CHAPTER 4

Inside the Black Box: Perspectives and Attitudes of Civil Servants on Citizen Participation

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Introduction

One essential feature of Weberian bureaucratic administration is the distance from the 'administered' as a guarantee of neutrality and objectivity in the functioning of a public administration. This distance from the public and its protection from political power ensures that the organization is protected from the struggle of interests inherent in society and in the political. This image of an administration, and as one that is blind and distant from social interests, has however given way to the emergence of a new paradigm: that of an administration that is close to citizens, open to

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the public, that operates through relations with citizens and that secures a sufficient level of transparency of the process.

This new image of public administration, which is open and accessible to the demands of society, is expected to use new forms of communication, consultation, and decision-making techniques (Vigoda, 2002). The passage from the mysterious black box to the glass box furthermore involves the emergence of citizen participation as a value in itself, and on which the legitimacy of the administrative apparatus ultimately depends. Citizen participation can take different forms (right to information, consultation, or decision-making procedures), can use different channels (face-to-face or digital) and can ultimately pursue multiple purposes. Some assume that citizen participation improves the quality of public decisions (King et al., 1998; Schachter, 1995; Thomas, 1995). Others are of the opinion that participation strengthens trust in public institutions, improves cohesion, and promotes social capital (Nabatchi, 2010; Roberts, 1997). In sum, citizen participation is expected to have benefits for democracy as a whole, and for the institutional performance of public institutions specifically. More recent studies have, however, focused on the analysis of costs of participation, the methodology used, the stakeholders and its potential dysfunctional effects (Berner et al., 2011; Burton, 2009; Velasco & Ruano, 2021).

The literature recognizes the importance of the role of public managers, this being due to their central position in the public administration between the political actors who ultimately act as promoters of participation strategies, and civil society which seeks to influence the decision-making process. It was therefore traditionally assumed that public managers limited themselves to implementing political decisions, while maintaining an attitude of exquisite neutrality. Some of the literature considers the final configuration of participatory systems to be largely determined by the attitudes of public managers towards citizen participation, attitudes which depend on personal as well as organizational or contextual factors (Ianniello et al., 2019; Liao & Schachter, 2018; Migchelbrink & Van de Walle, 2021; Yang & Callahan, 2007)

The objective of this chapter is to, based on these considerations, carry out a comparative analysis of the attitudes of civil servants involved in the processes of participation in the cities of Madrid, Oslo and Melbourne, three cities which have implemented institutionalized systems of face-to-face and digital citizen participation in different administrative contexts. The general position of the specialized literature on the role of public

managers in participation will then be presented. This is followed by a justification of the selection of the three units of analysis and the methodology employed and a presentation of the data analysis, concluded by highlighting the main findings of the research.

Factors Conditioning Civil Servants' Attitudes

The literature on civil servants' attitudes towards citizen participation processes has identified a number of variables that condition their attitudes and behaviour. Some of these variables are of a personal nature. Others relate to the characteristics of the participatory processes, the elements of the administrative culture or the socio-political context. This demonstrates that public managers do not passively accept policy guidelines solely on the basis of the values of the neutrality and legality expected of them, their perspective on public policies being also determined by a number of other factors, some ultimately promoting or hindering the implementation of participatory systems.

Elected officials are often promoters of citizen participation initiatives, the implementation stage of these initiatives being determined by factors such as the wide variety of designs and trust in elected officials (Liao, 2018). Social actors such as neighbourhood associations, business representatives, social movements, political parties, or individuals may try to influence the content of participatory policies, by exerting pressure on public managers to promote their specific interests or ideology (Yang & Callahan, 2007, pp. 251–252). It is, however, common for bureaucrats to invoke lobbyists' or individual citizens' lack of technical knowledge, their lack of expertise, their ignorance of the administrative procedure, or the false expectations created by participatory processes, as weaknesses of social actors (Ianniello et al., 2019, pp. 26–27). The political and institutional dynamics of a city and the resilience of public managers to external pressures can determine citizen input in participatory decisions. There is, nevertheless, no doubt that the groups that are better organized or better able to exert influence may end up setting the agenda of participatory politics (Campbell, 2010). The number and type of participants, their level of presence in the deliberative or decision-making arenas, and the representativeness of these groups or individuals of the wider community may therefore condition the input legitimacy of the participatory process (Koppenjan, 2008). The paradox of participatory processes is therefore, even where most processes are based on direct democracy techniques,

the perceived quality of the process may be affected by the low social representativeness of participants or the persistence of 'ever-present' or dominant groups, and therefore ultimately condition its development.

