

## RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# Policymakers' Perceptions of the Use of Deliberative Mini-Publics to Support Sustainability Policies

Heli Saarikoski<sup>1</sup>  | Maria Ojanen<sup>1</sup>  | Mikael Hildén<sup>1</sup>  | Hanna Mela<sup>1</sup> | Suvi Huttunen<sup>1</sup>  | Katariina Kulha<sup>2</sup>  | Katriina Soini<sup>3</sup>  | Jaana Sorvali<sup>3</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>Finnish Environment Institute, Helsinki, Finland | <sup>2</sup>University of Turku, Turku, Finland | <sup>3</sup>Natural Resource Institute, Helsinki, Finland

**Correspondence:** Heli Saarikoski ([heli.saarikoski@syke.fi](mailto:heli.saarikoski@syke.fi))

**Received:** 26 February 2025 | **Revised:** 28 December 2025 | **Accepted:** 4 February 2026

**Keywords:** deliberative mini-publics | public participation | sustainability | transformative change

## ABSTRACT

Deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) have emerged as a novel method to deepen public participation in complex and contentious policy decisions, such as those related to sustainability transformations. Despite an increasing interest in applying DMPs in environmental governance, little is known about policymakers' expectations regarding their applicability and impact. We address this research gap by exploring policymakers' perceptions of DMPs in a sustainability policy context, drawing on a qualitative analysis of focus group and interview data with Finnish policymakers. The results show that policymakers welcome DMPs as a promising addition to the repertoire of public engagement methods but only in an occasional and consultative role, without a formal place in decision-making. They felt that DMPs can promote active citizenship and reasoned debate, especially if they are combined with other participatory processes such as public hearings as well as wider communication processes that contribute to the deliberative capacity of the 'maxi-public'. At the same time, they were concerned over the representativeness of DMPs as well as citizens' capacities to grasp complex sustainability problems in a short time frame. A systematic collection of experiences from DMPs and regular reflection on their utility with policymakers would strengthen the role of DMPs in developing policies for sustainability transitions.

## 1 | Introduction

Public participation is crucial for finding legitimate and socially just responses to sustainability crises. This is particularly important in attempts to introduce transformative policies that seek to alter the status quo. Deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) have been put forward as a form of citizen participation that is well suited to improve the legitimacy of environmental decision-making (Smith 2003) and to build a social mandate for action on transformative change (Howarth et al. 2020; Pickering et al. 2022).

In the wake of the 'deliberative wave' (OECD 2020), DMPs such as citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies have been increasingly

used to address climate policy issues in many countries at different governance levels (Smith 2024). A large body of literature has followed, with an emphasis on the impact of deliberation on participants' values and attitudes, but also on the policy outcomes and participants' perceptions of the DMPs (e.g., Wells et al. 2021; Elstub, Carrick, et al. 2021a; Devaney et al. 2020). However, much less attention has been given to policymakers' perceptions of DMPs and their usefulness and impacts, even though the ultimate rationality of DMPs depends on policymakers' interest in commissioning, receiving, and acting on the recommendations delivered by DMPs. The attitudes and perspectives of local and national level civil servants, in particular, have received relatively little attention, despite their key position in designing and implementing public engagement activities (Sandover

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et al. 2021; Koskimaa et al. 2023), and their gate-keeper role in collating and synthesising information for elected policymakers.

The existing empirical evidence on policymakers' perspectives regarding the use of DMPs is ambivalent, indicating both strong support and high skepticism of citizen deliberation. According to some studies, policy elites have little trust in citizens' capacity to deal with complex policy problems and see citizen involvement as an infringement to the functioning of representative democracy (Koskimaa et al. 2023) or a challenge to established ways of working and existing power relations (Escobar 2022). Yet other studies indicate that some policy actors place high hopes on DMPs as a remedy to the current shortcomings of representative democracies (Niessen 2019) or at least see them as a useful tool for broadening the processes of participation and creating momentum for climate action (Sandover et al. 2021; Wells et al. 2021; Elstub et al. 2022; Ainscough and Willis 2024). However, the potential of DMPs to positively impact policies and policymaking depends on the ways in which DMPs are embedded in social, political, and administrative contexts and coupled to formal empowered decision-making sites (C. Hendriks 2016). The role of practical challenges, *realpolitik*, and contextual factors in shaping participatory practices and their integration (or lack thereof) into the political processes have received attention in recent studies (Boswell et al. 2023; Escobar 2022; Moseley et al. 2025).

In this paper, we explore policymakers' perceptions of DMPs in a sustainability policy context. We draw on a qualitative analysis of focus group and interview data with Finnish policymakers, both politicians and civil servants at different governance levels, to gain an in-depth understanding of their motivations and aspirations, as well as their reservations and doubts, concerning the use of DMPs in sustainability policy making. We use 'sustainability policy' as an umbrella term, covering policy fields related to climate, transport and natural resource management as well as urban and regional development.

Our specific research questions are:

1. What are the roles and uses of DMPs that policymakers perceive as relevant and what possible applications do they foresee?
2. What advantages and pitfalls do policymakers identify in the use of DMPs?
3. What factors contribute to the views of policymakers and should their concerns be addressed to design more effective DMPs and integrate them into political and administrative processes?

Based on our data, we will discuss the prospects of integrating DMPs in environmental governance in ways that provide effective and meaningful forums for citizen deliberation on just sustainability policies.

