

# POLITICAL PERCEPTION OF URBAN SUB-LOCAL ENTITIES

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## Abstract

*Urbanisation is currently one of the most dominant processes worldwide. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century only ten percent of the world's population lived in urban areas. However, this number is growing sharply, reaching almost half of the global population in 2006 (49 percent, meaning 3.1 billion) (Parker, 2004: 1; World Bank, 2006). Cities are now becoming the living environment of the future and very complex and sensitive structures, which basically remain local living environments. In such local entities citizens should co-operate in decision-making on most local public policies. Some authors insist that a decentralised decision-making process is fundamental to ensure that cities work for and not against people. The classical way to ensure participation and responsiveness is to divide the city up into manageable quarters and/or to implement instruments of deliberative or direct democracy. The implementation of Urban Quarter Councils (hereinafter: UQCs) in many cities in Europe indicates that such decentralisation in territorial terms and policy-making is crucial. But is it sufficient? Some of Europe's cities are already deconstructing this form of local political participation. The paper analyses the (non)salient reasons for implementing UQCs in Eastern European cities just at a time when this participatory instrument is being deconstructed in several cities in other EU countries (Sweden). Are these instruments merely borrowed from counties with well-developed local self-government and do they face the same destiny in CEE cities?*

## Introduction

Today cities are the centres of the maximum concentration of power, trade and a dense population that are influenced by centrifugal forces creating an orderly chaos. While observing the strong resource and financial flows within the city, one can easily forget the obvious – the city is made up of citizens. Mainly because of their uncontrollable size, cities should be decentralised in order to function according to what they primarily are – a local environment for residents. *Political Economy Theory* (see Mouritzen, 1989) argues in favour of this by advocating the thesis that citizens in small jurisdictions hold more favourable attitudes to participation and democracy and that smaller units are more homogeneous and more efficient in the provision of services.

Decentralisation typology (see Rondinelli, 1990) defines four different categories. All four categories encompass the transfer of power from central (city government) to (sub-local) local entities. The typology differentiates according to the form of organisation to which power is transferred. By the term *deconcentration* we understand the delegation of power from central to local administrative units; by the term *delegation* we understand the delegation of power to non-governmental organisations; *devolution* encompasses the transfer of power to local (sub-local) political bodies, while *privatisation* means the transfer of competencies to private subjects. According to Stren (1993), the decentralisation of the city is a jigsaw of three complementary dimensions. The first is *administrative decentralisation*, which encompasses deconcentration of city public services to the neighbourhood (also district or quarter) level; the second is *civil society decentralisation*, which is based on encouraging direct citizens' participation in decision-making at the local level; and the third is *political decentralisation* where powers are delegated to the lowest (sub-local) levels of representative political bodies. The most important dimension for the purpose of our paper is *political decentralisation*. Because we intuitively understand that

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participatory democracy will not work as well in a megapolis as in a small village the main question remains how the city should be decentralised.

Many argue that, since neighbourhoods are the closest to the citizen, policy-making should be brought to their level. "Quite simply, a neighbourhood<sup>1</sup> is a geographically circumscribed, built environment that people use practically and symbolically" (Blokland, 2003: 213). "For many commentators, the neighbourhood is perceived as something that still matters to people. In the context of the rescaling of economy and more complex multilevel governance regimes, urban neighbourhoods can be seen as spaces of important political struggle" (Kennet and Forrest, 2005: 713).

What appears to be agreed is that local governments on their own are rarely likely to effect positive, lasting improvements to the urban environment. It is for this reason that they need to learn to work better with other key actors, not least local community groups and businesses, using a wide variety of policy tools to address the problems their communities face. In order to achieve an active urban local environment, one should promote and develop activities at the neighbourhood level, harnessing people's interest in those activities which affect their daily lives. Urban citizens have specific needs, lifestyles, expectations, education and are often more apathetic when it comes to participation via formal channels. Through a more people-based decision-making system, traditionally conflicting interest groups can learn to work together. The stimulation of informal debate and decision-making is fundamental to the decentralisation of power. For the most optimistic the city seems set to become a spawning ground for greater participation and democracy – even pointing to a global trend towards equity.

### **The scale disadvantage of service delivery and participation**

The main goal of local authorities in the city should be that the citizens are satisfied, that they can express their opinions, and that the city management is effective and efficient. In smaller communities like villages, smaller and medium-sized rural municipalities and small towns we instinctively know that participation is feasible, but the scale of a larger city gives us an impression of absolute chaos. According to Van Assche (2004), an ideal size of a local community as concerns both legitimacy and effectiveness is somewhere between 20,000 and 50,000 inhabitants. There appears to be a U-curve relationship between efficiency and scale; above 200,000 inhabitants and scale economies turn into scale disadvantages. According to Mouritzen (1989), the efficiency of local government increases until it reaches 30,000 to 50,000 inhabitants. Yet from 200,000 to 250,000 inhabitants Mouritzen also detects scale disadvantages (ibid.). De Groot finds something similar; efficiency is low in both the smallest and biggest entities (De Groot, 1995: 28-29). The relations are even more apparent between scale and political participation. Verba and Nie (1971: 231) found support for the so-called "Decline-of-Community Model" which suggests that political participation will decline as one moves from a small village to a large city. Newton (1982: 197) reported similar trends in Great Britain concerning participation in local public services, the initiation of contacts with local authorities and electoral turnout. In the Netherlands it appears that every additional 10,000 inhabitants leads to 1.5% fewer voters at municipal elections (Kraaykamp et al., 2001). Regarding the local elections of 1990 (including in the Netherlands), Derksen stated that 77.4% of the citizens went to polling offices in municipalities with less than 5,000 inhabitants. In cities with over 100,000 inhabitants only 51.9% cast their votes (Derksen, 1996). A similar turnout is revealed at local Slovenian elections. On average, the turnout at local elections is somehow smaller than at national elections, although there are some specifics related to the size of the local communities. As Haček (2007: 36) found with the example of the 2007 local elections, a higher turnout can be

