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## **Making decisions on uncertain grounds: reflecting on compiling a database of mini-public practices on a global scale and comparing it to similar approaches**

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The database project is a subproject of the project “Doing mini-publics”, a research project between 2018 and 2021.

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## [0. Introduction]

Recently, discussions abound about citizen assemblies. They are hyped as an innovation of democracy that can compensate for deficits of representation and legitimacy. Sometimes it seems as if citizen assemblies were a novel invention, at least for how hopeful their promises are taken up. Often, however, the protagonists refer to an extended track-record and an extended history of experiments, experiences, learning, development and evidence on which the design and implementation of citizen assemblies can build. Historical reviews of the innovation journey indeed show that the term citizen assemblies is just the current notion for a specific method of public participation that has been developing and spreading already since the 1970s, even if under several different labels such as citizens' juries, planning cells, consensus conferences, deliberative polls, World Wide Views or, as umbrellas seeking to capture all these specific manifestations of a core design principle, citizen panels and deliberative mini-publics (Voß/Amelung 2016). This core design entails the organization of a convention of 12 to 200 random citizens to deliberate a collective judgment on some predefined policy problem while being provided with factual information and being moderated for fair and rational argumentation. A dedicated literature has been built up studying such processes and drawing lessons for improving their design (Grönlund et al 2014; Bächtiger et al 2018). Several attempts have been made to register different cases and provide an overview (Participedia, Amelung etc.). But all of them are partial. Nobody knows how many cases there are altogether. How many citizen panels or deliberative mini-publics, as we call them here, have been done throughout the years? And where on Earth? And when? And on what kinds of issues? And who had initiated them and carried them through? With reference to what kind of methodical specifications?

We have picked up these questions as part of a project investigating deliberative mini-publics as an innovation in governance, and investigating this process in terms of how it constituted a translocal space of doing politics after this particular model of deliberative mini-publics. Our baseline was to just start counting. We defined basic criteria for what we would count as a deliberative mini-public and then started researching. By all different means. We wanted to find out how far we come when we try, what the problems are that we encounter on the way, and what this means for the very possibility of providing a complete survey, a database with all deliberative mini-publics that have been carried out so far, across the world and since the 1970s. Overall, we have collected 2161 cases of mini-publics from 116 different countries, ranging from 1972 to the end of 2019. We set the end date of collection in December 2019 for pragmatic reasons, that is, the project's funding period expiring in December 2021.

The database project is a subproject of the project “Doing mini-publics”, a research project funded by the German Research Foundation between 2018 and 2021. The overall aim of the “Doing mini-publics” project was to study the traveling of mini-publics between different localities. As indicated, since their emergence in the 1970s in the USA and Germany mini-publics traveled to other places, at first, mostly within the Western world and recently increasingly to the Global South and authoritarian systems like China. Part of this project was to gather information about as many cases of mini-publics as possible from all around the world and since their emergence in the 1970s. The resulting database was to be used for analytically reconstructing and visualizing the spreading of mini-publics around the world over the last decade. We wanted to provide a simple, easily comprehensible overview of this process of democratic innovation.

The article is structured as follows. First, we will present a preliminary overview of prior and ongoing research dedicated to mapping the world of mini-publics as well as scientific reviews. Second, we will present our approach to setting up the database, our method, central hurdles we had to cope with during data collection and some basic findings emerging from the data. Third, we will compare in more detail all relevant mapping approaches (including ours) to contextualize our work and to point at important similarities and differences, for example concerning the scope and meaning of the definition used to decide on the inclusion or exclusion of cases. In the fourth section, we summarize the main points of this article.

## [1. Overview on previous research on databases on the world of mini-publics]

Can we find other approaches to map the world of mini-publics? Our database project is not the only attempt to gather information about mini-public events, to count cases and to compile databases. We will now discuss relevant scientific literature engaging with the challenge of compiling a database in the field of democratic innovations, paying special attention to mini-publics as a specific type thereof.

The most prominent approach is represented by Participedia, an online crowdsourcing platform gathering knowledge on democratic innovations broadly, among them, also mini-publics. As Frid-Jimenez et al describe it, Participedia was created in 2009 by a global community of researchers, mostly from political sciences, as a response to a dissatisfying documentation of data about participatory events, an “information gap” (Frid-Jimenez et al 2020: 21) or “knowledge deficit” (Fung/Warren 2011: 342) in need of adequate response. Being the first online platform to crowdsource knowledge on all kinds of participatory events, Participedia’s initial aim was to represent a tool which proves effective in *gathering data* about participatory processes for rigorous quantitative analysis by political scientists and to allow for a qualification of more and less successful participatory methods (Fung/Warren 2011: 343).

And indeed, there are a couple of research papers referring to Participedia as an “analytical tool” and archive of diverse cases to test assumptions of democratic theory (Gastil et al 2017), or as a source of usable data “for large-N systematic comparative analysis” (Smith et al 2015). However, after several years of being online and attempts to use the crowdsourced data it turned out that both, user interface and data model, were non-responsive, biased and not as useful as intended, at least for the purposes of academic research (Fred-Jimenez et al 2020: 21). Gastil et al (2017) report that Participedia suffers from missing data on cases and text-fields with vague content from which the extraction of variables is not impossible. Further, while for types of democratic innovations like mini-publics populations (meaning: the probable number of all cases) can be estimated more easily, more locally specific or yet unknown types of innovations pose a challenge as it is unclear on which grounds to estimate the population they are a sample of (Gastil et al 2017: 19). However, they identify the constructive potential of the large dataset provided by Participedia for cross-case and cross-(democratic innovation)-type analysis going beyond single case study research which is more usual for the field (ibid.: 19). Similarly, Smith and colleagues (2015) confirm that Participedia may provide useful data for comparative large-N analysis, especially useful for distinguishing types of democratic innovations (Smith et al 2015: 260). However, they point out that Participedia lacks a sound procedure for reviewing the quality of uploads, that its strategy to gather or motivate informants should be more targeted and systematic and finally, that motivations of those contributing should be studied.