Contextual variables mentioned in the literature that may favour or hinder participatory policies (beside factors related to external actors) include the size of cities, their demographic structure, the political colour of the government, the political-administrative structure, the educational and income level of the population, trust in elected officials (Hong, 2015; Liao & Schachter, 2018) or even the type of civic or moralistic culture prevailing (Neshkova & Guo, 2018).

Process design is, due to internal factors shaping participatory processes and to design having a decisive influence on the perceptions and attitudes of public managers, a key element. The inclusion in design of the instruments of dialogue and the dynamics of involvement also makes design a key element. The design of face-to-face or online mechanisms can, in this sense, facilitate or hinder the participation of certain social actors, the type of language or terminology used restricting communication to groups that are more familiar with the complexity of administrative procedures, therefore alienating marginal social groups, minorities or individuals (Halvorsen, 2003). Resources such as personnel, technology, time, budget, or political support may also be perceived as being key elements in the implementation stage (Kim & Schachter, 2013). Citizen participation may be felt like an additional workload upon systems that coordinate with other areas of government, with districts or between administrations, an aspect which should also be noted.

More intangible factors such as management culture also play an important role in shaping the perceptions of public managers. Red tape or bureaucratic structures characterized by hierarchical authority can be factors that negatively affect the momentum and development of participatory initiatives (Yang & Pandey, 2011). Top-down structures can generate distance between citizens and administrators, and the prevalence of a 'conservative' administrative culture based on centralized command and control systems can prevent the generation of a climate of trust with social actors and the creation, in participatory decision-making models, of important arenas for debate and discussion. An open administrative culture or an adaptive or relational leadership style can, however, favour the rapprochement between public institutions and civil society. The institutionalization of flexible forms of communication between them

can also, indirectly, promote a positive attitude in officials towards the participatory tools (Bussu & Bartels, 2014).

The impact of personal factors in shaping public managers' attitudes should also be considered. Some research points out the importance of satisfaction with work performed, the trust of citizens, their ability to interact with heterogeneous social groups, their educational level, gender, age, seniority, their level of fear of losing power or control (Feeney & Welch, 2012; Liao & Schachter, 2018), whether they hold a technocratic conception that is insensitive to political or social values other than bureaucratic expertise (Galbraith, 1975), or have a personal assessment of the cost–benefit ratio of previous participatory processes (Bohmelt et al., 2016).

Rational of Case Selection and Research Methods

Madrid, Oslo, and Melbourne have developed digital citizen participation systems that have been added to the traditional spaces for face-to-face participation. The three cities have different political and administrative traditions. All three have, however, used participatory instruments to handle certain institutional weaknesses. For example, the low public opinion of Melbourne's local governance was the basis for implementing alternative forms of communication and consultation between civil society and policy-makers. Melbourne belongs to Australia's Westminster administrative tradition, which is characterized by values of neutrality, anonymity, and authority and by accountability resting with elected officials. The participation policy drive is therefore essentially political.

The institutional trust indices in Oslo are relatively positive compared with other European political systems. The prolonged decline in local election participation has, however, been seen to be a sign of a latent crisis in local democracy. Strategies have therefore been pursued to revitalize local democracy, through an administrative culture that seeks cooperation, openness, democratic dialogue, and social participation. The implementation of citizen participation initiatives in Oslo furthermore benefits from the legal requirement to carry out consultations in different policy areas, and from an administrative culture that favours the autonomy of administrative departments in their interaction with civil society.

An attempt has been made in Madrid, to overcome the widespread distrust of the political class and of institutional performance. This has

been promoted through the use of a flexible institutional model that allows the deployment of participatory instruments, brings consultative and decision-making processes closer to the citizens, and gives a voice to the most active and interested social actors and citizens in municipal governance. Madrid therefore combines the tradition of a professionalized and neutral civil service with a broad autonomy of the political authorities, to promote participatory schemes. The main promoters are the elected officials.