## 2 | Deliberative Mini-Publics as Tools for Engaging Citizens in Sustainability Policymaking

DMPs are specially commissioned lay citizen forums that formulate recommendations for policymakers on the issue at stake,

after receiving information and carrying out facilitated in-depth discussion (Smith and Setälä 2018). Random stratified sampling is used to ensure representativeness of a wider population, to counter self-selection bias and to safeguard representation of diverse societal viewpoints and social positions (Setälä 2021). Participants have an opportunity to hear and cross-examine experts, and in some cases, also stakeholder witnesses (Boswell et al. 2023). The commonly used models of DMPs include Citizens' Juries and Citizens' Assemblies. The former refers to a citizens' forum with 20–40 participants who usually meet for 3 or 4 days while citizens' assemblies involve a larger group of people and meet over several weekends (OECD 2020).

The aim of DMPs is to create more inclusive and diverse spaces of public reasoning to counter the myopic tendencies of party politics dominated by vested interests and short-sighted calculations (Setälä 2017; Dryzek et al. 2019). The participants in a DMP are expected to engage in a dialogue with an open mind and to be persuaded by the richness of the debate and the information that they receive during the process. Consequently, DMPs are envisioned to counteract disinformation and polarisation, and help in bringing in typically excluded citizen groups into public policy and decision making (OECD 2020). However, the quality and legitimacy of DMPs are contingent upon several factors, including openness and transparency of the process, impartiality and credibility of expert witnesses, absence of interest group or any other kind of domination, and wider public engagement in the process (Smith 2003; Sandover et al. 2021).

Recent experiences of local, regional and national climate assemblies show that mini-publics have been able to broaden the terms of climate policy discourse (Sandover et al. 2021; Ross et al. 2021) and made participants more committed to consider future generations' perspectives (Kulha et al. 2021). Some climate assemblies have created support for ambitious climate policies (Devaney et al. 2020; Wells 2022; Smith 2024) while others have produced more ambiguous results, endorsing some but not all transformational solutions (Elstub et al. 2022; Saarikoski et al. 2023; Ainscough and Willis 2024; Moseley et al. 2025; Huttunen et al. 2025).

However, the concrete policy impacts from local and national climate assemblies have remained modest (Wells et al. 2021; Sandover et al. 2021; Elstub, Farrell, et al. 2021b; Ainscough and Willis 2024), and factors external to the DMPs have resulted in very different policy impacts as the French and Irish climate assemblies indicate (Torney 2021). According to Boswell et al. (2023), to understand the impacts of climate assemblies on politics and policy-making, it is important to pay attention to their integrative design characteristics. In particular, this involves examining which part of the polity DMPs are connected to; whether and how they seek to accommodate or transform interests in the media and civil society engagement; and whether DMPs incorporate practices to sustain input throughout the policy process. These three dimensions—polity, policy and political robustness—influence the effectiveness of DMPs (see also Moseley et al. 2025).

A key limitation of DMPs is that they are not representative in the electoral sense. Critics have pointed out that mini-publics with binding decision-making powers are an undemocratic 'shortcut' because they are not accountable to the broader

public (Lafont 2015). Furthermore, a small number of people with privileged access to information can become a 'pseudo-elite' no longer representing the general public (Lafont 2015). Most deliberative democrats, including Lafont, endorse non-empowered mini-publics that have an advisory or consultative role (Setälä 2017; C. M. Hendriks 2006). DMPs have also been criticised for potentially ignoring marginalised voices and providing definite answers in the form of consensus statements that close political debates (Curato and Böker 2016; Machin 2023). However, a mini-public can contribute to the deliberative capacity of the broader polity if it promotes a nuanced position on polarising issues or synthesises relevant discourses transmitted to wider publics (Curato and Böker 2016), thereby increasing the political robustness of DMPs (Boswell et al. 2023).

### 3 | Methods and Data

Our research is based on the directed content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) of 10 individual semi-structured interviews and six focus group interviews with Finnish policymakers. In total, we interviewed 35 actors. The interviewees and the details of the interviews are presented in Table 1.

We organised two focus groups with civil servants at ministries dealing with key sustainability transition issues, namely natural resource management ( $N=4$ ) and transport policy ( $N=3$ ). Additionally, we conducted two focus groups with civil servants ( $N=10$ ) in two cities that had extensive experience with participatory processes. We were interested in the added value that DMPs provided to the repertoire of conventional public participation methods. The interviewees were working in different sustainability-related fields, including transport, climate, and urban planning. Two focus group interviews were also organized with local politicians ( $N=8$ ) in the same two cities. The focus groups were conducted during November 2023–May 2024.

We started the focus groups with a 10-min presentation about DMPs, followed by the discussants' initial reactions and questions about our presentation. We continued with questions presented in the focus group guide (Annex 1).

The focus-group data was complemented with semi-structured interviews with individual civil servants. We interviewed officials from two cities who had experience of DMPs or similar deliberative forums ( $N=5$ ) in spring 2024, and two government officials who commissioned a DMP related to the National Medium-Term Climate Change Policy Plan in July 2021. Furthermore, we interviewed four regional level civil servants who were involved in regional level DMPs, one evaluating transport policy measures to be included in a regional climate roadmap, and the other one generating recommendations for sustainable and climate-wise use of natural resources for a regional green transition roadmap. These interviews took place in May 2022 and March 2023. The interviews followed the interview guide used for focus group discussions, except for the presentation about DMPs, as the interviewees were familiar with the method.