While Smith et al and Gastil et al point at shortcomings for researchers attempting to use Participedia’s data, Jimenez et al review Participedia systematically from the perspective of users. They remark that users who wanted to use the platform with a mobile phone and users from the Global South who wanted to contribute knowledge on grassroots activism and artistic participatory events were unsatisfied with the design of the platform. This led to a design-oriented refreshment of Participedia’s interface and data-model as described in more detail by Fred-Jimenez and colleagues (Fred-Jimenez et al 2020: 22).

Apart from Participedia, there is little academic literature dedicated to presenting results using data from databases or reviewing as well as commenting on the quality and shortcomings of other database projects. After scanning Google Scholar and Web of Science for scientific articles citing the most prominent databases in the field, we assume the OECD database (2020), the POLITICIZE dataset (2020) and the Latinno database (2015-2020) to be a bit less frequently referenced database projects compared to Participedia, which started in 2009. We did not find any scientific resource citing or referring to the smaller Loka Institute’s and Nexus’ database.

For the case of the OECD database issued in 2020, it is referred to as a collection of cases demonstrating the increasing usage of mini-publics connected to decision-making between

2006 and 2019 (Curato et al 2020: 3). Further, the OECD database's strength is the collection of mini-public cases successfully departing from the status of being a single event to the state of permanent institutionalization and long-term processes (Moodie et al 2021: 8). Apart from these two central sources, there are no further detailed reviews of the OECD database's methods, results or possible contexts of usage. In the remainder of this article, we will present in more detail and discuss the methods used to compile the database and compare it to other attempts.

The LATINNO database is referred to in a few scientific papers and in the project team's publications, where the project's members lay out which knowledge gap they address and which problems they encountered while collecting cases (e.g. Pogrebinschi/Ross 2019).

Cortés, in her literature review on direct democracy, describes the Latinno database as "(...) the first comprehensive and systematic source of data on new institutions for citizen participation evolving in Latin America." (Cortés 2019: 674). Elstub and Escobar mention the LATINNO database (along with Participedia) as an example for a collection of cases demonstrating the growing number of hybrid forms of mini-publics, mixing (globally) standardized with local practice elements (Elstub/Escobar 2017: 13). Spada and Ryan mention the LATINNO project as one international mapping effort besides Participedia, containing both, successful *and* failed cases of democratic innovations (Spada/Ryan 2017: 776); something providing hope for the field of democratic innovations, which said to be biased by reporting mostly on successful cases only.

Apart from these short comments on the LATINNO database, there is a research report by Thamy Pogrebinschi, principal investigator of the LATINNO project, summing up main points of the approach, methods and results and formulating recommendations (Pogrebinschi 2021 a) as well as a codebook documenting the technical side of the work (Pogrebinschi 2021b). Pogrebinschi describes the LATINNO database, built between 2015 and 2020, as a project, being denied the potential to collect "enough cases" by a potential, renowned European grant agency Pogrebinschi applied to for funding (Pogrebinschi 2021: 5). The basic approach of the LATINNO database was to assemble the diversity of "(...)institutions, processes, and practices that include citizen participation to improve democracy in Latin America." (ebd.: 14) and count as many cases as possible (ebd.:15). The team of the project comprised 32 members between 2015 and 2021. The codebook was used by many coders for coding material according to three sets of qualitative variables: context, institutional design, impact variable). The codebook was initially tested and redeveloped during a pilot phase and "(...) gradually adjusted/expanded to better reflect the empirical data." (ebd.:14). Coders were extensively trained and tests on reliability and validity were regularly executed. A first public version of the database which was published in 2017 got renewed, expanded and updated until 2020.

The POLITICIZE dataset on deliberative mini-publics is a subproject of the ERC-funded POLITICIZE project, collecting data on three types of non-elected bodies (Paulis et al 2021: 521). The sub-dataset solely contains mini-publics and was recently published in 2020. It is, despite being quite young, rather often cited as a datasource for a detailed collection on 127 European cases of publicly commissioned deliberative mini-publics (e.g. Talukder/Pilet 2021: 3; Rangoni/Bedock/Talukder 2021: 2). Further, it is used for data analysis on a range of questions stemming from political sciences (e.g. Paulis et al 2021; Rojon/Pilet 2021: 2). Additional cases will be added on a yearly basis in a rerelease of the dataset (Paulis et al 2021: 522). There are two versions available; an openly accessible database dedicated to scientific research and one publicly accessible search mask on the project's webpage for detailed case overviews.

## [2. Our methodology, central hurdles and problems and our ways to cope with them, main findings]

What we do here is to “open the black box” of backstage work (Goffman 2019) which was needed to build up the doing mini-publics project's database. We will provide an impression of the theoretical presumptions which motivated this project, the qualitative research part of it, challenges and experimental tinkering. We further elaborate on the networking and exchange in the field of doing mini-publics which was key to arriving at the database we have now. After all, we have collected 2161 cases all dating between 1972 and 2019. The quality of our data is heterogenous and there are too few cues to estimate the overall population for cases, may it be region-wise, model-wise or for a specific period. This is why we assume that our database is not exhaustive. Still, it contains a wide range of forms of mini-publics and cases from all regions of the world. In order to illuminate the quality of our data, we want to turn our attention to the process and approaches we relied on to complete our task.

### [2.1 Counting as many as possible cases]

Our aim was to collect as many as possible cases of mini-publics in order to visualize the global occurrence of mini-public practices throughout the 20th and 21st century. A circular process between narrowing down the definition with which we operate and deciding on the need of categories or indicators led to the set-up of a table format for the database containing very basic categories.

Apart from the challenge of tracking the traveling of a partly very poorly reported practice, we also faced the challenge to define what we consider to be part of the family of mini-publics. So, parallelly to deciding on the format of the table we were reviewing literature, especially on definitions, discussing more narrow or broader options and finally agreed on a working definition containing four main elements of this practice.

We did not decide that a specific method's label should be the relevant definitory item to discriminate proper cases from those left out, instead we defined the following criteria as essential and started looking for cases that met all of these criteria.

1. A random sample of citizens (12-200) is invited as representative of the larger public
2. They are provided with factual information (in form of information materials and/or expert statements) and professionally moderated
3. They produce a consensus or majority statement which is fed into broader public debate and/or ongoing processes of policymaking as an informed and considered view of the public.
4. Such processes involve 1 to 3 days of meetings that may also be stretched out over weeks or months.