Most of the information collected in this research was derived from a questionnaire that was sent to public managers in the three cities. These managers were involved in citizen participation processes and were based in urban development departments in the central organization or in the districts from May to June 2020. The questionnaires used in each were similar in structure, but were adapted to the political-institutional reality of each city. The questionnaire used in Melbourne was therefore distributed in seven inner-city council areas, distribution being extended to public employees in the State of Victoria, which is responsible for larger urban development projects. Preparing a public list of potential recipients of the questionnaire was difficult in Melbourne. This was, however, overcome by using a recruitment system that consisted of a mix of direct emails, LinkedIn messages, and snowballing. Distribution in Oslo took into account the active role of municipal agencies in the design and implementation of projects, and in Madrid the questionnaire was sent to officials of the central planning services and to those assigned to the city's districts, these being the territorial arenas for neighbourhood debate.

The questionnaire consisted of a set of multiple-choice questions on perceptions of participation systems, their limitations or drawbacks, the adequacy of existing technical systems, the communication channels used, the frequency of contact with different sectors of organized civil society, and the degree of influence of these groups on urban development decisions. The survey included open-ended questions that encouraged participants to express their views freely, which served to deepen, illustrate, or nuance the answers provided.

The total number of responses received was 369, from Madrid 201, from Oslo 95, and from Melbourne 73. The profile of participants showed that university-educated professionals and women predominated in the survey (58% in Madrid, 60% in Oslo and 62% in Melbourne).

The analysis strategy consisted of, first, ordering and systematizing the questionnaire questions to design 5 key study variables, each being

subdivided into operational variables or sub-variables that account for the content of the main variable. This is shown in Table 4.1.

The quantitative data provided by the survey was supplemented by in-depth interviews with key managers, who are directly involved in the design or implementation of urban development projects (see Appendix of interviews and their coding).

Thirty-seven interviews were conducted with key managers between May 2019 and July 2021, 23 of the interviewees being City of Oslo managers. The in-depth interviews served a dual purpose. Those conducted before the questionnaire provided insight into the context of each city and the details of each participation system. Those conducted after the questionnaire were used to interpret the quantitative data obtained from the survey.

Data Analysis

Citizen Participation and Its Problems

One of the clearest results of the study is the positive perception of public managers of participation in general. More than 80% of all respondents in the three cities said that participation contributes to good evidence-based decision-making (Mad = 82.9; Osl = 89.4; Mel = 87.5). There is also a strong opinion, in the three cities, that citizen participation initiatives improve democratic transparency, and promote the inclusion of traditionally marginalized groups. They, therefore, believe it increases the likelihood that people will support or accept change (Mad = 76.5; Osl = 63.1; Mel = 77.5), that it provides information on residents' experiences and increases our understanding of how people contribute (Mad = 84.6; Osl = 93.6; Mel = 90.2), that it allows input from silent voices that do not participate in the life of the organization (Mad = 60.5; Osl = 66.3; Mel = 73.1), and allows a diversity of stakeholders to have a voice in changes that affect them (Mad = 77.6; Osl = 70.2; Mel = 80).

This optimistic perspective on the possibilities provided by citizen participation is supported by the responses obtained from the open-ended questions, and by some of the interviews:

> *75% of the time consultation has turned out to be a powerful tool. We don't want to be in a position where the community thinks we have not consulted*

Table 4.1 Variables analysed and their operationalization

Variables	*Sub-variables*
1. Perception on participation	1.1. It contributes to good evidence-based decision-making 1.2. It increases the possibility that people endorse or accept change 1.3. It gives information about residents' experiences and an increased understanding of how they contribute 1.4. It allows inputs from silent voices that do not participate in organisational life 1.5. It allows a diversity of stakeholders a voice in changes that affect them
2. Problems of participation	2.1. Good participatory processes take time 2.2. People may lose motivation if they invest much time without seeing acceptable results 2.3. Civil servants and elected officials are hesitant to let residents influence decisions 2.4. Stronger groups use the system more effectively 2.5. People do not discriminate between the right to give suggestions and the right to certain results 2.6. Participation is becoming professionalized
3. Participatory infrastructure	3.1. We have procedures for participation embedded in our development plans 3.2. We have assigned officers responsible for coordinating urban development processes 3.3. We have procedures for involving councils and other organizations in developing urban policy 3.4. Collaboration between different departments in our organization works well 3.5. Collaboration between the municipality and the state works well
4. Communication channels and their administrative use	4.1. City webpages 4.2. City digital platforms and participatory apps 4.3. Social media (i.e. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter) 4.4. Webpages/social media pages started by residents or organizations

(continued)

Table 4.1 (continued)