The interviews and focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The material, altogether 16 h, was then

uploaded to the NVivo software and coded following the broad categories of the interview guide (deductive coding) by authors MO and HM. These categories included the potential topics of DMP, the perceived benefits and challenges, as well as the perceived policy impact. We also coded experiences directly linked to DMPs and DMP style processes. After the initial coding, MO and HM refined the coding using a data-driven approach (inductive coding). They searched for commonalities and differences within the codes to create sub-categories to existing codes. The results section is structured according to the key themes that emerged from the data. The direct quotes that have been used in the following have been translated and lightly edited for readability.

An ethical review was not conducted because the ethical guidelines set by the Finnish National Board on Research Integrity (TENK 2019) do not require a review for research in which participation is voluntary, is based on prior informed consent, and does not pose a risk to the physical or mental safety of the participants. All the interviewees gave written or recorded permission to use the interviews for research purposes, and none of the interviewees stated that they had limitations on disclosing personal views.

### 4 | Results

#### 4.1 | The Role of DMPs Vis a Vis Elected Institutions

The interviewees generally regarded DMPs as one potentially useful way to inform elected policymakers about public opinions, but they were not willing to delegate any actual decision-making powers to them. The possibility that DMPs would somehow overrule democratically elected decision-making bodies was one of the main reasons for being wary of them. As one interviewee pointed out, city councils are elected by universal suffrage and they can be held accountable to their constituencies, unlike randomly selected groups of citizens.

In the city of A we have very strong local democracy. The turnout in municipal elections is 78 per cent and if the elected city council has set a climate neutrality target, we see that the legitimacy and mandate [to prepare climate policy actions] comes from the democratic process.

(CSA4)

In a similar way, ministerial representatives noted that DMPs cannot substitute elected representatives nor overrule government decisions which set the parameters for preparing of legislation or other strategic decision-making. Additionally, the politicians resented the idea that DMPs would have any other role than an advisory function. A local politician noted that while public participation is a constitutional right, elections are the primary citizen participation channel and effort should be put into increasing the voter turnout. They explained:

It is important to listen to people and to provide participation opportunities, that's for sure. We all agree on that. But we have a representative democracy

**TABLE 1** | The interviewed actors, their experience in DMPs and the types of interviews.

<b>Governance unit</b>	<b>The interviewees</b>	<b>Number and code of interviewees</b>	<b>DMP experience</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Duration</b>
City A	Civil servants working on urban planning, citizen engagement and climate issues	6 (CSA1-CSA6)	No, but 4 participants described experiences in DMP-style processes	Focus group	2 h
City B	Civil servants working on urban planning, citizen engagement and climate issues	4 (CSB1-CSB4)	No, but 2 participants described experiences in DMP-style processes	Focus group	1.5 h
City A	City council members, 3 parties represented	3 (CCA1-CCA3)	No	Focus group	1.5 h
City B	City council members, 5 parties represented	5 (CCB1-CCB5)	No, but 1 participant described experiences in DMP-style processes	Focus group	1.5 h
City C	Civil servants	3 (CSC1-CSC3)	Yes	Individual interview	30–45 min/interview
City D	Civil servants	2 (CSD1-CSD2)	Yes	Individual interview	30–45 min/interview
Region A	Civil servants working on climate and transport policies	2 (CSRA1-CSRA2)	Yes	Individual interview	30–50 min/interview
Region B	Civil servant working on sustainability and green growth	1 (CSRB1)	Yes	Individual interview	1 h
Ministry A	Civil servants working on transport policy	3 (CSMA1-CSMA3)	No, but 1 participant was familiar with a national DMP process	Focus group	1.5 h
Ministry B	Civil servants working on forestry and agriculture policy	4 (CSMB1-CSMB4)	No, but 1 participant was familiar with a national DMP process	Focus group	2 h 15 min
Ministry C	Civil servants working on climate policy	2 (CSMC1-CSMC2)	Yes	Individual interview	20–40 min/interview

and elected decision makers, which is the priority number one, and a way for people to participate. We could also put more effort into citizens' activity and willingness to cast their votes.

(CCA2)

The hardest criticism was expressed by some regional level politicians who, according to a regional authority interviewee, questioned the legitimacy of the DMP on natural resource use questions, presumably because the DMP adopted very nature-positive views. However, among our interviewees, all local politicians acknowledged the value of public participation and welcomed DMP as an interesting addition to the repertoire of participation methods.

I think that this kind of [deliberative processes] are important tools that can broaden the understanding of both officials and politicians.

(CCA3)

It increases my learning when I see that what the residents have thought about concerning that topic. I certainly learn something from it and it makes it easier for me to make decisions, or it might even guide my decision-making.

(CCB3)

A few local officials and politicians maintained that the most important role of DMPs is to build trust and increase the legitimacy of planning and policy-making processes. As one city official formulated it:

It is not realistic to imagine that a single statement [by a DMP] would end up in a policy paper. And is that really a goal or is it more important that this kind of method can create trust and increase citizens' feelings of being heard, and such?

