

Collective Decision-Making Repository

A Comparative Analysis of Collective Decision-Making Practices

December 2025



Executive Summary

Democratic institutions are facing a convergence of challenges: declining legitimacy, degraded public discourse, and weakened governing capacity. In this context, collective decision-making has emerged as a promising response—yet its effectiveness varies widely. This report examines 32 cases of collective decision-making practices from around the world to understand what distinguishes processes that lead to meaningful outcomes from those that remain symbolic.

The analysis finds that participation alone does not produce better decisions or stronger trust. Instead, outcomes depend on how collective decision-making is designed and embedded within governing systems. Government-initiated and co-governed processes were more likely to result in policy change, particularly when participation was connected to formal decision authority and supported by clear accountability and feedback mechanisms. Processes that lacked follow-through—regardless of how inclusive or deliberative they were—frequently failed to produce durable outcomes and, in some cases, risked deepening cynicism.

Across cases, three design features consistently mattered: initiation and institutional embedding, decision authority, and feedback loops. Citizens' assemblies, town halls, and participatory budgeting often performed well not because of their labels, but because they combined these features in ways that linked collective input to action. Conversely, non-governmental or advisory-only initiatives were less likely to report policy change, highlighting the importance of proximity to power and implementation pathways.

The repository is not a catalogue of best practices or models to replicate. Rather, it is a design reference that enables practitioners to examine how specific features—such as who initiates a process, how decisions are made, and how governments respond—interact to shape outcomes. The central implication is clear: collective decision-making strengthens legitimacy and governance capacity only when institutions are willing and able to act on what people decide together.

As democratic systems confront rising polarization and declining trust, the challenge is not simply to expand participation, but to reimagine how institutions receive, translate, and commit to collective decisions over time. Embedding collective decision-making within governance structures—with authority, accountability, and learning—is essential if these approaches are to deliver on their democratic promise.

Introduction to the Repository

The capacity to bring together people of varying perspectives to make good decisions is the critical bottleneck for addressing interconnected challenges—from economic resilience to housing crises. But the quality of collective decisions matters as much as the fact of making them together: poorly designed participatory processes and the lack of formalised feedback mechanisms (to enable people to follow how decisions are acted upon and whether what was promised is actually delivered) can deepen cynicism and entrench division, while meaningful collaboration can build the shared understanding and trust needed for sustained action. Getting this right has never been more important, and it has never been more difficult. Three interrelated crises make the work of collective decision-making urgent.

- **A legitimacy crisis is destabilizing democracies worldwide.** Trust in public institutions has eroded to the point that it now acts as a binding constraint on governments' ability to address complex, long-term, and contested problems. Without legitimacy, even well-intentioned policies struggle to gain public buy-in or durability.
- **The conditions for healthy public discourse have significantly degraded.** Years of broken political promises, rising inequality, participation washing, and the spread of misinformation have left many people repeatedly unheard or marginalized. As a result, public discourse has become polarized, increasingly uncivil, and optimized for one-off engagement rather than deeper understanding, particularly in the absence of open digital public infrastructure.
- **Sustained underinvestment in democratic governing systems has weakened collective capacity.** Failures to strengthen civic engagement, responsiveness, and representation have left societies without the systems needed to meet the challenges of the current moment. Even where civic engagement processes are thoughtfully designed, they are too often disconnected from follow-through or from meaningful changes in people's lived experiences.



This repository initially documents 32 cases of collective decision-making practices around the world, with the goal of reporting successful cases to understand what makes them work. By learning about the types of practices and characteristics of successful participation models, this repository can direct us toward ways to build stronger governing structures for the future. We also include older examples where collective decision-making led to meaningful outcomes and built community trust over time.

Our primary audience is the Governance Futures Network, though we hope the findings prove useful to anyone designing or evaluating participatory governance initiatives.

This repository is a living document, and we will continue to update it with more cases.

What This Repository Enables

Unlike typologies that classify participatory initiatives by broad “models” alone, this repository disaggregates collective decision-making into distinct design dimensions, such as how decisions are made, who participates and under what conditions, how feedback is structured, and how processes are embedded within institutions. This approach allows us to compare governance arrangements that may appear similar on the surface but operate very differently in practice.