Events that fulfill these criteria may be commissioned by public authorities, non-governmental organisations, more rarely activists or private bodies.

## [2.2 Data collection strategies & recurring problems while searching]

The fact that a central database attempting to cover all mini-publics did not exist before made it necessary to assemble cases or preceding databases from diverse sources. Quite similarly to the OECD's approach (OECD 2020: 183-184), we combined (1) desk research, scanning various sources from news articles to scientific articles, (2) the inclusion of fitting cases from existing databases, (3) open calls for information and review in expert networks such as Democracy R&D and (4) more targeted direct enquiries into larger organizations experienced in conducting mini-publics.

We started off with an Internet research that led us quickly to Participedia and the other databases already mentioned. We further scanned a research report/dissertation of Nina Amelung and Louisa Grabner for cases which were reported therein (Amelung 2012, Amelung 2017, Amelung & Grabner 2017). In addition, we figured out organizations, activists and professionals who carried out the local subprojects of World Wide Views, most of them situated in the Global South. For those whose contact information we could find, we reached out to them to gather information on the cases they conducted. But often we could not reach the local partners or they could not provide detailed information. Finally, we scanned the Journal of Public Deliberation (now "Journal of Deliberative Democracy") for single-case descriptions. We also contacted the authors of certain articles requesting further information.

Then, we continued with literature research, inspecting comparative analysis articles. We were confronted with the problem that often these publications were lacking precise data regarding the precise location or date of the mentioned cases. The other type of useful information we

found were estimates of amounts of mini-publics in specific regions (Wakeford et al 2008: 334; Nagano 2020: 2).

We went on to contacting stakeholders, practitioners and academics from the field. It turned out to be the most successful research strategy. As academic members of the network *Democracy R&D* we had access to fellow members through annual meetings, almost weekly "Learning Calls" and active participation in working groups. However, entering a practitioner field as a researcher, it is initially hard to know who knows what, where which information is stored and who to ask for what. So we started with requests for support within the network, but we had to find out that general calls for participation do not create the response rate we expected. The network of Democracy R&D itself is growing in geographical scale; but there are several structural barriers especially in relation to African, Asian and South American countries, where fewer of the members come from, who participate less in the forum and from where we had fewer replies, when we reached out directly via mails to ask for their help tracking mini-public cases. This may have been due to language barriers, the extra work connected to our enquiry or due to lacking information available at hand.

This can be illustrated with one example. We had found in the literature several estimations of certain amounts of Mini-Publics that had been carried out in certain countries. For most of the countries, we had neither concrete numbers, nor estimations, and we were wondering how many mini-publics were still missing in our dataset. We wanted to know if we could get experts from countries all over the world to give us their opinion and an informed guess, how much mini-publics have been carried out in their countries and to get an overview about the cases that we were still lacking. We then targeted individuals or organizations, listed as members of Democracy R&D and had about half of them answering (15 out of 31). This shows, that by approaching directly, it is a lot easier to get in touch.

Via further ethnographic fieldwork, we could establish personal contacts to English-speaking practitioners in non-anglo saxon countries that worked as door-openers and helped us access more cases. This way we stumbled upon hundreds of cases in Japan, which we never could have accessed otherwise. This illustrates the arbitrariness and social embedding of gaining access to knowledge, especially when language barriers prevail and the lack of visible local networks producing accessible knowledge reduce the possibilities of Internet and literature research.

Summing up, we can say that language barriers and the organizational structure of the mini-publics field in a certain region may matter to each collection strategy as well as poor reporting, especially for cases dating back to the 1990s or before.



### [2.3 Compiling the database, setting up an infrastructure, formatting and including others]

When it comes to collecting information, resources play an important role. We had no money to offer and relied on voluntary collaboration, which might create bias because practitioners and fellow researchers are equipped differently. Many people who supported us set up compilations of data in their spare time, which is not possible for everyone. When it came to integrating other datasets into our own database, we were faced with problems of compatibility and relevance. We were not able to get each aspect of information that was of interest to us for each case; for example we had a lot of Japanese cases without a proper name. In order to maintain coherence of case-specific information throughout the whole database we reconstructed the names out of the description field. We sometimes faced extensive information which we narrowed down, consciously neglecting aspects that did not match our pre-set category structure. This is true for lots of cases from Participedia, which normally come with a detailed text describing the event, its history, context and aftermath.

However, to map the different mini-publics visually, we tried to complete certain core information (e.g. location, which we turned into geocodes as well) in order to depict the case visually on a world map.

In spite of our vision to come up with a dataset that will be transparent and accessible for any interested people in the future, we were faced with the problem that, after a while, previously used homepages we used as sources were not available anymore or run out of safety certificates and are now more difficult or impossible to access. Nevertheless, we want to publish our results as provisional results and to answer the question: what happens, when you start counting all the mini-public events that ever took place? In this way our database can be seen as a first starting point and as an invitation to pursue and professionalize this task.

Other than big organizations, we have little human resources and are not able to publish our results on a new homepage. We neither can include new cases afterwards, nor turn our database into an ongoing participative project, as some of the data collections we described earlier do. Instead, we found simple and affordable solutions that are meant to be available in the long run, after our research project has ended. The map provides a visual overview over our results and for everyone who wants a more detailed insight, we linked our final version of the database as google sheet in the information area of the mini-publics map, which seems to be the most accessible way of publishing it.

## [2.4 Making selections on uncertain grounds]

In this section, we will comment on several aspects of our method which necessitated decisions and trade-offs concerning the granularity of data, generalization of information, our method to cope with the high amount of labels and models and the grounds on which we decided to include or exclude events that only matched one or two of our main criteria. It is important to say ahead that specifying if a case is a proper mini-public case and collecting cases for the database were processes evolving in parallel with setting up the format of the database and re-calibrating its theoretical aim.

Despite all obstacles we tried to find the most specific information per case; first, to distinguish the cases from each other, second because we were looking to visually map different methods of mini-publics all over the world. We wanted to find out the events' name, its location (city, administrative region, country), the date (start and end date) and we collected further details concerning their organizational and issue context.