(CSB4)

However, most interviewees maintained that DMPs should provide meaningful inputs to the policy processes. The authorities at the ministries saw DMPs first and foremost as a method that could improve the evidence-base of policy proposals by bringing in citizens' perceptions and values on par with expert evaluations. In local officials' and politicians' account, DMP statements could be one element of the background information that preparing officials put together for political decision-makers. Furthermore, several interviewees pointed out that DMPs could help to address the shortcomings of the current democratic decision-making processes in which citizens only have a say once every 4 years. The following comments elaborate on this point:

Here the idea is to bring up citizens' perspectives between the elections. It only creates added value and does not jeopardise representative democracy.

(CSMB3)

This [DMP] could complement representative democracy by providing a way to focus on a single topic, while municipal election themes cover basically anything and everything.

(CSA2)

Almost all interviewees lamented the deterioration of the public space into polarised echo chambers whose members only talk to each other. As one person observed, all efforts to "bring citizens into normal interaction" are indispensable to counter the current anti-democratic tendencies. Another interviewee captured the widely shared concern aptly:

Especially in these times we need all possible means to intercept bawling [voicing populist and false arguments] and to provide real opportunities to influence [public debate].

(CCB3)

## 4.2 | The Appropriate Scope and Remit of DMPs

According to the interviewees, the applicability of DMPs is constrained by the sheer complexity and science-intensity of sustainability policy problems, especially at the national level. Some government officials maintained that it is unrealistic to expect ordinary citizens to grasp the intricacies of climate policy instruments or the agricultural subsidy system or gain a good understanding of the impacts of 50 different biodiversity protection measures within a four-day jury process, as the extracts below demonstrate:

How can the jurors reach a level of knowledge that they can make judgements based on factual evidence and not only on emotions? I have dealt with these climate issues for years and still I am sometimes, like, how does this thing [some climate change mitigation option] work?

(CSMB4)

It is impossible to familiarize people in a few hours with every measure concerning the EU effort sharing sector [not covered by the emissions trading system].

(CSMA3)

Also, some city officials felt that the level of expertise required to consider climate policy measures restricts the helpfulness of DMPs.

How can one teach people the effectiveness of [climate policy] measures in such a short time and how many can actually calculate that kind of thing and think about the ways to achieve this [CO2 emission target].

(CSA4)

However, the interviewees felt that DMPs can be a good way to address a limited set of sub-questions, especially ones that are relatively concrete and resonate with people's everyday lives. For example, they suggested that whilst addressing a sustainable and profitable national food strategy is a far too challenging task for a DMP, citizens could attend to specific elements of it, such as ways to promote healthy eating or to reduce food waste. In a similar way, DMPs could concentrate on concrete transport policy measures like road tolls. In a forest management context, the interviewees envisioned a role for DMPs to provide input to regional management plans for state-owned forests. DMPs could channel 'ordinary' citizens' views into the participatory planning processes which tend to be dominated by 'the usual suspects', that is, forestry interests and conservationists.

On the other hand, some interviewees suggested that DMP statements on broader questions, like protection of old-growth forests, could be one element of background material prepared for policymakers, informing them about citizens' preferences for biodiversity protection targets and measures to achieve them. This view was echoed by an official who saw that DMPs could be especially useful in anticipatory planning, such as preparing roadmaps for fossil-free transport. They observed that laws are often drafted in haste, with minimum hearings, following the principles set in government programmes. Therefore, there is no meaningful role for DMPs when the outlines of politically controversial initiatives, such as the lowering of the distribution obligation for renewable transport fuels, have already been fixed in tough government formation talks.

When the [policy] measure is fixed, then it will just be implemented as it is [written in the Government Programme]. There is no function for a citizens' jury here. A better moment is when there are options on the table and a policy measure can be implemented in different ways, or not to be implemented at all.

(CSMA3)

In contrast, DMPs addressing forward-looking visions could bring issues to the policy agenda and contribute to public debate on emerging policy initiatives. In the transport sector, the national level civil servants mentioned the national implementation of the EU transport emissions trading scheme and the renewal of automobile taxation as examples of feasible assignments for potential DMPs. The use of DMPs for strategic level questions got support also from the authorities who had been involved in the DMP addressing the National Medium-Term Climate Change Policy Plan. They were quite satisfied with the outcome and felt that organising the DMP early enough in the planning process had increased policy impact:

It provided concrete support for [the planning process]. One reason for the success was the right timing so that we could directly use the results in one preparation step which focused on new emission control measures and their effectiveness and acceptability.

(CSMC2)

At the city level, most deliberative processes so far have addressed relatively concrete questions such as developing pedestrian streets. However, some city officials argued that a DMP would be especially valuable for addressing the thorny question of the extent of city growth. They would have liked to set up a DMP on the mismatch between the official city policy to increase the housing stock for the increasing population and the local opposition to basically all proposals to locate new developments in specific areas. They hoped that a balanced discussion among a representative group of citizens could bring up the diverse interests and needs of all citizens, including those who lack affordable housing or those who prefer dense and compact urban areas. They also called for a civic discussion on the conflicting environmental goals: compact cities are a remedy for urban sprawl and related CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions, but densification often means limiting urban green spaces. One civil servant described the incompatible goals that the planners need to cope with in their daily work:

Here in Southern Finland cities grow and there are development pressures but at the same time, we have all these climate targets and biodiversity protection goals. So, we should both build and expand, and at the same time, preferably not to build and expand.

