och jämlikt inflytande*. Stockholm: Ministry of Culture.
- Statistics Sweden. 2018. *Medborgardialog efter kommun. Mandatperiod 2010–2014–2014–2018*. Stockholm: Statistics Sweden.
- Statistics Sweden. 2020. *Statistikdatabasen*. Stockholm: Statistics Sweden.
- Stauskis, G. 2014. "Development of Methods and Practices of Virtual Reality as a Tool for Participatory Urban Planning: A Case Study of Vilnius City as an Example for Improving Environmental, Social and Energy Sustainability." *Energy, Sustainability and Society* 4 (1): 1–13. doi:10.1186/2192-0567-4-7.
- Stoker, G. 1998. "Governance as Theory: Five Propositions." *International Social Science Journal* 50 (155): 17–28. doi:10.1111/1468-2451.00106.
- Susha, I., and Å. Grönlund. 2012. "eParticipation Research: Systematizing the Field." *Government Information Quarterly* 29 (3): 373–382. doi:10.1016/j.giq.2011.11.005.
- Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth. 2020. *Kommunindelning stad och land*. edited by Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth. Stockholm: Swedish Agency for Economic and Regional Growth.
- Tahvilzadeh, N. 2013. "Dialogens politik: demokratiutveckling med förhinder." In *Framtiden är redan här: Hur invånare kan bli medskapare i sadens utveckling*, edited by, J. Stenberg, H. Abrahamsson, H. Benesch, M. Berg, P. Castell, E. Corkhill, S. Danielsson, et al., 32–35. Gothenburg: Chalmers University of Technology.
- Tahvilzadeh, N. 2015a. "Det våras för medborgardialoger." In *SOU 2015:96 Låt fler forma framtiden! Forskarantologi*. 507–558. Stockholm: Ministry of Culture.
- Tahvilzadeh, N. 2015b. "Understanding Participatory Governance Arrangements in Urban Politics: Idealist and Cynical Perspectives on the Politics of Citizen Dialogues in Göteborg, Sweden." *Urban Research & Practice* 8 (2): 238–254. doi:10.1080/17535069.2015.1050210.
- Taylor, M. 2007. "Community Participation in the Real World: Opportunities and Pitfalls in New Governance Spaces." *Urban Studies* 44 (2): 297–317. doi:10.1080/00420980601074987.
- Thomas, G. 2011. "A Typology for the Case Study in Social Science following A Review of Definition, Discourse, and Structure." *Qualitative Inquiry* 17 (6): 511–521. doi:10.1177/1077800411409884.
- Wallman Lundåsen, S., and Johan von Essen. 2015. "Medborgerligt Engagemang: Klassresa Eller Klassklyfta?" In *Låt fler forma framtiden! Forskarantologi*. 357–408. Stockholm: Ministry of Culture.

Zittel, T., and D. Fuchs. 2007. *Participatory Democracy and Political Participation: Can Participatory Engineering Bring Citizens Back In?* Oxon, London & New York: Routledge.

Appendix

Table A1. Compilation of informants.

	Municipality	Role
<i>Informant 1</i>	Gislaved	Civil servant
<i>Informant 2</i>	Gislaved	Civil servant
<i>Informant 3</i>	Gislaved	Politician
<i>Informant 4</i>	Gislaved	Politician
<i>Informant 5</i>	Gislaved	Participant
<i>Informant 6</i>	Gislaved	Participant
<i>Informant 7</i>	Krokom	Civil servant
<i>Informant 8</i>	Krokom	Civil servant
<i>Informant 9</i>	Krokom	Civil servant
<i>Informant 10</i>	Krokom	Civil servant
<i>Informant 11</i>	Krokom	Politician
<i>Informant 12</i>	Krokom	Politician
<i>Informant 13</i>	Krokom	Participant
<i>Informant 14</i>	Krokom	Participant
<i>Informant 15</i>	Krokom	Participant
<i>Informant 16</i>	Krokom	Participant