



## Healthier Democracies Case Study: Gdańsk, Poland

# HOW CITIZENS MAKE POLICY DECISIONS

by Melisa Ross

Citizens gather in small groups during the third Citizens' Assembly in October 2017.

In the city of Gdańsk, Poland, three citizens' assemblies, or Citizens' Panels (*Panele Obywatelski*) were organized between 2016 and 2017 with a small group of randomly selected citizens to tackle issues of floods, air quality and empowering civil society at the local level. Participants attended presentations and read documentation provided by experts on issues and were then given time and space to consider what local government could do to address these concerns. Each assembly culminated in the creation of a list of recommended measures. Those supported by a minimum of 80 percent of the participants became binding for the Gdańsk Mayor's Office.

While the citizens' assemblies were initially convened to respond to pressing concerns such as flooding and local infrastructure, Gdańsk has employed other long-term participatory structures to connect with citizens. Since 2013, annual participatory budgeting has allowed residents to prioritize public investments that improve their everyday lives on a smaller scale. Citizens can put forward proposals both for the district where they reside and



citywide. The proposals with the most support are then submitted to a popular vote, and those with the most votes become binding for the local government. Since 2021, a second, parallel process called the [Green Civic Budget](#) (*Zielony Budżet Obywatelski*) has been dedicated to generating ideas to make the city more environmentally friendly.

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## BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Gdańsk is a city on the Baltic coast of Northern Poland in the region of Pomerania. With a population of 470,000, it's the country's most important seaport and its fourth largest metropolitan area. It is also one of the few Polish cities with a growing population.

The city's history of civic participation is closely tied to Paweł Adamowicz, who served on the Gdańsk City Council from 1990–1998, and then as mayor from 1998 until his assassination in 2019. Mayor Adamowicz's accomplishments include signing the cooperation agreement for the creation of the Gdańsk-Sopot-Gdynia Metropolitan Area, also known as the [Tricity Area](#) (*Trójmiasto*), which brought together 57 local governments from the area of the Pomeranian Voivodeship to create joint development projects. He also promoted the incorporation of Gdańsk in multiple local innovation networks, such as [URBACT](#), [BoostINNO](#), [CHANGE!](#) and the [CityMobilNet](#) initiative. He introduced the Gdańsk Model of Integration of Immigrants<sup>1</sup> and the public innovation lab Gdańsk-LAB to improve cooperation among Gdańsk City Hall departments.

### Fast Facts

POLAND

**GDAŃSK**

POPULATION  
**470,000**

GDP  
**\$594 billion**

GEOGRAPHICAL AREA  
**101 mi<sup>2</sup>**

In this case study you'll find great examples of:



For more information, see the [PGL User Guide](#), [Glossary](#) and [Lessons Learned](#) at [publicagenda.org/healthier-democracies](https://publicagenda.org/healthier-democracies).

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<sup>1</sup> Anna Fedas, Marta Siciarek, and Piotr Olech, (eds.), *Model Integracji Imigrantów, Urząd Miejski w Gdańsku, Gdańsk* (City of Gdańsk, 2016). <https://www.Gdańsk.pl/download/2017-01/83702.pdf>.

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# SYSTEMS & PROCESSES

On November 26, 2015, the Gdańsk City Council passed Act Nr. XVI/494/15, which enabled residents to initiate a citizens' panel. By collecting 1,000 signatures or the support of 25 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), citizens can demand that the mayor call a citizens' consultation on a specific issue. The collection of 5,000 signatures in support of a consultation makes the convening mandatory for the mayor. This model offers a powerful combination of a bottom-up trigger mechanism for citizens' assemblies and top-down mechanisms for convening consultations.<sup>2</sup>

## Institutionalizing participation: Gdańsk's participatory budgeting

In 2011, residents of the Wrzeszcz Dolny district in Gdańsk formed a district council that organized its own neighborhood participatory budgeting for the years 2012 and 2013, with funds allocated by the City Council for urban regeneration (around €10,000 [~\$11,400] the first year and €13,000 [~\$14,840] the second year). Projects included the renovation of playgrounds, restocking the local library and increasing the number of bicycle racks.<sup>3</sup>