(CSB3)

The need to engage citizens in preparing city strategies was also recognised by some politicians. Interestingly, some of them felt that DMPs could be an effective way to address controversial 'sore points', like how and where—and whether—the city should grow, while others felt that these kinds of highly politicised questions should be left to politicians. In their view, citizens' input is most helpful in the form of user experience when developing municipal services such as health care networks or public transport. They suspected that despite random selection, only the people with strong views, for or against things, would volunteer to participate in a DMP on a highly divisive issue and people with moderate views, 'those who would speak rationally', would stay at home.

### 4.3 | Diversifying Voices

The idea that DMPs consist of randomly selected ordinary people was appealing to the authorities who were somewhat disillusioned with more traditional public participation methods. They lamented the fact that public hearings and on-line participation channels tend to polarize issues and engage only those who have strong opinions about and possibly stakes in the policy proposals, as explained below:

There are so many provocative statements produced by extreme groups, which influence decision making and create polarisation. I would gladly take this kind of service [DMP] in use in our job.

(CSMB3)

You never hear from those people who support the plan, you only hear from those who are against it.

(CSA6)

The authorities also pointed out that strong interest groups tend to monopolise the public discussions at the expense of ‘silent citizens’. In some instances, these groups have even prepared model answers and mobilised their supporters to submit them in the “OtaKantaa” (“Voice Your Opinion”) service, which is an open platform through which authorities can ask for statements without any restrictions or participant criteria. The interviewees felt that participatory forums such as DMPs could bring up ordinary citizens’ presumably more moderate views and create novel insights. As one interviewee put it,

It could create a new perspective, which could deviate from the typical dispute situation in which everyone just repeats what they always say.

(CSMB4)

The officials who had experience of deliberative forums noted that DMPs can help citizens understand that there is usually not a single citizen opinion but a variety of perspectives. According to them, public hearings and social media debates are often dominated by people who strongly oppose measures such as restrictions for automobile traffic, whereas those people who cannot afford a car or drive it are not similarly organized to be able to voice their preferences for reducing car lanes to improve the conditions for public transport. They also noted that dealing with angry publics is very stressful and therefore they welcomed all participation methods that can promote dispassionate dialogues of the pros and cons of development proposals and alleviate the juxtaposition between officials and citizens, as explained below:

The best moment in the DMP was when the residents, including the passionate opponents of the development proposal [for urban densification], started to realize that hey, this is not citizens against planners, but we citizens have different ideas and opinions here. That is when the discussion took off properly.

(CSA4)

One city official noted that DMPs can also serve as eye-opening experience for policymakers who are frequently contacted by pressure-groups lobbyist or who follow social media posts by the ‘angry publics’. An interviewee explained this:

They were, like, how can these results [from citizen interviews and discussion forums] be so different from the citizen feedback that we receive every day? They realised that the feedback they receive does not necessarily reflect the views of the general public.

(CSA6)

A regional authority who had been involved in a DMP addressing forest use noted that the jury helped to open up the forest policy discourse. Local politicians are influenced by the strong forestry lobby and tend to emphasise economic aspects, while the jurors were more, or at least equally, concerned about

biodiversity, carbon sequestration and local recreational uses of forests. Opposite views were held by some interviewees who noted that a process which generates a consensus statement can narrow down policy debates. One person referred to an extensive online public hearing with 18,000 responses, including open-ended ones, and maintained that it might have generated a broader range of ideas than a joint compromise statement by a DMP.

Some civil servants remarked that in DMPs not only the participants but also the officials can learn and reflect on their initial views. As one city planner explained, interaction with citizens, some of whom might be in a very different socio-economic position than the planners themselves, can help the planners see the issues from different perspectives. Several interviewees also mentioned that citizens can have valuable insights, for example, of the actual impacts of proposed policy instruments on people’s behaviour, and consequently on the effectiveness of those instruments.

#### 4.4 | The Question of Representativeness

While the interviewees generally felt that DMPs can diversify policy discussions, some of them nevertheless doubted the representativeness of DMPs. They suspected that despite stratified random selection, the volunteers are typically more active and better educated than average people, and they are motivated to become involved because they have clear views on the questions to be debated. To counter the self-selection bias, some interviewees emphasised the importance of using attitudinal variables as one selection criteria along with demographic variables. However, one person noted that there are some groups, like children, vulnerable people, or language minorities, who are likely to be excluded despite the best intentions to engage them.

The representativeness of DMPs was criticised especially by some local politicians who felt that their own mandate came from the large number of people casting their votes. The legitimacy of a citizen forum with only a small number of participants was also questioned by civil servants at the national and city level, as the following quotations express:

We might have 34 people who understand the issues better, but we also have the 5000 people who are yelling at each other on Twitter, so what is the use of the process?

(CSMA1)

How will policymakers react to the fact that OK, a 15-person random group has proposed something. How reliable is that? I don’t know.

(CSA1)

The city officials, who had previous experience with DMPs, were more trusting that random sampling could guarantee representativeness and capture also the silent voices, especially if DMPs are complemented with other methods like surveys. One city official pointed out that representativeness could be increased by sharing the DMP results in public hearings or town

hall meetings. This could give the residents a feeling that their views have been heard, even if they have not been personally involved.

[People might think that] well, I was not personally involved, but this sounds convincing enough to me. In this way, people get the feeling that **we** are heard even though **I** was not consulted.