Variables	*Sub-variables*
5. Contacts with stakeholders and their influence	5.1. NGOs 5.2. Sports associations 5.3. Religious associations 5.4. Educational institutions 5.5. Cultural/Ethnic associations 5.6. Business organizations 5.7. Neighbourhood associations 5.8. Developers/Property owners 5.9. Individual residents

Source Own elaboration

properly, and then we start the work and objections start coming in (…) I think it is useful, and the council benefits from it" .(Interview Mel 6)

We have to accept that the 'less qualified' opinion of the citizen is sometimes difficult, although generally enriching. (Mad)

The potential improvements provided by citizen participation are the result of a process of political change, thus providing an 'opportunity window' which public managers can take advantage of:

The work commenced after a change in government, it was partly driven by a change in approach for managing our digital products and relates to the philosophy within our team (…) within the policy of the government we could see that there was a space. So, we could see that there would be a focus on community engagement (…) We really saw an opportunity. (Interview Mel 3)

Participation requires a process of continuous improvement. The goal is to professionalise participation internally and avoid its politicisation. We want to avoid political bias, to broaden participation, so that the same people do not always participate. (Interview Mad 2)

Well, what I think is important in terms of the development of the city, is the political interference of the councils, and what is the culture around community engagement. So if the council trusts the planners, and our Maribyrnong council has a political environment where the council has trust in the staff to do proper community engagement and if the political messages are the same

in the organisation, you get more stuff done. Political environment is very important in the development of the city. (Interview Mel 2)

An analysis of the practical problems associated with implementation soon, however, shatters this optimistic perspective on participation. One clear practical problem is the lack of time, which is an essential resource. This is recognized by the majority of public managers in the three cities (Mad = 70.2; Osl = 50.5; Mel = 62.1) and confirmed by the open-ended questions. Embedded in the lack of time is also the risk that participants lose interest in participating if they do not see acceptable results within a reasonable period of time (Mad = 89.5; Osl = 90.5; Mel = 91.9):

Bureaucracy makes it difficult (impossible) to respond in a timely manner to enquiries. A comment will be handled by four different people before it gets to the subject matter expert, who can't engage directly but must go back through all the channels. (Mel)

(There is) a danger of symbolic participation, that the process takes too long with no results, and explanations are not given. (Osl)

Another main problem reported by public managers is citizens' lack of technical knowledge of administrative procedures or the competencies of the different administrations:

"(We should know) on which issues citizens should be listened to and the more objective aspects (technical, legal...) that should take precedence and that citizens sometimes do not know about. (Mad)

Many suggestions are made on issues that the district does not control, they therefore have to be forwarded and are not so useful to the district. (Osl)

Stakeholders often lack the full level of detail or technical information regarding an issue and so often views are unable to be accommodated due to other precluding information which has either not been considered by the stakeholder or is required to be confidential to stakeholders. (Mel)

False expectations of the results of participation can arise from citizens' lack of technical knowledge. That is why almost two of three respondents think people do not discriminate between the right to make suggestions and the right to certain results (Mad = 73.8; Osl = 75.8; Mel = 64.8):

We need to be more didactic, to avoid false expectations. (Interview Mad 4)

Frustration must be avoided, because there are things that can't be done or do not fall within the municipality's area of competence. The previous model collapsed due to numerous projects being complicated or having long implementation periods. We need to extend the time for the technical evaluation and implementation of projects. Madrid's was a pioneering experience, but mistakes were made. (Interview Mad 2)

They think participation means decision-making. (Osl)

The pessimism towards participatory processes of certain sections of the citizenry is based on the assertions of some public managers that participatory initiatives lack sincerity:

Most of the time you simply follow the procedure and don't listen. (Mad)

Most things are decided in advance. (Osl)

The government just needs things that makes their jobs easier, in a lot of cases, they are not thinking what do the citizens need. (Interview Mel 4)

The Participatory Arrangements

One of the key elements of citizen participation is policy implementation. Adequate implementation requires material and human resources, and also coordination procedures between institutional actors. Most public managers say that their administrations have integrated participatory procedures into development plans (Mad = 62.1; Osl = 60.2; Mel = 85.4) and assign officials to the coordination of urban planning processes. This statement is, however, more doubtful in Oslo (Mad = 66.3; Osl = 41.3; Mel = 85.3). Public managers in all three cities, despite these resources, highlight the weakness of coordination mechanisms, less than half saying that these coordination instruments work well between organization departments (Mad = 38; Osl = 29.3; Mel = n.d) or between layers of government (Mad = 27.3; Osl = 9.8; Mel = 42.5). Coordination difficulties are compounded by the perception that there is a lack of the technical resources required to process the information and use it appropriately:

It is difficult to coordinate competences between government areas and districts. (Mad)

(There is) no digital system for processing the input. Must be done manually. (Osl)

There need to be across agency positions created to facilitate place based inter-agency approaches. This would enable better integrated engagement to occur. (Mel)

A key element of the successful implementation of the citizen participation policy is, on the other hand, its integration and coordination with the procedures and programs of other areas of government. This adaption effort is perceived as being an unwieldy burden, as the interviews conducted in Madrid show:

Unlike consultations, public policies have to be implemented, procurement has to be organized... The most complicated aspects of this are carried out behind closed doors. At the start, civil servants are reluctant to implement projects suggested by citizens, proposals have to fit into strategic plans, and new government teams need time to learn how to implement them. One challenge is to change the internal culture. (Interview Mad 8)

The projects are an additional burden to the administrative work, this causing tensions between the Directorate General for Citizen Participation and the government areas. (Interview Mad 1)

Citizen proposals have to be adapted to the human and economic resources we have available and to execution times. (Mad)

Communication Channels and Their Administrative Use

All three cities have developed digital citizen participation systems that complement the traditional face-to-face debate arenas, the use of these web pages, social media pages and digital platforms seeming (based on the survey information) to be relatively widespread. This is especially true in Madrid, which is the only city of the three whose webpage serves as a platform for citizen-driven project and investment budget decision-making (Mad = 83.4; Osl = 52.6; Mel = 54.3). According to the interviews, the

digital platform provides obvious advantages of an instrumental nature and even helps build community trust:

> *So in terms of accessibility, this is a really useful tool because a lot of face-to-face events – you know, such as workshops or focus groups – there are a lot of people that feel uncomfortable, or don't feel that they can contribute, because they may be intimidated by that face to face environment. While online discussion forums, people that have different needs from different socio-economic backgrounds, different educational levels, are still welcome to interact.* (Interview Mel 2)

> *So, we can use that, and if we find that we are short in one area, we will target that group, whatever they may be, especially old people, or multicultural groups, so you can always supplement from other tools. We aim to get a representative sample.* (Interview Mel 5)

> *The other element of the platform is the ability to build your community trust and build your relationship with the community.* (Mel)

Two problems arising from the use of digital platforms were, however, noted: on the one hand (as for the lack of use of participation systems noted above), few public managers, especially in Oslo, believe that they have adequate systems for input systematization (Mad = 78.1; Osl = 29.8; Mel = 47) and ongoing assessment (Mad = 68.4; Osl = 28.2; Mel = 42.9).

The development of digital participation systems, while considered inevitable in the digital society, immediately raises the problem of the digital inclusion of different social sectors:

> *Young people do not participate. Older people are interested, but do not participate digitally.* (Interview Mad 1)

> *I think the digital divide is a reality, OECD countries have embraced technology and the digital is the medium through which we interact. There is no doubt about that. I am not saying it's the best thing, but it is just the reality.* (Interview Mel 4)

> *"So, in a low socio-economic community, you might need to go out face-to-face with an iPad and interact with them at a relevant time and in a meaningful way. Those gaps in the data allow the organization to understand*

> *that it's not the same people that always provide feedback, and decisions are made based on a representative – as representative as possible. It's not a representative sample. (…) It allows the organization to really understand the types of people that participate.* (Interview Mel 2)

Not all digital channels are, however, suitable for citizen involvement, particularly some social media channels. It is therefore necessary to combine them with face-to-face channels, so that the majority of the population is reached and to guarantee their representativeness in participatory processes. This is, at least, expressed in the interviews conducted in Melbourne:

> *Facebook doesn't help for sure. It is a terrible tool for engagement. Look I will say that, because even if you look at, it promotes our keyboard warriors too much, so I don't think Facebook is a powerful tool for community engagement. It's good to get the message out there for people to look at. We tried that in planning, and it failed. So, we put in links to surveys, but not for comments.* (Interview Mel 6)

> *Face to face is targeted at migrants, or resident organisations, non-English speaking backgrounds, or disabled people, so they are targeted at them. And often those people haven't heard of Participate Melbourne, so that is an indication for me that the online people are different.* (Interview Mel 2)