For the cases for which detailed information about the issue was available we extracted these pieces of information. In an attempt to generalize these very locally bound and specific issue descriptions we were searching for the most general issue categorizations emerging from the more extensive descriptions. We figured out nine very general issue categories ranging from social, to ecological to technological issues; however these four very general categorizations as well as their combinations provide poor information of what *exactly* the mini-publics were about as mini-publics often cover very concrete and multifaceted problems such as the building of a street or genetically modified crops.

Let us comment on the method we used. As our definition did not necessitate a case to be labeled with a specific name of a method, the final sample became quite diverse and we noted over 170 names of different mini-public methods: from popular methods as 'Citizens Jury' or 'Planning Cell' to unknown methods that appear only once under the mentioned name, like e.g. 'scenario workshop'. To reduce the complexity and disorder created by 170 different labels for around 2100 cases, we reduced the method category to 9 basic categories, including 'other' as the residual category with the highest number of cases.

In the following, we want to make a few comments on difficulties concerning operationalisation during the research process of compiling a coherent dataset. In this sense, we can present a few meta findings on doing qualitative research in the field of mini-publics.

As there is no agreed upon standard definition of mini-publics and a variety of different cultures of public participation in every region of the world, formats which included only one or two criteria of our definition were not included in the database. This is true for a whole bunch of methods ranging under the term "Participatory Budgeting", which were invented in Brazil. There are many more methods combining elements of mini-public-like deliberation with public

participation methods adapted to the local cultural, socio-economic and educational context. As indicated, there is no standardized definition of mini-publics, however it can turn out that methods labeled the same way are practiced differently (e.g. Citizens' Assemblies). Only the Deliberative Poll and Citizens' Initiative Review are registered trademarks and as such, it is not legal to copy their label while deviating from the original practice design.

To conclude, compiling a database containing as many mini-public cases as possible was a process marked by limitations and uncertainties concerning the availability of data, concrete estimations of regionally specific "populations" and the multiplicity of definitions for specifically branded yet sometimes slightly differing methods. However, the tenet to find all cases one could find turned out to be a hard work given that we faced language barriers in the non anglo saxon world, dead mail accounts of former project organizers, poorly reported cases and in general, a much better organized and documented "world of mini-publics" for the nations of the Global North (and more cases we counted) than for those of the Global South, which, according to our findings, also shows less cases. English speaking actors from Japan could help us cope with the bad availability and accessibility of data. More such "door openers" are needed; especially for those regions of the world of which it is known that mini-publics took place there but data is missing, not translated or incomplete. Quite unsurprisingly, information about mini-publics dating back longer than the 1990s are very hard to gather while information about recent mini-publics is easily available. More than half of the cases we collected took place after January 2011.

## [2.5 Main Findings ]

The quantitative outcome are 2161 collected cases of mini-publics from 116 different countries, ranging from 1972 to the end of 2019. We set the end date at December 2019 for pragmatic reasons, that is, the project's funding period expiring in December 2021.

### Categorized method

Citizens Jury	80 cases
Citizens' Assembly	38 cases
Citizens' Initiative Review	17 cases
Consensus Conference	121 cases
Deliberative Poll	78 cases
other	1043 cases
Planungszelle	250 cases
Shimin Togikai	347 cases
World Wide Views	187 cases

Overall, 671 individual mini-public events were part of a bigger series of mini-publics, with World Wide Views being the largest formation of interrelated events (own calculations).

## [2.6 Visualization]

As we have already explained, we categorized the mini-public methods in order to get an overview over the occurrence of different methods. We want to give some insights in the database's visualization. We do this by looking at the geographical accumulation of main types of mini-publics over the years, progressing per decade.

### [Mini-Publics until 1986]



Until 1986 there are a few Citizens Juries in the United States and Planning Cells in Germany, but nothing more. They did not start to spread to other parts of the world, other methods did not come up yet.

### [Mini-Publics until 1990]



By looking at the year 1990, we can not only see a third format, the Consensus Conference in Denmark coming up, we also witness a major traveling of knowledge on mini-publics for the first time. An orange dot at the east coast of the United States proves that the Planning Cell had made its way to the US.

#### [Mini-Publics 2000]



In 2000, we can see the emergence of other methods, such as Deliberative Poll, but also mini-publics conducted with other, uncategorized or hybrid methods. The previously mentioned methods had spread much more than before, but we clearly see a concentration in the US and Europe, with a few exceptional dots in Japan, South Korea, Australia and New Zealand.

#### [Mini-Publics until 2010]



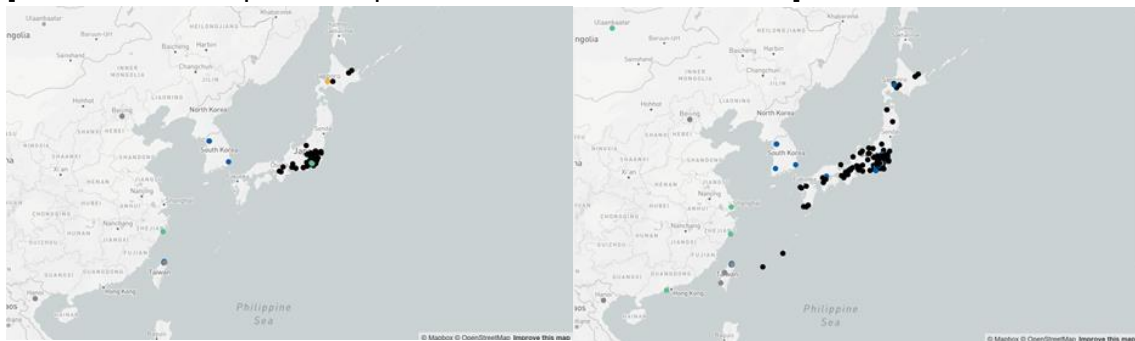
The accumulated overview in 2010 shows for the first time a spread that involves countries that are non-western countries or countries considered weak economically. This is partly a result of the World Wide Views, which, as indicated by their name, are meant to be a series of mini-publics that take place all over the world at the same time. In addition, there is a surge of events with uncategorized methods, for example in Ghana.

#### [Mini-Publics until 2019]



In 2019, which marks the end of our data collection, the most striking fact is the increase in density, which is again an effect of several other series of world wide views, but also again an increase in numerous other mini-publics, that are not categorized explicitly as one of the most popular and most specific methods. Another striking difference is the spread of a local Japanese method: the Shimin Togikai. They do not exceed Japan, but there is an enormous surge since 2007, clearly visible when you compare the accumulated cases from 2019 with those of 2010.