(CSA5, emphasis added)

A similar point was made by a local politician:

There are lot of suspicions between the city organisation and some vocal citizen groups. So, it might help some people to know that ok, there were people like you in the citizens' jury and they came to this conclusion after they had thought about it together.

(CCB5)

Interestingly, some ministerial interviewees felt that DMPs can distort the 'real' public opinion as the jurors might be swayed by expert presentations. They felt that they would rather like to have a proper understanding of citizens' reasons and their underlying fears and concerns that lead them to oppose certain policy proposals. A similar concern about the experts interfering with citizens' views was raised by a regional administration interviewee:

It can also create suspicions that those people who introduce new knowledge [to the process] try to influence things, and also whether the information is really based on facts.

(CSR1)

On the other hand, most interviewees saw that the added value of DMPs lies in the fact that the citizens involved receive adequate and balanced information on the topics under discussion. Some of them mentioned that ideally, DMP statements would not represent the views of just a random group of citizens but a group of *informed* citizens. Overall, the policy actors who had experience of DMPs were more trusting of the process and pointed out that DMPs have produced surprisingly well-informed and reasoned judgements in a relatively short timeframe.

#### 4.5 | Strengthened Impact of DMPs: Designing Effective DMPs

All the interviewees felt that DMPs could provide added value to planning and policy-making processes. The most important obstacle to adopting DMPs, or using them more frequently, was the lack of resources as well as competencies to organise DMPs. The national level civil servants considered it very unlikely that they or their colleagues would organise a DMP without substantial support from some external body, either a research institute or a government organisation like the Government Communications Department at the Prime Minister's Office. They also regarded a clear political mandate to be an important precondition for setting up DMPs.

Time and money were also an issue for local officials who maintained that sending out thousands of invitations to get a representative sample of the population is not the most cost-effective way of getting citizens' feedback. Furthermore, they observed that translation services are needed to capture language minorities. However, large cities do have professional staff to organise and run citizen participation events, and most city officers did have some experience of DMPs or similar types of deliberative forums. Some cities had cut down the costs by establishing a pool of voluntary citizens from which to pick a sub-sample for diverse deliberative forums. Furthermore, while the costs of face-to-face citizens' juries or assemblies were seen to be high by local officials, they also acknowledged that even 100,000 euros, the price of a 200-person jury organised by external experts in one city, is a small sum in large infrastructure projects where the planning costs are millions of euros.

Those politicians who had experience of DMPs and similar dialogue processes emphasised the importance of skilful facilitation as well as a good understanding of the substance of the topic under discussion. They also noted that DMPs require a lot not only from the organisers but also from the participants, who need to invest their time and effort in learning new and often quite complex issues. As one interviewee summed it, "This is not an easy method, but the fact that it is so demanding means that it produces good results" (CCB4).

From the city officials' perspective, the key question regarding the institutionalisation of DMPs involved the ways in which DMPs can complement the other participatory methods already used by the cities. These include public and residential hearings, surveys, and ad hoc sparring groups as well as permanent youth, elderly and disabled persons' panels and participatory budgeting exercises. As one official pointed out, not everyone has the time or ability to attend public events and therefore people also need opportunities to participate from their 'own sofas'.

Both civil servants and politicians maintained that for a DMP to have a real influence, it should take place in an early phase of preparation, when the options are openly on the table and the background documents are being prepared. According to them, a DMP is pointless at the stage when the city government brings a proposal to the city council. In contrast, DMPs which had a clear political mandate and strong links to timely planning processes have produced concrete results. For example, a citizens' jury on municipal transport policy led one city to put more emphasis on improving pedestrian transport, as requested by the jurors. In another city, the jurors' support for the planners' ideas for a neighbourhood design helped the planners to justify the proposal to the policymakers. Both local and regional level civil servants felt that facilitated citizen deliberations could make policy processes more frictionless and ease the work needed to address appeals.

If this kind of facilitated citizen deliberation forum would become a part of the regional planning process, it could perhaps reduce the millions of small remarks and statements that we receive on the plans afterwards [and must answer one by one].

(CSRA2)

## 5 | Discussion

The policy actors had fairly similar views on the potential roles and relevant topics of DMPs in environmental policy processes. They also shared some of the reservations about DMPs as well as views of their key benefits and ways of advancing their applicability. The different policy actors' views are summarised in Table 2.

The interviewees unanimously agreed on the advisory role of DMPs, ruling out the delegation of formal decision-making power to DMPs. The results align with previous studies that have found that policy actors emphasise that citizens should only have a consultative, non-binding role in the formulation of policies (Koskimaa et al. 2023; Niessen 2019). However, some civil servants noted that the four-year electoral cycle is too long to allow citizens to have a say, especially on locally important matters. They felt that DMPs could be especially useful for advising policymakers on occasional issues that emerge during a term of a city council. Furthermore, basically all actors maintained

that participatory forums such as DMPs do not compete with but strengthen the representative democratic system by supporting active citizenship and promoting reasoned public discourse.