The Gdańsk City Council passed a statute to establish a citywide participatory budget in August 2013. In October of that year, the mayor of Gdańsk appointed a consultation committee with 21 representatives from the local government, the City Council and local NGOs to conduct the pilot project for the Citizens' Budget 2014.<sup>4</sup>

The process in Gdańsk follows the standard format of participatory budgeting, organizing open assemblies

in the different districts of the city. [Any resident](#) over 16 years of age can participate in assemblies, propose projects and cast a vote for projects in their respective districts and citywide. The proposals are aggregated into a list of priorities and submitted to a popular vote held exclusively online. All residents can vote for a project, regardless of whether or not they attend an assembly.<sup>5</sup>

In 2013, around 13.6 percent of the electorate took part in the voting stage. Women comprised 57 percent of participants, reaching a higher participation mark than in usual elections, where the number of women taking part is usually below 40 percent.<sup>6</sup> Participation seems to be in decline however. [In 2021](#), only 9.9 percent of the electorate took part, amounting to 43,000 people with around 10 percent more men than women.

The city of Gdańsk has been implementing participatory budgeting continuously since its inception. Funded and implemented projects include the rehabilitation of public parks and recreational spaces, the creation of vegetable gardens in public schools and kindergartens, new playgrounds and sports spaces for schools and districts, road renovations and footbridges in key points across the city, public bike parking lots and tourist information infrastructure. The [implementation status](#) of projects can be tracked online on the city's dedicated participatory budgeting website.

Since 2021, Gdańsk has divided the civic budget into two processes: the regular participatory budgeting and a separate proposal and voting procedure for the Green Civic Budget. It is conducted with the same process, but is dedicated to citizen proposals on environmental

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<sup>2</sup> Lyn Carson and Marcin Gerwin, "Embedding Deliberative Democracy in Poland," *newDemocracy Research Note* (May 8, 2018), [https://newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/docs\\_researchnotes\\_2018\\_May\\_nDF\\_RN\\_20180508\\_EmbeddingDeliberativeDemocracyInPoland.pdf](https://newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/docs_researchnotes_2018_May_nDF_RN_20180508_EmbeddingDeliberativeDemocracyInPoland.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Maja Grabkowska, "Between gentrification and reurbanisation: The participatory dimension of bottom-up regeneration in Gdańsk, Poland," *Geografie* 120, no. 2 (January 2015): 210–225, <https://doi.org/10.37040/geografie2015120020210>.

<sup>4</sup> Jasmina Džinić, Mária Murray Svidroňová, and Ewa Markowska-Bzducha, "Participatory Budgeting: A Comparative Study of Croatia, Poland and Slovakia," *The NISPAcee Journal of Public Administration and Policy* 9, no. 1 (June 2016): 41, <https://doi.org/10.1515/nispa-2016-0002>.

<sup>5</sup> Džinić, Svidroňová, and Markowska-Bzducha, "Participatory Budgeting," 42–43.

<sup>6</sup> Dorota Kamrowska-Zaluska, "Participatory budgeting in Poland—Missing link in urban regeneration process," *Procedia Engineering* 161 (December 2016): 1998, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.proeng.2016.08.792>.

protection and ecology, and supporting the local administration in developing green policies. Projects can be related to one specific district or to citywide improvements and are organized into five thematic areas: planting and caring for vegetation in urban green areas, new green spaces, the construction of rain gardens, the renovation and modernization of the development of existing green areas and ecological activities.

## Institutionalizing deliberation: Citizens' Assemblies

In summer 2016, heavy rainfall caused flooding in the city of Gdańsk, particularly in the district of Wrzeszcz. The damage was severe: two residents perished and repairs were estimated to cost millions of euros. Experts warned that due to climate change, Gdańsk was likely to face more extreme rainfall and the city was ill prepared to face extreme weather events. A resident and activist for citizen participation, Marcin Gerwin, approached Mayor Adamowicz to propose the idea of a citizens' panel to discuss and assess how to better prepare the city for future floods and extreme rainfall. Adamowicz accepted the proposition and agreed to enact any proposals where at least 80 percent of the participants voted in favor of it.



