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Ideals of deliberative democracy in the context of informal civic participation - a qualitative study on structural characteristics of deliberative arrangements

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1 Introduction

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Abstract

Deliberative participation arrangements are understood to fulfill three criteria: (1) they enable an effective involvement of citizens; (2) they take place in pre-conceived settings and thus do not occur spontaneously; (3) they have at least informal influence on processes of political decision-making. There has been an increased proliferation and differentiation of these arrangements since the end of the nineties, with sometimes only technical details distinguishing individual arrangements. Common features of arrangements are that they claim to overcome perceived shortcomings of political systems geared to representation and to produce better results within the dimensions of systemic and democratic performance.

In the study, the research question was to pursue how far the structure of deliberative arrangements is able to demonstrate these claims. Five deliberative procedures in their ideal type structure were compared in an empirical qualitative study based on grounded theory methodology (GTM). Written records of the design of the procedures, insights from practical application as well as problem-centred interviews with experts in the field were used as evidence.

In the empirical analysis, the small differences of the studied procedures were examined and compared first. However, commonalities in terms of shared characteristics, expressed in the four central and interacting dimensions, were shown to be more significant. Thus, deliberative participation arrangements as time-limited objectives and learning spaces could be outlined through diverse and sometimes conflicting strategies aiming to stimulate participation.

“Anything goes” as a central phenomenon opened up an additional perspective on the subject matter of the investigation. It became clear that in order to be able to complete rules for each arrangement consistently, there are inherent mechanisms within the ideal structure itself which then prevent ideal procedures.

This study demonstrates that current deliberative participation arrangements fail to structurally operationalize deliberative norms in the three central dimensions: discourse quality, inclusion and political influence.