A major concern for many of the policy actors was the representativeness of DMPs. They suspected that despite stratified random sampling, active and well-educated people, or people with strong partisan positions, would be overrepresented due to self-selection bias. Similar concerns are observed also in other studies (e.g., Sandover et al. 2021; Elstub et al. 2022). However, those local and national level civil servants, who had experience with DMPs, suggested that the representativeness can be increased by making sure that the participants hold diverse views about the issues at hand. The importance of discursive representation is emphasised also by scholars studying climate assemblies where values and worldviews shape individuals' orientations (MacKenzie and Caluwaerts 2021; Elstub, Farrell, et al. 2021b). Importantly, some urban planners proposed that DMPs could feed into public hearing processes while some of the politicians suggested that the legitimacy of

**TABLE 2** | A summary of the different participants' perceptions on DMPs.

	<b>Regional/local civil servants</b>	<b>Local politicians</b>	<b>National level civil servants</b>
Potential roles for DMPs in policy processes	Advisory non-binding role. Creating active citizenship, countering polarization via reasoned debate. Building trust in policy making	Advisory non-binding role. Creating active citizenship, countering polarization via reasoned debate. Building trust in policy making	Advisory non-binding role. Creating active citizenship, countering polarization via reasoned debate. Improving the evidence-base of decision-making.
Main concerns	The complexity of environmental issues makes it difficult for lay citizens to provide thoughtful input in a short timeframe.	Representativeness. The complexity of environmental issues makes it difficult for lay citizens to provide thoughtful input in a short timeframe.	Representativeness. The complexity of the issues at hand makes it difficult for lay citizens to provide thoughtful input in a short timeframe. The role of experts in steering the panel's views.
Possible topics Scope of DMPs	Concrete issues of relevance in everyday lives of citizens but also complex and contested questions related to e.g., urban growth city-wide issues, such as trade-offs between city growth targets and the preservation of biodiversity	Topics of a broader nature where party politics is not a strong determinant. Yet also support for DMPs which could address contested issues related, e.g., to urban growth.	Broad visions that could influence future policies, beyond those already set in government programmes. Practical and well-specified topics related to the implementation of policies, within the limits of the national government programme
Key benefits	Depolarizing issues by giving also those who do not have a strong personal stake in issues a say and making those views visible. Mutual learning.	Ways of learning about the actual sentiments of the citizens in specific issues. Opportunity to highlight the diversity of views. Mutual learning.	Strengthening the evidence-base for policy-making. Diversifying the views beyond those provided by strong stakeholder groups. Forcing lobbyists to recognise wider viewpoints.
Practical constraints	Resource demands and time constraints.	Resource demands and time constraints.	Resource demands, capacities and time constraints.
Ways of advancing applicability	Fitting DMPs into the broader context of participatory approaches. Appropriate timing.	Availability of skilled and trusted non-partisan facilitators. Appropriate timing.	The need for a broad political mandate and practical support from an external body. Appropriate timing

DMPs could be increased by good media coverage to instigate a wider societal discussion on DMP recommendations. These suggestions resonate with proposals that DMPs should be embedded into wider processes of public consultation (Moseley et al. 2025) and contribute to the deliberative capacity of the broader polity (Curato and Böker 2016; Boswell et al. 2023).

Another key concern, especially among the civil servants, was the capacity of the citizens to grasp complex and science-intensive questions pertinent to the sustainability transition, such as climate change mitigation or biodiversity protection. This concern can be justified to some extent, given, for example, Boswell's (2021) first person account of citizens' assembly on air quality and experiences from the UK climate assembly (Elstub, Farrell, et al. 2021b). However, city planners who had commissioned deliberative forums were more optimistic about the cognitive capacity of lay citizens, noting that DMP designs including expert consultation enable citizens to educate themselves about the matter at hand. Interestingly, some national level civil servants suspected that interaction with experts might distort citizens' initial or 'real' views, echoing Lafont's (2015) argument that deliberative processes make participating citizens no longer a representative sample of the citizenry at large. They wanted to know what citizens 'really think' to be able to set straight misconceptions and unjustified worries. A notion of DMPs as a way to educate the public was also held by those city officials who maintained that DMPs are essentially an opportunity for the citizens to learn about sustainable lifestyles and the importance of combatting climate change. Similar views of the function of DMPs as an awareness raising tool were observed among authorities commissioning a Climate Assembly in the UK (Sandover et al. 2021). Yet some of the politicians and civil servants had a more positive view of the epistemic role of citizens, observing that DMP participants can provide important insights and bring in situated knowledge that complements, and in some cases challenges, public officials' and other experts' knowledge.

The interviewees envisioned multiple ways in which DMPs could increase effective environmental governance. The city planners emphasised the administrative connection and saw DMPs as a welcome supplement to the existing repertoire of public participation methods in urban planning processes. Traditional events such as public hearings are typically dominated by vocal minorities, while DMPs could bring up the views of 'the silent majority' and support dispassionate discussion. In doing so, the planners adhered to the accommodation model (Boswell et al. 2023), according to which DMPs provide a depoliticised forum for a diverse group of citizens, unconstrained by vested interests, to come to a reasoned judgement. However, the planners did not entirely want to bypass or stifle social conflicts but maintained that DMPs could be useful sites to discuss and debate controversial policy proposals such as restrictions on private motoring or densification of the urban structure. According to them, competing social interests can be integrated into the process in a constructive manner by ensuring that diverse argumentative perspectives are represented in the DMP in a balanced way. Some local politicians, too, felt that DMPs were especially suited for addressing highly salient and contentious public policy issues (see also C. Hendriks 2016; Moseley et al. 2025), while others maintained

that citizen input is best used for concrete, less politicised urban planning issues such as designing public spaces or planning pedestrian and bike routes.