> *Most people have internet and the online access is easy, but face to face is also required. There is a temptation in some people to just do digital and not go and face people, but I don't think that's right. You need to cover the variety of cultures and cohorts.* (Interview Mel 5)

Contacts with Stakeholders and Their Influence

One of the most frequent tasks of public managers in citizen participation processes is the development and maintenance of relationships with a wide range of social groups. The groups that public managers maintain regular contact with differences between the cities. The public managers in Madrid acknowledge monthly or weekly contact with business organizations (33%), individual residents (29.9%) and parents' associations (23.7%), the main stakeholders of reference in Oslo being individual residents (55.3%), developers or owners (35.7%) and NGOs (30.7%), and

in Melbourne sports associations (59.6%), religious associations (51.1%), NGOs and developers or owners (44.2%).

One problem perceived by public managers in relating to the social groups was the lack of a strategic vision for the city as a whole and, conversely, the prevalence of specific interests that were limited to the social group's sector of the city:

> *Sometimes I believe that it is necessary to teach citizens beforehand, so that they are in context, not so much to guide their proposals but to get them to see that changes can be made on a larger scale than their own street or neighbourhood.* (Mad)

> *Many do not see the situation in a larger perspective, in terms of what's best for the area and the community as a whole. Their input is focussed on changes not being made near their property.* (Osl)

> *The council generally looks at community engagement in an issues-based way. So, we look at homelessness, waste recovery, while our branch is place based more than place making, so in terms of homelessness, or waste recovery. Citizens are more interested in their own area, and not so much in all of the city of Melbourne.* (Interview Mel 1)

An additional problem is the difficulty of reconciling different and even conflicting interests in plural societies:

> *It is difficult to reconcile the conflicting interests of residents and users of public space (shopkeepers, hotels, etc.) – due to the noise and environmental problems generated by them.* (Mad)

> *Conflicting suggestions from people with widely diverging interests makes it difficult to make a decision that makes everyone happy.* (Osl)

> *Part of the work is balance the interest of developers, businesses, government agencies and community benefit to ensure mutually benefiting outcomes.* (Mel)

> *(There are) very divided personal interests. People can be very 50:50 in what they want and it makes the decision making process more complicated. The sheer size of the Victorian population and how you reach 5 million people and/or hundreds of thousands of businesses. How to prioritise the input that*

> *comes back? Whose input is most important and who determines that? As eluded, you need to hear a diverse range of opinions and to have input from the quiet voices as well as the loud.* (Mel)

This plurality of stakeholders and interests generates problems of legitimacy in the participatory processes. Older people, individuals with greater personal resources or groups familiar with the dynamics of participatory processes are well represented, other groups however lack social representation:

> *We need to complement individual participation with collective participation. We must extend participation to young people and vulnerable groups and innovate. We cannot forget the importance of neighbourhood associations and the collegiate bodies of the City Council. It is not acceptable for the same people to always be there. We must diversify and reduce direct subsidies.* (Interview Mad 2)

> *Individuals say they represent a larger group, when they don't.* (Osl)

> *It is hard to mobilize some groups. Resourceful people, older people and more men engage in open meetings etc. This can cause a less than nuanced impression of needs and wishes in the area.* (Osl)

> *Most of the time, it's the same people that engage with the council. Council has established an active transport committee (…) and there are people that are active in those communities.* (Interview Mel 6)

The survey results show, however, that regularity of contact between public managers and stakeholders does not correlate with the degree of influence stakeholders exert. In other words, it is not always the actors who maintain the most frequent contact that exerts the most significant influence on urban development policies.

The most influential stakeholders in Madrid are business organizations (81.7%) and neighbourhood associations (60%). These were not the stakeholders who were most strongly linked to public managers. The most influential stakeholders in Oslo were developers or property owners (68.9%) and neighbourhood associations (54.5%), these stakeholders displacing individual residents. The actors that public managers in Melbourne perceive to be most powerful are business organizations

(54.5%) and developers or property owners (48.5%). NGOs take second place. These results are confirmed by the qualitative data:

> *Business organisations, through their pressure and support, influence the way in which urban planning is carried out and municipal by-laws are drafted, their goal being the economic growth of the city.* (Mad)

> *Developers and real estate owners have a lot of power in Oslo.* (Osl)

> *Developers set the agenda because they suggest and drive the city's development. They therefore have a strong influence. Developers know how politics works. They go directly to politicians when they want to exert pressure and to influence decisions – not to the administration.* (Osl)