### OPPORTUNITIES

Three citizens' assemblies were formally convened by the mayor in cooperation with public servants from the Mayor's Office and a team of three or more independent coordinators.

### ORGANIZING THE ASSEMBLY

The first citizens' assembly in Gdańsk consisted of 64 members plus four substitutes chosen to reflect the population and demographic composition of the city's 34 districts, with one representative for every 10,000 residents.<sup>7</sup>



### COMMITMENTS

The voters' registry was then used to identify potential participants through random selection to match four demographic criteria: gender, age, district of residence and education level. Individual demographic profiles for all 56 seats of the citizens' assembly were designed to ensure equality and to reflect the demographics of the city. Once the profiles were set, the preselection of potential participants was conducted with the support of a random selection software. The platform analyzed the registry and produced a list of addresses and identification info for citizens who matched the criteria, and assigned an individual code to each for the invitation. Over 8,000 invitations were sent out to people matching each demographic profile and from the responses, a final randomized selection was completed with the support of the open-source program [Panel helper](#), and, in a final round, by rolling a dice. The process was transmitted live on the citizens' assembly website to offer transparency and build trust.

A monitoring team consisting of 7 to 15 people from different backgrounds was tasked with following the development of the assembly to assess the roles of all those involved, including the coordinators and facilitators. The monitoring team could demand a change in the program if the quality standards of assemblies or deliberation were violated during the process. Paid external observers, nominated by an external body, evaluated the panel's performance.<sup>8</sup>

**The main aim of the citizens' panel is, above all, civic engagement... The impact of citizens' panels is true democracy, getting people involved in political activities.**

**PIOTR GRZELAK,**  
*Deputy Mayor for Sustainable Development*

<sup>7</sup> Dawid Szescilo, "Co-Producing Local Policies Through Citizens' Panels," *Journal of Comparative Urban Law and Policy* 4, no. 1, Article 14 (2020): 94.

<sup>8</sup> Marcin Gerwin, Łukasz Pancewicz, and Magdalena Haas, *Raport Podsumowujący Panel Obywatelski* (City of Gdańsk, 2016).

## FUNDING CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

Each assembly has costed approximately €30,000 (~\$34,260). Members of the citizens' assemblies were paid a fee of 600 Polish zloty (PLN) for their participation (at the time, equivalent to \$160). The stipend for participants was meant to convey that the local government took the process seriously.<sup>9</sup>

Participants were engaged by a contract establishing the conditions for their participation and remuneration. The participant fee was set to cover the costs of travel or child care for the four weekends taken up by the assembly. The decision to pay an allowance for participation ensured that not only those interested or already involved in the issue participated, but also as an incentive for citizens who had not been previously active in city matters. The allowance is increasingly relevant the longer a citizens' assembly is planned to last.<sup>10</sup>

Assembly organizers and facilitators were remunerated as contractors for City Hall. Stakeholders were not remunerated, as they participated to advance their own interests.

## PREPARATION AND EDUCATIONAL PHASE

In order to provide everyone a chance to participate, two weeks before the citizens' assemblies, all residents were invited to send in their preliminary comments regarding a given issue by email, writing a letter or calling a designated phone line. The municipality also published a call for experts and stakeholders interested in presenting their positions on the issue. Experts or stakeholders could also be proposed by any interested parties, including the coordinating team and the municipality.

The three citizens' assemblies took place on weekends over the course of four days. The first two days were dedicated to the learning or educational phase and the last two days to deliberating proposals and drafting recommendations. To respect both the time and capacity of participants, expert and stakeholder presentations were limited to 12 to 20 minutes covering the most essential information, and handouts with additional resources

were distributed. The presentations and the question and answer sessions were transmitted live on the website of the citizens' assembly, as well as recorded and made available for asynchronous viewing. After each presentation, four-person groups matched for maximum diversity engaged in 10 minutes of discussion in multiple rounds.