The government officials attended to the governmental-administrative connection and considered the role of DMPs in preparing national level strategies. The Climate Jury organised in conjunction with the National Medium-Term Climate Change Policy Plan was regarded as a success by the commissioning authorities who contemplated making climate assembly a permanent element of preparing the plan, which is revisited every 4 years, when the government changes. Some government officials maintained that the level of detail in national level policy strategies can be daunting to lay citizens and therefore suggested that DMPs could contribute to more general visioning processes, in which the options are still on the table, and generate novel ideas unconstrained by party politics. They thought that the policy impact of such DMPs would be based on agenda setting and bringing ideas to a broader public discourse, especially if the outputs received broad media coverage. Others proposed DMPs which would focus on clearly defined sub-questions that could realistically be tackled by a DMP operating under time constraints. Overall, those policy actors who had previous experience of DMPs were more trusting of the capacity of DMPs to enhance effective environmental governance. Similar observations have been made by Elstub et al. (2022) and Ainscough and Willis (2024) who found that policy actors who had been closely involved in a DMP subsequently supported the more widespread use of DMPs.

The main obstacle for increasing the use of DMPs at all administrative levels was time and resources. Cities often have more leeway because citizen involvement is part of their mandatory tasks, and they usually have separate offices and budgets for dealing with public participation. However, the city officials also observed that DMPs are so resource-intensive that they should be used only in matters of high political salience. At the national level, the capacity of civil servants to organise citizen engagement beyond formal hearing processes was a major impediment for applying DMPs to support policy processes. The institutionalisation of DMPs at the national level is unlikely without dedicated external support for individual ministries. Resource challenges and capacity issues have also been recognised as barriers in studies which have evaluated the policy impacts of local level climate assemblies (Wells et al. 2021; Moseley et al. 2025) as well as national level DMPs related to climate policymaking (Ainscough and Willis 2024).

The ways to advance the use of DMPs link to the challenges identified by the policymakers. They suggested combining DMPs with surveys and traditional public hearings to ensure representativeness and to provide space for all people, not only a selected few, to voice their opinions. The policy actors who had experience of DMPs emphasised the importance of good facilitation and the ones who did not, especially at the national level, stressed the need for capacity building and external support for running DMPs. Appropriate timing was considered essential at all policy levels to ensure that DMPs have real policy impacts, either on agenda setting or policy implementation. However, the policy actors at all levels were keenly aware of the 'messiness' of political processes and pointed out that no single input, whether

expert opinion, interest group lobbying or DMP statement, has a direct impact on policymaking processes. The practitioners' insight aligns with Boswell et al. (2023), who emphasise the "downstream" complexities of policy and administration.

## 6 | Conclusions

The interviewed policy actors had remarkably consistent views of the potential benefits of citizen deliberation when addressing sustainability challenges. This suggests that there is potential for DMPs to become embedded in environmental governance processes. However, the acceptance is also conditional on the particular applications of DMPs and perceptions of the outcomes, as well as the political and administrative contexts. Our results demonstrate that some policy actors see DMPs primarily as a way to debate issues of principle and broader perspectives, whereas others see them as tools for activating citizens' collective intelligence and practical knowledge. They all agreed that DMPs should not have a binding role in policy processes; instead, the value of DMPs lies in their capacity to engage also the silent voices, overcome destructive polarisation, and facilitate civil political disagreements.

DMPs demand resources. To convince policy makers that the resources are worth spending, DMP-entrepreneurs must show that acceptable representativeness can be achieved with a small sample from the total population and that complex sustainability problems can be distilled in such a way that they can be meaningfully addressed by a group of informed citizens in a short time frame. In further institutionalising DMPs, their role and position in relation to representative democracy must be clarified. Institutionalised DMPs need a political mandate, which is crucial if their outcomes are to be used. To succeed, the institutionalisation requires capacity building and a search for innovative cost-effective ways of running DMPs, including linking them to other participatory processes. Systematic gathering of experiences and regular reflections with policy makers on opportunities and challenges can build a foundation for regular DMP practice in developing policies for sustainability transitions.

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### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the Academy of Finland for financial support (Projects 341398, 341373 and 341399). Open access publishing facilitated by Suomen ympäristökeskus, as part of the Wiley - FinELib agreement.

### Funding

This work was supported by the Academy of Finland, 341398, 341373, 341399.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

### Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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## Annex 1

### The Focus Group Guide

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What thoughts does the researchers' presentation on deliberative mini-publics evoke? Are you familiar with deliberative min-publics, and do you have any questions or comments regarding the presentation?

How could deliberative mini-publics be utilized in planning and decision-making in your organisation?

What kinds of topics are best suited for deliberative mini-publics? Conversely, what kinds of topics are not suited for this method?

Which stages/processes of decision-making are best suited/most natural for the use of deliberative mini-publics?

Are there any potential risks associated with the use of deliberative mini-publics? What might these be?

How and where can the recommendations from deliberative mini-publics have an impact? Follow-up/Clarification if needed: What kind of concrete effects do you think would be possible in the ministry's/city's decision-making?

Do you think that deliberative mini-publics could have a broader social impact? If so, where and in what way?

What are the challenges of deliberative mini-publics?

How do deliberative mini-publics compare to other forms of participation? In particular, what added value can deliberative mini-publics bring to different forms of participation?

Question about the future: In your opinion, in what direction is citizen participation developing, and what factors are influencing this

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