#### [Mini-Publics in Japan - comparison between 2010 and 2019]



### [3. Comparison of database projects for democratic innovations]

In this section, we will systematically compare database approaches, which have been carried out so far. We will put specific emphasis on the forms of mini-publics included in each database project, their spatial and temporal scope, their institutional background and finally, the definitions underlying the inclusion/exclusion of cases.

Mini-publics or democratic innovations is an umbrella term for a family of different methods for engaging citizens in policy-making. These methods do not have a predefined set of characteristics in common. As Escobar and Elstub argue, there “ (...) is limited agreement in academic work about which governance processes should be classified as ‘democratic innovations’ and a lack of clarity and precision in the use of the term. Indeed, democracy itself is widely regarded as an ‘essentially contested concept’ (Gallie, 1955-6) and ‘innovation’ is interpreted in a number of different ways across different countries and policy areas (cf. Sørensen, 2017). (...) It is argued that democratic innovations can be seen as a Wittgensteinian ‘family’ of conceptual clusters that include spaces and processes that have certain resemblance but also differences that are determined by context.” (Elstub/Escobar 2017: 2). By highlighting each database’s structure and its process of compilation in a comparative perspective, we go beyond a review of research commenting on the benefits and limitations of each database, which was provided in section 1). We expect that comparability, similarities and differences among them will be clearer as well as in how far each of the other approaches differs from our database.

### [3.1 Contexts of origin, temporal and spatial scope, forms of mini-publics included and definitions used]

The Nexus Institute published its database specifically dedicated to the collection of planning cells.<sup>1</sup>The Nexus Institute is a company realizing planning cells, among other participative models, led by Prof. Liudger Dienel, the son of Peter Dienel, who invented the planning cell back in the 1970s. In parallel to Peter Dienel but without knowing him personally, Ned Crosby invented the Citizen Jury in the 1970s at the Jefferson Centre in Minneapolis, Minnesota, USA. Citizen Jury and Planning Cell are foundational models of mini-publics because all subsequent mini-public models referred to these first examples of sortition-based and moderated public deliberation. The Nexus database lists planning cells in the narrow sense, starting in 1976 and also includes planning cells implemented by other organizations. For the case of the Nexus database it is obvious that only Planning Cells according to Nexus' definition have been included. Nexus defines Planning Cells as follows: a planning cell usually consists of 25 participants who are chosen by lot. In some cases diversity of participants is ensured by running many Planning Cells parallelly. It normally takes three to four days to complete a Planning Cell process. Each day is split into several thematically defined working units. Experts and stakeholders are being invited to inform participants on factual aspects of the topics and for responding to questions. A characteristic of Planning Cells is that the whole group is split into smaller units which discuss different aspects of the overall topic without moderation<sup>2</sup>. At the end of the process, they write a final report, a citizen expertise which is supposed to be fed into the Policy Cycle. Nexus is the main organization offering to conduct Planning Cells on a regular basis and has a long-standing experience. Thus, the Nexus database is only covering this formative, yet specific mini-public method.

The database of the Loka<sup>3</sup> Institute mainly contains Consensus Conferences. Consensus Conferences emerged in the 1960s in the U.S, were often used for making citizens deliberate on technology-related issues and were particularly driven forward by the Danish Board of Technology (DBT) in the 1980s. The Loka Institute's database is particularly suited to "tracking danish-style, citizen-based Deliberative Consensus Conferences worldwide."<sup>4</sup>. It is the most unstructured database in our collection and seems to have been abandoned since 2013. The same applies for the Loka Institute's database on "Danish-Style Consensus Conferences", as

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<sup>1</sup>We were not able to find out the publication date.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.planungszelle.de/en/planning-cell/>

<sup>3</sup>During our working process, the Loka Database and the whole Loka website disappeared. Nevertheless, we decided to let the loka database remain in our comparison, as there is no other database about Consensus Conferences we know of. Our information stem from september 2021, when the website was still accessible.

<sup>4</sup>[www.loka.org](http://www.loka.org)

it is a single-method-database as well. The webpage is not conclusive about what exactly makes a “Danish-Style Consensus Conference” “Danish”. Consensus Conferences are most often used to make citizens discuss complex technology- or science-related issues with relevant experts, which were chosen by the citizens themselves. A planning committee is preparing the process which lasts 7 to 8 days. The planning committee is supposed to maintain a “disciplinary balance” (Blok 2008: 167). It consists of six to eight experts who are academics, practitioners, issue experts, and interest group representatives (Escobar/Elstub 2017: 2, 4). In preparatory meetings, citizens are invited to choose from a limited range of experts and to formulate their questions. These questions are the main content of the actual meetings and citizens are required to formulate a final recommendation after the meeting. As we can see, Consensus Conferences, especially “Danish” style, is a rigorously standardized method of mini-publics for a specific issue context, namely, science and technology.

Participedia<sup>5</sup> is the most encompassing database for participatory and democratic innovations. Starting in 2009 as a project funded by Prof. Mark Warren and Prof. Archon Fung to crowdsource project descriptions of participative events (Smith et al 2015), Participedia grew to a central resource for practitioners and academics engaged with mini-publics. It contains more than 1800 diverse cases of citizen-led and professionally organized participative formats and is being curated by several project managers, designers and developers. Participedia has been supported by several institutions in the past and is currently (2020) financed by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. As already indicated, Participedia does not allow for searching mini-public methods explicitly by their categories in the search mask. Either one types the name of a specific method like “Consensus Conferences” in the main search field, or you use and combine elements of mini-public methods, such as sortition or moderated deliberation, in order to end up with a list of cases fitting your mini-public definition. As such, Participedia is not a database operating with a fixed definition for the family of mini-public related democratic innovations, nor does it exclusively cover only one method. Nonetheless, Participedia’s search filter allows for narrowing down the number of cases based on attributes, which are key in terms of defining a democratic innovation: “They focus on one of the following: the selection mechanism of participants; the form of interaction between participants; the way in which participants come to a decision or recommendation; and/or the intended purpose of the process.” (Smith/Richards/Gastil 2015: 250).