## DELIBERATING AND DELIVERING POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The final two days of assembly were dedicated to the thorough debate of input received from experts and stakeholders. During the first deliberation day, to ensure meaningful and equal exchanges, a first round was dedicated to establishing the common good to be achieved and the common values of participants. Small groups then discussed possible solutions and recommendations. Discussion criteria included relevance, clarity and level of support. Similar proposals could be joined together. Proposals with sufficient support were submitted to a simple majority vote.

The preliminary list of proposals was then submitted to the municipality to be evaluated as to whether a proposal was legally practicable, whose responsibility or jurisdiction it might fall under and its estimated costs. This part of the process could take two to four weeks depending on the complexity of the subject and the number of recommendations.

During the second deliberation day, the assembly reviewed the conclusions from experts, stakeholders and the municipality on its preliminary list of recommendations. A final discussion was conducted with the whole group, moderated by facilitators, to review each agreed upon recommendation. Questions considered for each recommendation included: What are its strengths and weaknesses? Is there resistance against this recommendation? What are the specific needs addressed by the recommendation?

Finally, a voting round was held for each recommendation. If there were several options to choose from, votes were counted using the modified borda count tool and the

<sup>9</sup> Marcin Gerwin, "Delivering the Process of Designing Recommendations by the Citizens' Assembly," 2018, [https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/delivering\\_recommendations\\_-\\_attachment\\_to\\_gdansk\\_case.pdf](https://urbact.eu/sites/default/files/delivering_recommendations_-_attachment_to_gdansk_case.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> Marcin Gerwin, *Citizens' Assemblies: Guide to democracy that works* (Kraków: Otwarty Plan, 2018).

Decision-Maker software. The consensus coefficient is used to check if the required level of support (80 percent of participants) had been reached. For each individual recommendation, participants could express their preference on a scale of eight options: 1) Strongly agree, 2) Agree, 3) Agree with doubts or reservations, 4) Many doubts, 5) Rather disagree, 6) Disagree, 7) Strongly disagree, and 8) Rejected for other reasons. The aim of this voting method was to allow citizens to vote honestly and find a precise expression of their position.

Proposals that received support from more than 80 percent of the participants were adopted as recommendations by the citizens' assembly and became mandatory for the local government to enact. If the support for a given proposal was lower, then it was treated as a suggestion, which the mayor could, but did not have to, take into consideration. The level of 80 percent was considered to represent an almost complete consensus, or supermajority. Such a high threshold assured that public support for a given proposal would be very high.

### First citizens' assembly (2016)

The first citizens' assembly was convened after the aforementioned 2016 flood damage to generate proposals to better prepare the city for future climate-related challenges. The citizens' panel was tasked with answering three questions:

1. How might we improve the retention of rainwater in the Tricity Landscape Park?
2. What should be the scope of assistance for the residents of Gdańsk after a heavy rainfall?
3. When building new retention reservoirs, should the city stop filling them partially with water?

The assembly pared down the input from experts and stakeholders to 19 specific recommendations. Sixteen of them received over 80 percent support and were passed as binding recommendations for the municipality. These ranged from a \$40 million investment in infrastructure and monitoring systems to an educational campaign

highlighting emergency resources and a ban on forest clear-cutting.

A year after the first assembly in 2017, heavy rainfall caused floods again. The city responded faster to the emergency and "was better prepared to respond thanks to the citizens' assembly's work."<sup>11</sup> The municipality estimated that they had been able to complete around 90 percent of the measures recommended by the assembly.<sup>12</sup> The local government developed a communication campaign to inform residents where to get help in cases of emergency and crises. It also created a fund for small interventions to create retention pools and started drafting [urban development plans](#) to incorporate the larger infrastructure recommendations that emerged from the assembly with investments of [150 million PLN](#) (~\$37.8 million). Participants also reported becoming more committed to the city's well-being and appreciative of the opportunity to be heard and influence political decision-making after their experience in the assembly.