By focusing on design features rather than labels, the repository makes it possible to identify patterns across cases, surface tradeoffs between inclusion, authority, and follow-through, and better understand the conditions under which collective decision-making leads to meaningful outcomes rather than symbolic participation.



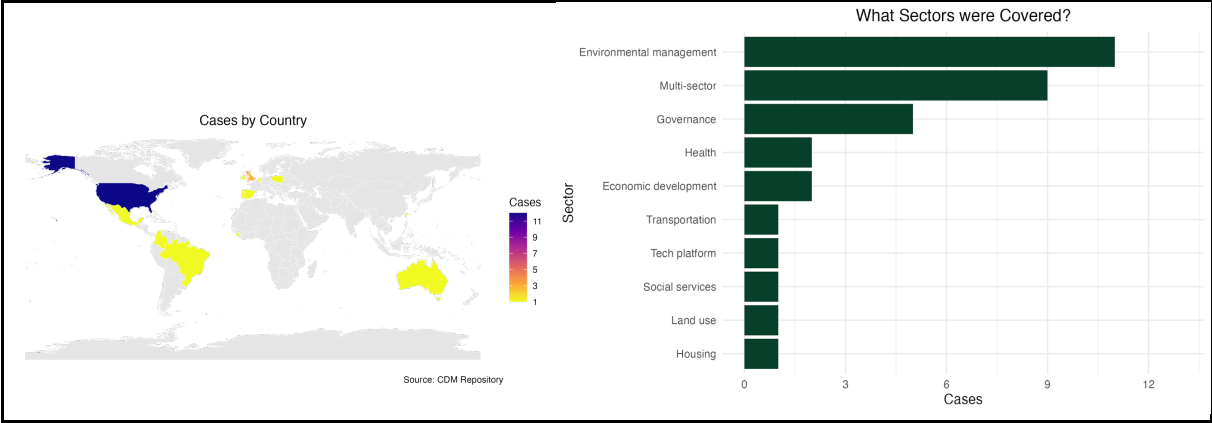
Cases, Trends, and Findings

In analyzing the cases, we do not treat participation models as fixed or uniform categories. Instead, we examine how different design features—such as initiation source, decision authority, feedback mechanisms, and institutional role—interact to shape outcomes. The trends presented below should therefore be read as descriptive patterns across design dimensions rather than causal claims about any single participation model.

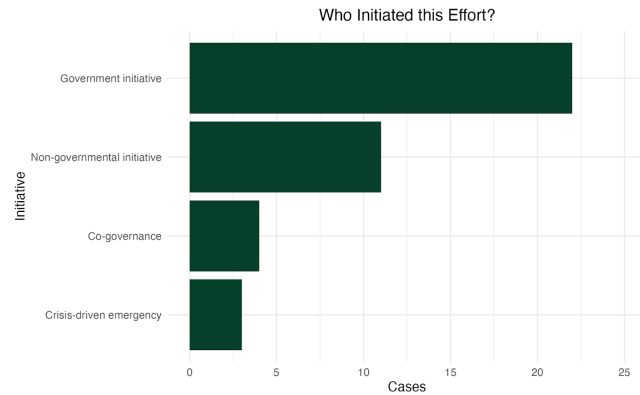
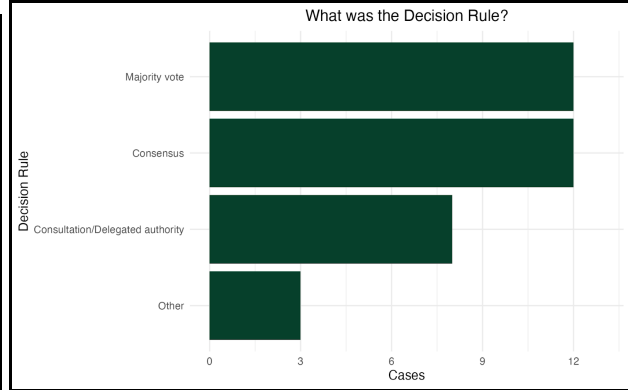
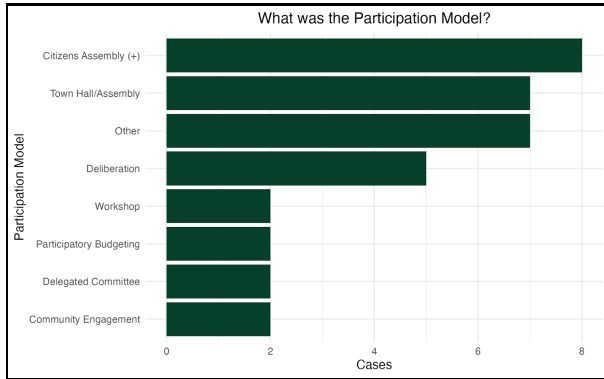
Overview of Cases