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<sup>5</sup><https://participedia.net/>



The LATINNO<sup>6</sup> database was created to collect cases of democratic innovations only from the Latin American continent. It was founded as a pilot project in 2015 by the researcher Dr. Thamy Pogrebinschi, at the Department Democracy and Democratization at the WZB Berlin Social Science Centre and is funded by the Open Society Foundation. The database lists 3744 cases implemented in or attached to different institutional designs, with different means, ends and revolving around different policy issues. The LATINNO database is somewhat in the same category as Participedia, as it allows to search in a very differentiated way for diverse democratic innovations; but it also differs decisively from Participedia as it only covers cases from Latin America. Although wide in range, the LATINNO database also uses a minimal definition for democratic innovations to be included, based on the following three criteria: “democratic innovation must necessarily match the following three criteria: 1. Citizen Participation: It must be designed to improve one (or more) of these five ends: accountability, rule of law, responsiveness, social equality, or political inclusion. 2 Democracy Enhancement: improve one (or more) of these five ends: accountability, rule of law, responsiveness, social equality, or political inclusion. 3 Impact on Policy Cycle: Its design must enable citizens and/or civil society organizations to participate in one (or more) stages of the public policy cycle, namely: agenda setting, formulation and decision-making, implementation, or evaluation.” (Pogrebinschi 2021 a: 11) <sup>7</sup>. Compared to the search filter of Participedia, it is even more difficult to calibrate your search in a way to extract only cases matching central traits of mini-publics. Either you type the name of a mini-public method in the open search field or you use a combination of filters. However, sortition, moderated deliberation and the aim of reaching a consensus are not provided as filters for the search.

The database of the POLITICIZE project started in 2020 and is led by Prof. Jean Benoit Pilet from the Free University of Bruxelles, Belgium. A first version of the dataset on mini-publics and scientific papers with more specialized empirical interest were published in 2021. The database contains data on an extensive set of indicators covering general information, the composition of the mini-public, its format and the mini-public’s role in policy-making<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, the database of the POLITICIZE project is not limited to one specific model of mini-public. However, the inclusion of a case is restricted by a range of criteria: a case must have taken place in Europe between 2000 and 2020, it must consist of both extensive moderated and informed deliberation as well as a recruitment based on a random or representative sampling of the public at large. Further, it must be commissioned by a public authority on local, regional

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.latinno.net/en/innovations/>

<sup>7</sup>Pogrebinschi, Thamy (2021) : Thirty Years of Democratic Innovations in Latin America, WZB Berlin Social Science Center, Berlin  
available at: <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/235143>

<sup>8</sup><http://politicize.eu/inventory-dmps/>

or national level, which excludes all cases organized by activists, citizen-initiatives, NGO's or private companies (Paulis et al 2021: 522f). Via a search mask on the project's website one can filter all cases with respect to country, administrative scale, selection methods, issue, prerogatives and date. While Pilet's and colleagues' definition of a mini-public clearly resembles our definition in many ways, its exclusiveness in geographical, administrative and temporal terms is far beyond Participedia and ours. Similarly, the database of the POLITICIZE project is not limited to one specific model of mini-public. However, the inclusion of a case is restricted by a range of criteria: a case must have taken place in Europe between 2000 and 2020, it must consist of both extensive moderated and informed deliberation as well as a recruitment based on a random or representative sampling of the public at large. Further, it must be commissioned by a public authority on local, regional or national level, which excludes all cases organized by activists, citizen-initiatives, NGO's or private companies (Paulis et al 2021: 522f). Via a search mask on the project's website one can filter all cases with respect to country, administrative scale, selection methods, issue, prerogatives and date. While Pilet's and colleagues' definition of a mini-public clearly resembles our definition in many ways, its exclusiveness in geographical, administrative and temporal terms is far beyond Participedia and ours.

The OECD published a report in 2020 about representative deliberative processes. It is accompanied by a database which was updated in 2021 compiled to support the report, containing tendentially successful cases of implementation<sup>9</sup>. The OECD drew on the help of practitioners and professional networks, such as DemocracyR&D and a proper OECD network. The updated database holds 574 cases and comprises an extensive set of categories oriented towards the policy cycle.<sup>10</sup> The OECD wants to provide extensive comparative analysis based on evidence with the aim of quality assurance and institutionalization. The OECD database's focus lies explicitly on all methods belonging to the broader conceptual family of mini-publics. However, their criteria differ from ours. In order to be included in the OECD database the cases have to match the following aspects: "1. Deliberation (deliberative processes had to have at least one full day of face-to-face meetings). [...] 2. Representativeness (participants of the deliberative process were randomly selected and demographically stratified).[...] 3. Impact (deliberative process were commissioned by a public authority)." (OECD 2020 : 182). The first two of these criteria are also part of our project's database approach and definition. The third aspect, impact, is going beyond our more minimalist definition. We solely set criteria regarding

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>

<sup>10</sup> <https://airtable.com/shrHEM12ogzPs0nQG/tbl1eKbt37N7hVFHF/viwxQgJNyONVHkmS6?blocks=hide>

the internal design of mini-public events. We do not exclude cases based on the contractor's origin and we do not consider impact to be decisive for defining a mini-public. The OECD database is especially valuable for public authorities who are interested in conducting a mini-public, as the database provides a full overview on a case's "life-cycle", from the early stages of preparation to its impacts and costs.