### Second citizens' assembly (2017)

In spring 2017, a second citizens' assembly was organized around reducing air pollution. While Gdańsk's air quality ranked higher than many other cities in Poland, the topic was at the center of national debate at the time, and local pollution levels were in excess of the recommended threshold set by the World Health Organization.

The question addressed was: **What solutions should be introduced to improve the city's air quality and to reduce pollution from domestic heating stoves and coal-fired furnaces?**

The topic was defined as part of a larger debate on air quality, but was limited to an aspect that could be debated in the time assigned to the assembly. The organizing team decided to exclude the aspect of air pollution caused by automobiles and other methods of transportation, as well as emissions from private-owned industrial plants, all of which are beyond the jurisdiction of the City Council.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Marcin Gerwin, "Delivering the Process."

<sup>12</sup> Piotr Grzelak (Deputy Mayor for Sustainable Development), interviewed by Eugenia Scanferla, Gdańsk City Hall, September 24, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> Marcin Gerwin, *Raport Podsumowujący Panel Obywatelski* (City of Gdańsk, 2017): 2, <https://download.cloudgdansk.pl/gdansk-pl/d/20170488884/raport.pdf>.

Nine recommendations reached the 80 percent threshold of participant votes. While the Gdańsk city website does not currently display information about the implementation of the second panel's recommendations, public servants have indicated that some of them were incorporated into governance plans immediately, while others were, unfortunately, impossible to implement.

**In this case, the questions were more general and the recommendations were made far beyond the financial possibilities of the city. For Gdańsk, there was a recommendation to eliminate all coal-fired furnaces by 2020. We estimated that this cost, this impact could be achieved... but by 2030! Still, a certain number of recommendations were implemented, but not in such a percentage as in the first [assembly].**

**PIOTR GRZELAK**

### Third citizens' assembly (2017)

The third citizens' assembly in Gdańsk was convened to debate on the topic of improving civic engagement. No concrete event triggered this assembly; instead, it was organized on the conviction that the city of Gdańsk wanted to improve and expand participation in public life. The assembly was organized in connection with the proposal to adopt the [European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life](#) at the city level. Organized around the question of how to support civic activity in Gdańsk, the questions and final recommendations included:

1. How can we support the development of civic engagement in schools? *By implementing participatory budgeting in schools, introducing democratic education programs and increasing opportunities for students to influence school curricula, among others.*
2. How can we support civic engagement among adults? *By evaluating the implementation of projects funded with participatory budgeting on a case-by-case basis, citizen monitoring of all stages of participatory budgeting and including highly supported but not funded projects in the city development plans.*
3. How can we promote equal treatment at the city level? *By advancing gender and LGBT+ equality through an increase in funds allocated to NGOs*

*working to help victims of violence, introducing anti-discrimination education in schools (with consent of parents on the curricula) and implementing mandatory anti-discrimination training for public servants, among others.*

Since one of the issues submitted for debate was the civic engagement of students, the coordinators decided to organize students' assemblies for junior high and secondary school students, selected by lot. A workshop was organized with them to discuss their perspectives on civic engagement and what would be needed to support engagement in schools. In addition, an extra one-day debate was organized for assembly members on the support and equal treatment of men, women and LGBT+ persons in connection with the recommendations regarding the European Charter for Equality.

The assembly did not ultimately recommend that the city pledge the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life. The resolutions adopted by the third assembly thus departed from the city's plans to improve gender equality.