Lorem In this initial effort, we compiled 32 cases of collective decision-making initiatives from across the world. This repository is intended to grow over time as new and relevant cases continue to emerge. For this first round of analysis, the cases were concentrated primarily in the United States and Europe, reflecting both data availability and the foundations of prior work.

Our selection builds on earlier efforts by Dark Matter Labs, which focused largely on collective decision-making models in environmental contexts. As a result, environmental management is the most represented sector in this initial sample. The second most common category comprises multi-sector processes—such as town halls and participatory budgeting—which span a wide range of issue areas and governance contexts.

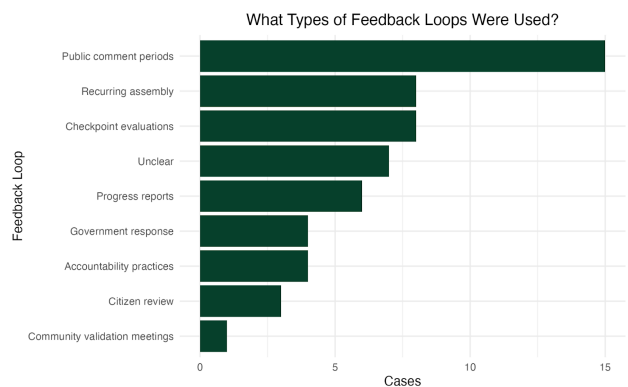


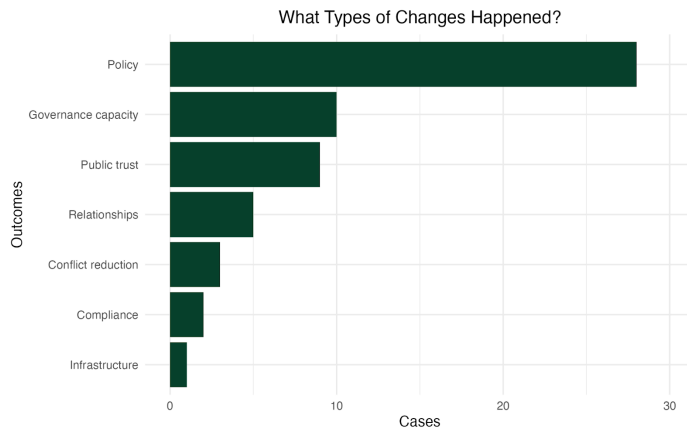
The most common participation model in our cases was citizens’ assemblies or citizens’ assemblies combined with additional efforts; the second most common model was town halls and assemblies. Relatedly, the most common decision rules were majority rule or consensus.



Most cases in the repository were initiated by governments. Non-governmental actors—including civil society organizations, community groups, and private companies—were the second most common initiators. Several cases involved joint initiation by governmental and non-governmental actors, with some initiatives explicitly designed as co-governance arrangements.

These cases also contained a wide variety of feedback mechanisms. The most common were public comment periods, where online portals or in-person sessions would be open for public comment. Recurring assemblies and checkpoint evaluations were also common practices for feedback between government and people.