The database of our "Doing mini-publics"<sup>11</sup> project holds about 2161 cases of mini-public models matching our definition. It is the outcome of three years of research on the traveling of mini-publics on a global scale. Given this research goal, it was of capital importance to keep eyes open for collecting cases from any country or world region and to implement those cases from already existing databases, which fit our minimal criteria of a proper mini-public case. Cases listed in the database contain basic information such as date, topic and (geo-)location but also further details about the implemented model, involved authorities or implementing organizations or further information about the deliberation issue whenever accessible. As a matter of completeness, we recall the definition of the Doing Mini-Publics database and compare it to the others. Our definition is the broadest when speaking about the whole family of mini-public methods but it is (intentionally) too narrow to include varying democratic innovations, as we witnessed in the case of Participedia or the LATINNO database. We included all cases which, first, take a small group of citizens invited as 'representative/stratified/weighted sample' of the public at large. This includes many different methods of sampling a small version of the public and not just one. Second, we included cases where citizens are expected to discuss a given issue, supported by information provided by the organizers. We do not, as it is the case with Consensus Conferences, make the attendance of experts or stakeholders a mandatory criteria for inclusion. Third, we require cases to be professionally moderated and organized, thus, excluding forms of self-organized events of any form. Fourth, cases to be included should aim at producing a consensual statement, a vote or at least any kind of final product. Fifth, the meeting should at least last one day. We only included cases, where a face to face meeting was part of the mini-public event, because we saw online mini-publics spreading enormously under pandemic conditions as a new phenomenon. As opposed to the OECD's or POLITICIZE's database, we did not presuppose cases to be contracted by a public authority exclusively. This definition is the outcome of a twofold orientation. First, we reviewed popular definitions from the academic and practitioner field and compiled a set of minimal criteria. Second, we expected the field to experiment with

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<sup>11</sup>[https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Ue4Mdwf6ngzPCKmz5tKW9FavoeXLEZPEFbJI2mnAX\\_E/edit#gid=2061509366](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1Ue4Mdwf6ngzPCKmz5tKW9FavoeXLEZPEFbJI2mnAX_E/edit#gid=2061509366)

characteristics of mini-publics, to recombine, adapt specific traits or re-invent whole new methods.

As already pointed out, each database serves a different purpose and emerged from a specific interest of assembling, archiving or circulating knowledge about mini-publics (Voß/Schritt/Sayman 2021). While the Nexus Database on Planning Cells seeks to enhance the availability of Planning Cells and creates visibility for the legacy of Peter Dienel, this is what makes for its limitations: only Planning Cells are listed. The same applies to the Loka Institute's Database, as it focuses on Danish Style Consensus Conferences. The remaining databases in our list do not only document a single model of mini-publics. They cover a wider scope. Participedia registers the whole range of self-organized or professionally organized cases of democratic innovations, also beyond mini-publics. Further, Participedia is the least regionally limited database, and as such, quite similar to our database. Although the majority (75%) of cases in Participedia is from Europe, North America and Australia, there are hundreds (25%/443) of cases from Asia, South America and Africa<sup>1213</sup>. A similar ratio between cases from the Global North and the Global South applies to the mini-publics database of ours. [about 72,28%/27,72% for our database].

Other than these, the Loka Institute's database, the Nexus database, POLITICIZE's dataset and the LATINNO database have a more limited spatial scope. Nexus' database only contains cases from Germany and Austria (N=76). POLITICIZE only covers Europe (N=127). The LATINNO (N=3744) database obviously covers Latin America solely. The Loka Institute's database contains 65 cases of consensus conferences from the Global North (Europe, North America, Australia/Pacific) and 12 cases from Asia, South America and Africa. A similar bias towards covering cases from the Global North applies to the OECD's database. It contains 177 cases from Asia (including Japan and South Korea), 4 cases from South America and 273 cases from Europe, 56 cases from Australia and 64 cases from North America.

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<sup>12</sup>The evaluation is based on the database downloaded on 23/09/21 at participedia.net. 1737 cases which had entries in the country category were taken into account; other cases with missing country data were excluded.

<sup>13</sup>For practical reasons, we did not analyze the location based on economic or political terms. We tried to group the cases based on geographical criteria, distinguished by continents and built two groups. Northern America, Australia and Europe as one group and Asia, Latin America, Africa as the other group. It is important to know that we grouped Japan together with other Asian countries. The percentage of Global South cases without the Japanese cases only makes up 5,65%.

### [3.2 Schematic Comparison]

	Date of origin	Total Amount of Cases	Openly crowdsourced data collection?	Working Status	Design/Main Categories	Purpose	Definition of Mini-Publics	Limitations
<b>Nexus Planning Cell database</b>  <a href="https://www.planungszelle.de/datenbank/">https://www.planungszelle.de/datenbank/</a>  <a href="http://pzdb.jazzpis.space/cells">http://pzdb.jazzpis.space/cells</a>	n.a.	76	yes	Open for adding cases;	Table Format; Title of the Event, Tags, Region, Year, Participants, Administrative Unit	Enhancing the availability of Planning Cells for all interested	an elaborate definition of Mini-Publics is not provided, but the representative sampling is mentioned as crucial trait for MP	only Planning Cells are collected
<b>The Loka Institute</b>  <a href="http://www.loka.org/TrackingConsensus.html">http://www.loka.org/TrackingConsensus.html</a>	n.a.	n.a.	yes	Open for adding cases	clustered by countries and topics, few informations	"to track and describe citizens' panels on science and technology policy that have been conducted all around the world"	no definition	only Consensus Conferences are collected
<b>Participedia</b> <a href="https://participedia.net/">https://participedia.net/</a>	2009	1800	yes	Open for adding cases	very comprehensive set of categories including (among others): topics, start date, end date, approach, number of participants, purpose or goal	"to connect and bolster" research on participatory democratic innovations worldwide"	an explicit category of MP is not existing, the search filter however permits to combine central criteria of MPs such as sortition, civic lottery, deliberation	very broad collection of cases; direct search for mini-publics possible only by explicitly searching for a method's name (e.g. "Citizen's Jury"; "Deliberative Poll"; etc)