**The government had planned to adopt the European Charter for Equality of Women and Men in Local Life, but because of the decision of the citizens' assembly, it could not be introduced—because the participants had not accepted it and their decision was mandatory for the local government. In the end, the City Council introduced its own model for equal treatment.**

**SYLWIA BETLEJ,**  
*Acting Director, Office for District Councils  
and Cooperation with Residents*

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# OUTCOMES

## Influence, outcome and effects of citizens' assemblies

Public officials in Gdańsk estimate that around 80 percent of the final recommendations from the citizens' assemblies were enacted, although some of those recommendations took longer to enact than others. After the completion of the assemblies, local government staffers in charge of the procedural part evaluated "which department, which recommendations, which unit could implement it appropriately," and assigned those recommendations accordingly. "And they would implement it as far as possible, as far as their means allowed. Sometimes the recommendations take years to implement, such as building a retention pond or replacing the furnace, which need to be budgeted for."<sup>14</sup>

Some problems arose with single recommendations that were challenging to translate into government action, "because they refer, for example, to some

recommendations to conduct activities in schools, but neither the principals nor the students were interested; it's as if the residents [assembly members] thought it would be interesting, but the principals and the students said that it would not be useful for them at all, and so the recommendation was not implemented."<sup>15</sup>

For a few years after the citizens' assemblies, the local office in charge continued to meet with the monitoring team and hold press conferences, "an open meeting to inform citizens about the steps of implementations of their recommendations." The information was also submitted to the citizen representatives who participated in the panels, "so they would know that what they had worked on was being implemented."<sup>16</sup> Still, communicating proposal results wasn't as simple as expected, considering that "the actions taken after the citizens' assembly do not always have an immediate effect" and that public works recommended by the assemblies take place sporadically.<sup>17</sup>

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# LESSONS

## Visibility and recognition

Gdańsk's citizen assemblies are widely acknowledged as both innovative and successful. Implementing this experimental form of citizen participation with mandatory results gave the city prominence at the national, European and international levels and granted the local government recognition and inclusion in numerous networks.

Gdańsk's assemblies have also served as a model for other citizens' assemblies and panels that have been taking place across the country; seven other Polish cities have recently conducted or are conducting citizens' assemblies, especially around issues of environmental protection and climate change. Many of these assemblies have emerged as bottom-up demands from organized civil society groups, and in particular from youth

<sup>14</sup> Sylwia Betlej (Acting Director, Office for District Councils and Cooperation with Residents), interviewed by the author, October 5, 2021, Gdańsk City Hall.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Grzelak, interview.

<sup>17</sup> Betlej, interview.



and student movements. Gdańsk's assemblies have set institutional standards for the random selection of participants and the mandatory and binding nature of the resulting recommendations.<sup>18</sup>

## Responsiveness: Bringing citizens and governments closer

Public officials in Gdańsk have reported that citizens' assemblies have been essential to understanding citizens' preferences:

**Few politicians would want to go against public opinion, and the question is always how to get this public opinion.... The panel gives us this possibility, to translate people's feelings into action. It is a tool to get to know the citizens' opinion on important issues for their city.**

**PIOTR GRZELAK**

Citizen assemblies were important in building public servants' receptivity to citizens' input, to better knowing and understanding their electorate and to developing solutions to the city's challenges through public participation. Public servants have since reported more openness toward other forms of participation as well.

**A citizens' assembly is a good solution when we are building a strategy for the city, when we need a broader discussion about the direction in which the city should go. But many things can also be achieved with other methods of consultation. For example, we can use this participation tool on a smaller scale.... We want to implement small district assemblies; try it out on a small scale to see if this method works also on a local level. Because it could be less costly but, in the meantime, also more effective.**

**SYLWIA BETLEJ**

The regulation for citizens' assemblies and the Gdańsk is criticized by scholars who consider citizens' juries and panels of "limited value" or as mechanisms that simply

"reinforce authority."<sup>19</sup> Instead, an institutionalized arrangement such as the one in place in Gdańsk has been shown to increase trust in institutions and the agency of participants. Citizen assemblies are tools that can give legitimacy to political decision-making and decision-making power to informed citizens.

*Support for this research was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundation.*

<sup>18</sup> Marcin Gerwin (PhD Specialist in deliberative democracy and sustainability, Initiative for Citizens' Assemblies and Center for Climate Assemblies), interviewed by the author, June 6, 2021.

<sup>19</sup> Carson and Gerwin, "Embedding Deliberative."

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