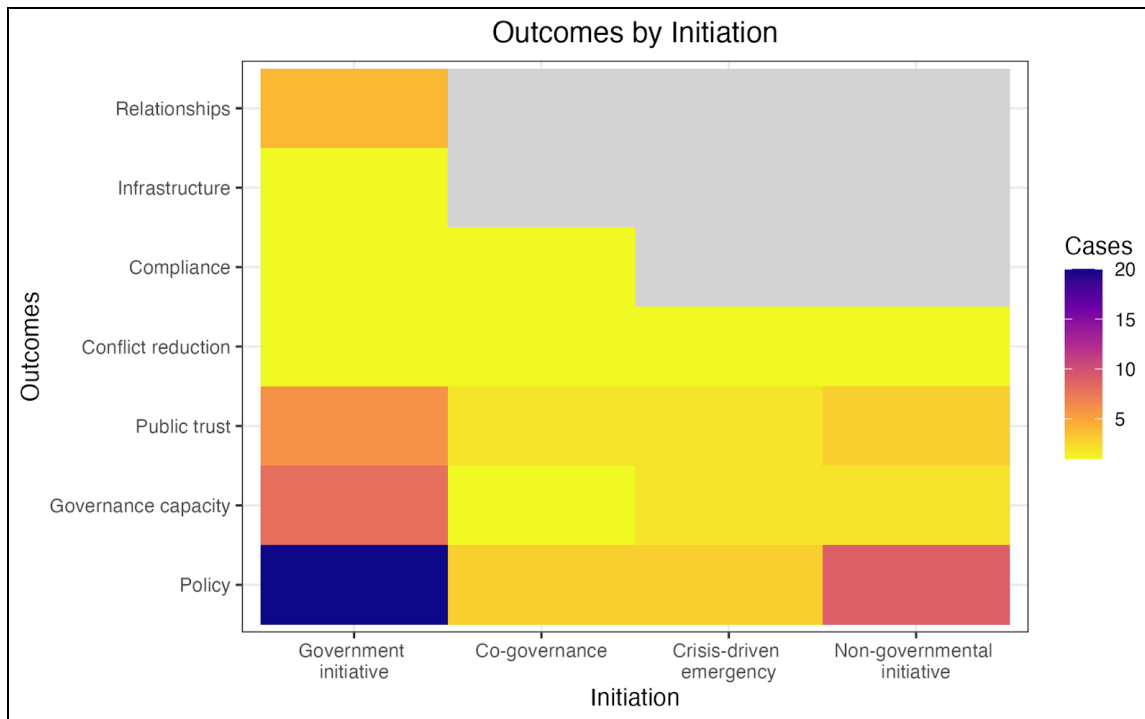
Lastly, almost all of the cases resulted in some sort of policy change. In some cases, these policy changes became national law, such as the Irish Citizens’ Assembly on abortion. In other cases, they delivered concrete recommendations for climate action, such as Barcelona’s Citizen Climate Assembly. Many cases also reported having increased governance capacity and trust

between the government and residents.

We also analyze trends for different participation models. When we identify different types of feedback loops that are common for participation models, we find that citizens’ assemblies have the most variety in feedback loops, followed by town hall/assemblies and deliberation. Notably, citizens’ assemblies are the only models where government responses were part of the feedback loop. Public comment periods were common forms of feedback among all types of participation models, and particularly common for town hall/assemblies, deliberations, and public comment periods.

We also analyze the different types of outcomes that are present for each participation model. In these cases, policy changes are common among all types of participation models. Governance capacity changes were also observed among almost all types of participation models, and were most common in deliberation, participatory budgeting, and town hall/assembly models. Notably, compliance improvement was only reported for town hall/assembly and workshop models, while relationship improvement was only reported for citizens’ assembly and participatory budgeting models.

The last set of relationships we explore is those between the outcomes of the case and how the case was initiated. Government-initiated cases, which are also the majority of cases in our repository, saw changes in all outcomes. In contrast, cases initiated by non-governmental groups did not report changes in compliance, infrastructure, or relationships.



Design Features That Matter

Across cases, several design features consistently shape whether collective decision-making processes translate into meaningful outcomes.

Initiation and institutional embedding matter. Government-initiated or co-governed processes were more likely to result in policy change, particularly when participation was embedded within formal decision-making structures rather than operating as a one-off consultation.

Decision authority influences follow-through. Processes where participants produced binding decisions or formal recommendations with a mandated government response were more likely to report concrete outcomes than advisory processes without accountability mechanisms.

Feedback loops shape trust and capacity. While public comment periods were common across cases, more robust feedback mechanisms—such as recurring assemblies, formal government responses, and checkpoint evaluations—were

associated with improvements in governance capacity and, in some cases, public trust.

Participation alone is insufficient. Inclusive or deliberative formats did not consistently produce outcomes unless paired with clear pathways from collective input to institutional action.