<b>LATINNO</b>  <a href="https://www.latinno.net/en/">https://www.latinno.net/en/</a>	2015	more than 3700	yes	Open for adding cases	infobox, six main categories with several subcategories: key information, institutional design, impact, means, ends policy cycle	to provide comparative knowledge about democratic innovations in Latin America	they focus on democratic innovations in a broader sense without differentiating between mini-publics and other types, so they do not provide a definition of mini-publics	only cases from Latin American countries are collected
<b>POLITICIZE</b> <a href="https://politicize.eu/inventory-dmps/">politicize.eu/inventory-dmps/</a>	2020	127	yes, mainly experts (Paulis et al 2021: 523)	Open for adding new cases	extensive set of indicators for the broader categories: general information, composition, format and role	Help scholars to stress the diversity of formats and modes of recruitment, single and multi-issue orientation and a majority of consultative and evaluative rather than decisional functions.	“(1) it has to be a deliberative process, meaning that participating citizens reach their conclusions or recommendations after receiving information and engaging in a careful and open discussion about the issue or issues before them, and (2) it should be a mini-public, meaning that its members are selected to constitute, as far as possible, a representative subset of the wider population (meaning that fully open citizens’ forums are not DMPs).” (Paulis et al 2021: 522)	Only cases from Europe and between 2000 and 2020 are collected and only those commissioned by a public authority on the regional or national level; local level cases were only included when having a measurable impact. Paulis et al (2021: 523) stress the poor availability of data for local mini-publics.
<b>OECD</b> <a href="https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/innovative-citizen-participation-new-democratic-institutions-catching-the-deliberative-wave-highlights.pdf">https://www.oecd.org/gov/open-government/innovative-citizen-participation-new-democratic-institutions-catching-the-deliberative-wave-highlights.pdf</a>  <a href="https://airtable.com/shrHEM12ogzPs0nQG/tbl1eKbt37N7hVFHF/viwxQgJNyONVHkmS6?blocks=">https://airtable.com/shrHEM12ogzPs0nQG/tbl1eKbt37N7hVFHF/viwxQgJNyONVHkmS6?blocks=</a>	2020, update in 2021	(289 in 2020)  574	yes	Open for adding cases	extensive set of categories oriented towards the policy cycle: duration, number of participants, detailed method description, stakeholder inclusion, challenges encountered, pre- and post-measurement of participants’ beliefs, total costs, outcome, fundings source, status of institutionalisation etc	to provide extensive comparative analysis based on evidence with the intention to “contribute[...]to the emerging international evidence base about [...]representative deliberative processes] and help[...] public authorities implement good	representative deliberative process is used interchangeably with deliberative mini-public they are defined as “a randomly selected group of people who are broadly representative of a community spending significant time learning and collaborating through facilitated deliberation to form collective recommendations for policy makers”	-biased towards cases in Anglophone and Francophone countries despite efforts to increase the researchers’ reach beyond - language barriers may play a role -as part of the update, there was a surge in especially Japanese cases

hide						practices and consider routes to institutionalising citizen deliberation"		
Mini-Publics Database	2021	more than 2100	yes	Open for adding cases	Exact geographical location, Event Title, City, Start and End Date, Issue , Format, Implementing Organization, Contracting Entity, Source	to gather as much as possible cases of mini-publics (in the narrow sense) from all around the world and since their emergence	-small group of citizens invited as representative sample of the public at large -to deliberate a given issue based on provided information -professionally organized and moderated -to produce a consensual judgement or vote of the public	- for some cases detailed information is not available (e.g. only date, location, method)  - due to scarce information it was not always possible to ensure that every case matches all criteria

## [5. Summary]

Let us sum up the main take-away points of our database project. We started with the tenet to collect as many as possible cases of mini-publics in order to visualize the global occurrence of mini-public practice throughout the 20th and 21st century. After three years we ended up with a database that tries to capture all the mini-publics that ever took place, but only recorded a few crucial categories that help identify cases. The four definitory criteria which, for us, make up a proper case were developed with reference to central literature from the field which is sensitive to the fact that mini-publics are still an essentially contested concept (Elstub/Escobar 2017). During the process of mobilizing data we recognized the many deviations of participatory processes from the core concept of mini-publics which repeatedly forced us to make inclusion/exclusion decisions on uncertain grounds because of a lack of comprehensive data.

The limitations of our database are transparent and manifold. Although there is no other database only dedicated to mini-publics with as many cases as ours, our database is biased towards countries from the Global North, overrepresents cases from Japan due to a cooperation on data sharing with japanese academics, includes almost 50% of cases which are not labeled with one of the major methods for mini-publics and finally, contains links to web sources which, throughout the time we set up the database, expired and are dead now. This may reflect two overall trends in the field: one of increasing standardization and professionalization on the side of those who carry on the legacy of the prototypical methods of doing mini-publics (Citizen Juries, Planning Cells, Consensus Conferences, etc); and one of constant tinkering and experimentation with elements of mini-publics within new formats which then, are harder to identify as mini-publics and which are reported poorly or not on the same channels as the more standardized ones. By comparing definitions we could see that cases were included on the grounds of a very broad definition of democratic innovations to represent diversity (Participedia, LATINNO), based on defining characteristic traits of the family of mini-publics (Doing mini-publics, POLITICIZE, OECD) or on the grounds of a specific mini-public method which should be collected (Loka, Nexus). Further, time span (POLITICIZE), geographical region (LATINNO, POLITICIZE), policy impact (OECD) and the type of commissioning bodies (POLITICIZE) proved to be decisive for deciding on the inclusion of cases.

This clearly indicates that the mapping of the mini-publics world and the counting of cases is always related to an interest in the generation of a specific type of knowledge and the intended contexts of its scientific and/or practical usage. It shall also have become clear that creating databases in the field of mini-publics represent an attempt to address specific audiences with a highly selective collection of what is considered a mini-public. The intended audience



(academia, practitioners, the public or all together) and context of usage affects the (higher or lower) quality and granularity of data; this is because data collection and selection strategies are influenced by the validity and scope of knowledge claims intended to be made after completion of the data collection and by coping strategies with missing/incomplete data and unknown “populations”.

Drawn from our experience of setting up a mini-publics database, we want to share some aspects that we hold as important for further work with the mini-public database or similar projects. First, we want to highlight the importance of definitory decisions because they are consequential (and determine the scope and limitations of your data). Second, we appeal to reflect the social embeddedness of knowledge while collecting because it is crucial to grasp the validity of your empirical data in representing a greater, mostly unknown “population”. Therefore it is necessary to consider the organizational structure of the mini-publics field in different parts of the world transparently, as it impinges upon your possibilities (how) to access data. Third, reflecting the limitations of our assembled cases, one of the most important insights is the importance of door openers to other linguistic and cultural regions and the need to document cases of deviating forms of mini-publics which are enmeshed with local political and cultural formats and practices in case one is interested in this kind of data.

In hindsight, we regretted that the data was sometimes included in a rush, which led to ambiguous conclusions, so as a last point we want to stress the importance of good quality when it comes to data documentation and also when it comes to translating information.

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