> *Businesses can engage by lobbying for direct benefits or to remove perceived barriers to profit. They have a strong voice and influence on decision makers including public servants. Other groups have substantially less influence under strong efforts are made so they are heard.* (Mel)

Citizen participation processes are, however, essentially political initiatives. This means that the balance of power among stakeholders is always in flux and depends on changes in government and alliances between political parties and interest groups. This is especially evident in Madrid, where changes in government led to changes in the participatory model, to one that was more favourable to other stakeholders:

> *It depends on which political group is in power. Which interest groups are being listened to varies from one political group to another.* (Mad)

> *For many years, neighbourhood associations and NGOs have had a significant influence on decisions. This is also due to the political support they provide, which is reflected in the subsidies they receive.* (Mad)

> *(There are) close ties between some local politicians and stakeholders.* (Osl)

A large majority of public managers in the three cities agree that the stronger groups use the participatory system more effectively (Mad = 75.5; Osl = 84.2; Mel = 60.5) and the 'silent voices' are hard to reach (Mad = 83.3; Osl = 90.5; Mel = 62.1). This data is illustrated by the survey's open-ended questions:

> *Input varies a lot and mirrors that there are more conflicts of interest than common interest in the community. The strongest and most resourceful citizens push their demands in all channels and act as pressure groups, often at the expense of weaker groups' interests.* (Osl)

> *(There is the) eternal difficulty of reaching the silent voices. The vested interests are so loud and powerful it can be tempting for organizations to just respond to them without testing broader community sentiment.* (Mel)

> *There is definitely more scope to bring silent voices and individuals along in the journey.* (Mel)

> *(We put) too much focus on minor issues important to a few persistent noisy voices.* (Mel)

The logical consequence of the domination of participatory processes by some stakeholders is that group-specific interests predominate over collective interests:

> *Activists or minority interest groups, such as those focused on mobility, sustainability, etc., have in recent years also had a strong influence on political decisions and on the definition of participatory models. The danger has been that a minority can greatly influence a participatory process.* (Mad)

> *Organizations further the interests of their own small group of people, and do not work to promote the general interests of the whole area - so it's more a form of lobbying.* (Osl)

> *Stakeholder input often relates to individual interest rather than broader community interests or non-human interests and so doesn't reflect the system of needs that urban development seeks to address.* (Mel)

This capacity of influence is not distributed homogeneously throughout the territory. The capacity of action of certain resourceful groups is linked to the characteristics of the city sectors and the dynamics of gentrification:

> *In the central city areas, organizations that represent shops and businesses have more influence than other organizations and residents. Developers have a strong influence irrespective of area.* (Osl)

The citizens of the west (rich) part of the city know the jargon and can contact politicians more effectively. (Osl)

So lots of suburbs in Melbourne have become gentrified. So, I think that when a suburb becomes gentrified, the expectations rise. The new residents coming in want clean streets etc. So we have to allocate more budget to making the city look good. Their concerns are very different from new ones. The previous residents are happy to have a roof over their heads, and their bread and butter. Today's society is different to them. It becomes hard for council to do stuff, as the expectations go bigger and bigger. (Interview Mel 6)

It is always a challenge, particularly due to the multiculturalism, and also because of the change from industrial to residential, and also because our area has become trendier or hipster. There is one small area here that now has the highest number of educated people, Yarraville. We try to put parking fees, and they ran a campaign with their educational and financial resources to refute our strategy. (Interview Mel 5)

Conclusions

Some of the limitations of this study should first be recognized. This research is, on the one hand, based on public managers' perceptions. Perception is the filter through which reality is shown to us, and in this sense is indispensable in explaining decision-making. Future research should, therefore, to verify our results, employ objective techniques in the analysis of the behaviour of public servants.

A further limitation of the study relates to the sample used. The sample is not statistically representative. The study's aim is not to achieve quantitative results that can be extrapolated to the entire community of public managers, but to understand the public employees and to deepen the qualitative value of the survey through in-depth interviews, which can help explain the results expressed. It would, however, be very useful to use statistical techniques of external validity that apply to administrative sectors or to specific territorial contexts.