Implications of Cases

Government-initiated efforts tend to be impactful for policy purposes. These general trends suggest to us that government-initiated efforts for collective decision-making – efforts like citizens’ assemblies, town halls, and participatory budgeting – have tended to be more impactful for policy purposes. There is still plenty of space for improvement for government initiatives, as feedback loops could be strengthened, and changes to outcomes like public trust and governance capacity could be enhanced.

Non-governmental initiatives are less common and possibly less successful at policy change. Another area of additional exploration is how non-governmental initiatives could be more involved in collective decision-making. It may be the case that we are less aware of non-governmental initiatives, or it may be that non-governmental initiatives are often less successful than government initiatives for collective decision-making. If non-governmental initiatives are less successful, we may examine why they are less successful with more cases in the repository.

Delegated committees, deliberation, and workshops are participation models with potential. It is clear from this repository so far that citizens’ assembly, town hall/assembly, and participatory budgeting models are very promising for collective decision-making. There are many documented resources and sources for these models. Delegated committees, deliberation, and workshops are less examined, but seem to have potential. They are able to bring in a number of different types of feedback loops and are reported as changing outcomes like public trust and governance capacity. These models of participation may be useful to explore in future exercises.

These patterns should be interpreted with caution. The repository focuses on functioning governance arrangements and therefore does not capture unsuccessful or abandoned efforts, which limits causal inference. In many cases, outcomes are self-reported or not independently evaluated. Moreover, institutional power asymmetries and political constraints—while often present—are not always fully visible in available documentation. Future research comparing successful and unsuccessful cases would be necessary to isolate the conditions under which collective decision-making fails as well as succeeds.



Ideas for Application

The current cases in this repository provide us with some ideas for future experiments in designing collective decision-making initiatives as well as areas for future research. These ideas are drawn from the trends we see in the repository, as well as trends we have observed in our own work.

The repository is intended not as a menu of models to replicate, but as a design reference that allows practitioners to select and adapt specific features—such as feedback mechanisms, decision authority, and institutional embedding—based on context. Rather than asking which participation model to adopt, designers can use the repository to ask which combinations of design features are most appropriate for their institutional constraints, policy goals, and available capacity.

Potential Experiments

Evaluating alternative forms of collective decision-making. Citizens' assemblies, town halls/assemblies, and participatory budgeting models are well-documented

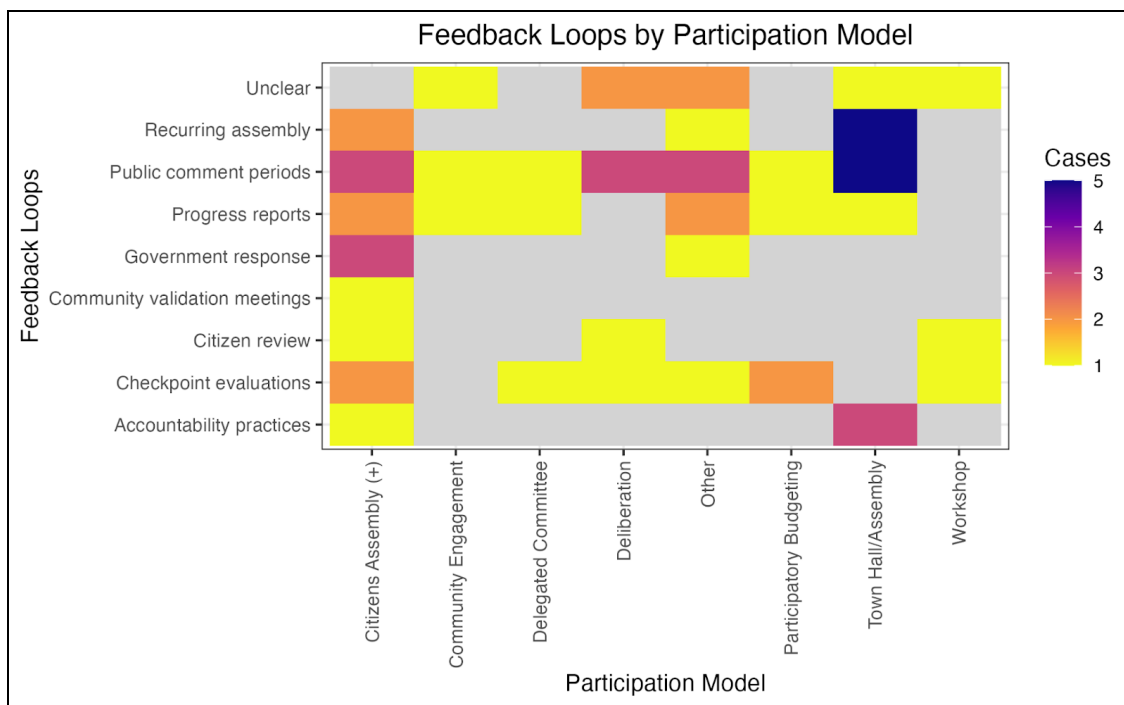
and have proven track records. In our repository, they make up the majority of participation models. We also see successes from other forms of models, such as delegated committees, deliberation, and workshops. These are less common, but may be useful for groups who are trying more collective decision-making. They may be less expensive for organizers and require less time and burden on participants. We may consider designing an experiment that tests these three less formal models against each other. Understanding how to structure or execute a less formal model may be helpful for groups who want to conduct more collective decision-making in a successful manner but do not have the resources to do a formal exercise.

Fostering trust from collective decision-making with meaningful follow-up. Almost all of our cases had policy change as an outcome, but improvement in trust is less common. We would hope that collective decision-making improves trust between participants, the government, and other stakeholders. The Governance Futures Network has frequently identified the lack of trust as a large impediment to governing together. We may consider designing an experiment for one or more participation models and see what additional activities we should include in that model to increase public trust, especially ones related to meaningful follow up. For example, perhaps more feedback loops are needed with tradeoffs explained and accountability measures illuminated, or perhaps the final decision needs to be more transparently made, or perhaps participants need to experience successful services and/or that their views are represented. Understanding how to foster more trust from collective decision-making can help groups add those activities to their collective decision-making practices.

Areas for Additional Research and Activities

Increasing civic engagement on online platforms. Online collective decision-making platforms are designed to reach a broad audience. In our repository, we have many cases of in-person sessions that also include online sessions to bring in broader participation. However, participation on these platforms has become an increasingly large issue; people have opportunities to participate in collective decision-making with online platforms, but they are not doing it. According to a seminar discussing the 2025 Gov Tech Maturity Index, World Bank staff noted the

lack of granular data on the adoption of digital public infrastructure in general, while pointing out that citizen engagement lags behind other digital workflow components. While institutional maturity is a challenge, incentives and political will are lacking. Experts have noted that the public sector incentives favor output, not dialogue and this is perhaps because governments are comfortable with digitizing processes (HR, payroll) but not so much with digitizing accountability. An area of research for our group could focus on cases where online platforms are used explicitly, or where accountability is blended with service delivery, and identify key conditions or practices that need to be in place to have large engagement in online sessions.



Identifying conditions for successes in collective decision-making. Our repository focuses on successful cases of collective decision-making. By only looking at successful cases, we are unable, currently, to make distinctions between why certain cases are successful and other cases are unsuccessful. One area of future research is to conduct a set of comparisons between unsuccessful cases and successful cases to understand more clearly the ingredients that go into a successful case.

Creating guidelines for using different participation models. Through this repository, we can start to create a set of guidelines (and later a curriculum) for the

different types of participation models that work well in specific situations. For example, our cases show that citizens' assemblies are particularly good at collective decision-making for one issue or topic, and are a tool that governments can use to receive deep insight and feedback from their residents. Citizens' assemblies can also lead directly to policy outcomes because they result in a proposal or a decision from residents. Government responses, accountability practices, and other forms of feedback loops also naturally build into citizens' assemblies. In contrast, a workshop may be a good brainstorming tool, where people come together to come up with ideas and options that will be decided on at a later time. But as a result, having feedback loops might be less clear in a workshop. As we are starting to see the types of practices that are most common for certain participation models, we can then build out a set of guidelines for how and when people can apply specific models. This evolution of participation models reflects other communication feedback methods that are shifting. For example, the sequential linear waterfall method in business has moved to an agile, iterative, flexible, and adaptable workflow. Likewise, the one-to-many explanatory models must now adapt to encompass many-to-many relationships.