The research reflects the general optimistic opinion of public managers, of the potential beneficial effects of citizen participation upon democracy and city performance. This optimistic view of participation becomes, however, much more pessimistic when public managers speak about the lack of the human, material and technological resources required to implement the processes, and to the precariousness of cross-sectoral and multilevel coordination tools. These shortcomings are exacerbated by the citizens' lack of technical knowledge and, on occasions, by the

lack of a sincere willingness among the political authorities to share decision-making with the sectors affected by the policies, all this leading to frustration and the generation of false expectations.

Citizen participation processes are, at least in Madrid and Melbourne, essentially political. This relates both to the political nature of their promoters, and to the development and conditioning factors. Consultative tools are more internalized in Oslo's administrative procedures and are less politically dependent. The idea of a homogeneous society that makes decisions on issues that relate to the common good, based on informed debate, fade in all three cities in the face of the reality of conflicting interests that are difficult to reconcile, and the close contact between social, political and bureaucratic stakeholders. This implies that conflict is no stranger to the processes of citizen participation. The results of the research show, however, that contact frequency is not a good measure of the real level of influence of social groups upon urban development decision-making.

The different channels of participation (face-to-face and digital) are necessary and must be complementary, if the level of representativeness required to provide process input legitimacy is to be achieved. The implementation agents in the three cities shared, however, ideas that define the dynamics of the participatory processes. These include the prevalence of particular interests over common ones, narrow approaches versus the strategic vision of the city as a whole, and the predominance of resourceful social groups over individuals and the most disadvantaged sectors of the city.

It should be finally noted that, despite what we expected before conducting the study, the different administrative cultures and traditions of three cities do not have a decisive influence on the views of their public managers. Differences can be observed in the level of involvement of social stakeholders, depending on the urban context or the robustness of multilevel or multisectoral coordination instruments. Quite the opposite can therefore be concluded. Participatory policies do have their dynamics and raise the same issues and hindrances beyond structural factors and the political-institutional context.

Appendix

See Table 4.2

Table 4.2 Interviewees-A

City	*Position*	*Interviewee*
Madrid	Director General of Citizen Participation (term 2015–2019)	Mad 1
	Director General of Citizen Participation (term 2019–2023)	Mad 2
	Director of the Institutional Outreach Service	Mad 3
	Head of Service, Direction General of Citizen Participation	Mad 4
	Head of Service for Information Access	Mad 5
	Member of the Open-Government Team	Mad 6
	Special advisor for Citizen Participation	Mad 7
	Subdirector General of Citizen Participation and Non-Profit Organizations	Mad 8
Oslo	Chairman of the Board Local Tours for the Area Promises Change leader in the Old Oslo District	Osl 1
	Communications advisor, Agency for Urban Environment	Osl 2
	Department director Bydel Gamle Oslo	Osl 3
	Department Director Urban Development and Area Plan, Urban Environment Agency	Osl 4
	District director of Old Oslo	Osl 5
	Employee Area lift for Tøyen and Grønland	Osl 6
	Head of Communications, Old Oslo	Osl 7
	Head of Unit, Agency for Planning and Building Services	Osl 8
	ICT advisor, Agency for Planning and Building Services	Osl 9
	Leader of Områdeløftet Tøyen and Grønland	Osl 10
	Manager, Oslo City Government's Communication section	Osl 11
	Participation Coordinator, Agency for Planning and Building Services	Osl 12
	Project leader Electronic Services, Agency for Planning and Building Services	Osl 13
	Project executive 'Smart Oslo', Oslo City Government	Osl 14
	Project manager Kolstadgata, Urban Environment Agency	Osl 15
	Project coordinator and project manager, Area Lift for Greenland and Tøyen	Osl 16
	Section leader Outdoor Space, Urban Environment Agency	Osl 17
	Special advisor 'Origo Folk' (Oslo municipality digitalization unit)	Osl 18
	Special Councillor, Oslo City Government's Communication Section	Osl 19
	Special advisor, E-Transparency and Internal Communications, Oslo City Government	Osl 20
	Special advisor, Section for planning and strategy, Department of Finance, Oslo City Government	Osl 21
	Special advisor, Section for planning and strategy, Department of Finance, Oslo City Government	Osl 22
		Osl 23

(continued)

Table 4.2 (continued)

City	*Position*	*Interviewee*
Melbourne	Community Engagement Coordinator	Mel 1
	Community Engagement Manager	Mel 2
	Executive Director of Digital Design and Innovation	Mel 3
	Manager of Urban Design and Planning	Mel 4
	Manager of Public Affairs and Communication	Mel 5
	Manager of 'City Places'	Mel 6

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