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of our paper neighbourhood is a synonym for a district or city quarter.

expected in municipalities with less than 10,000 inhabitants, especially in those with less than 3,000 inhabitants.

When researching political participation one can indicate that a small community is the ideal place for education to democracy. Citizens are more responsible, the opportunities for participation are enhanced and feelings of efficacy are fostered (Sharpe, 1979). A large city produces alienation, cynicism and frustration. Government leaders and bureaucracies cannot be controlled and influenced and people develop feelings of mistrust and inefficacy (Mouritzen, 1989: 664).

## Participation and city decentralisation

All over Europe local democracy used to mean democracy at a communal (or municipal) level (the lowest administrative unit with a democratically elected authority). But today *local* implies two other levels: the metropolitan and the neighbourhood (or community) levels (Blanc and Beaumont, 2005: 410). *The Recommendation REC(2001)19 of the Committee of Ministers*<sup>2</sup> shows how “seriously” the problem of enhancing local participation in the EU is being regarded. From the standpoints that “local democracy is one of the cornerstones of democracy in European countries and that its reinforcement is a factor of stability” and that “in certain circumstances, the level of trust people have in their elected institutions has declined and that there is a need for state institutions to re-engage with and respond to the public in new ways to maintain the legitimacy of decision-making”, the Committee recommended several guidelines for the governments of member states. The main focus is still on the uniqueness of each member state as well as on each local self-government’s level characteristic with respect to their socio-economic background. However, all citizens should be guaranteed the basic right to have access to clear information about local matters that concerns them and to have the right to co-decide on major local questions. Great importance is placed on communication between public authorities and citizens and to encouraging local leaders to emphasise citizens’ participation, which should be approached by enhancing both representative democracy and by forms of direct participation. Rigid solutions should be avoided, giving space to experiments and ad hoc methods as well as models that give priority to empowerment, rather than merely laying down rules.

In connection to this article, the encouragement for developing neighbourhood democracy<sup>3</sup> in Article A.7 is one of the most important. According to that article, local governments should give citizens a greater influence over their local environment and municipal activities. *They should set up, at the sub-municipal level, bodies with appropriate elected representatives which could be given advisory and informative functions and possibly delegated executive powers.* Among other things, local residents should be encouraged to become involved in designing and implementing projects that are important to the local sphere.

*Table 1: (Dis)advantages of implementing quarter councils*

ADVANTAGES	DISADVANTAGES
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<sup>2</sup> Recommendation REC(2001)19 of the Committee of Ministers to member states on the participation of citizens in local public life was adopted on 6 December 2001 at the 776<sup>th</sup> meeting of Ministers’ Deputies.

<sup>3</sup> The Committee made a special remark that the development of neighbourhood democracy is important equally in both the most populated urban centres and in rural areas.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <i>quarter councillors are legitimate spokesmen for sub-local interests</i></li> <li>· <i>quarter councillors are more approachable</i></li> <li>· <i>city quarters can coincide with an existing community identity</i></li> <li>· <i>quarter councillors know the local situation better</i></li> <li>· <i>sub-local councils can be a recruitment pool for the city council</i></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· <i>representation means there is always a gap in time and space between a problem and its solution</i></li> <li>· <i>limited or small formal authority</i></li> <li>· <i>fragmentation of policy power</i></li> <li>· <i>quarter councillors most likely do not represent the whole community</i></li> </ul>
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Nevertheless, there are some disadvantages of political decentralisation in the city (see Table 1). Indirect democracy always produces a time lag between a problem and its solution. Although quarter councillors may be more suitable for detecting local problems because they are closer to the community, they have to (usually sub-local political bodies do not have any great formal authority) pass these findings on to the city council level. Besides, it is highly likely that quarter councillors do not represent the whole community, excluding the marginalised and the poor. However, the disadvantages are few and far between. Many countries in Western Europe have created sub-local political bodies in their urban municipalities and this may be seen as an attempt to find that sought-after balance between integration and local differentiation (Bäck et al., 2004: 16).

Our focus is on these sub-local representative bodies, namely urban quarter councils (UQCs). UQCs as mediators of citizens' demands and wishes are being constructed (as well as deconstructed) throughout Europe, but vary in formal authority, recourses, institutionalisation and in the way councillors are elected or appointed. Since the goal of this paper is not to present the variety of UQCs in the Europe but to examine how citizens perceive them, we will present analyses of the implementing of UQCs in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana and how the citizens accept and value them. We will do this by presenting a longitudinal survey conducted among citizens of Ljubljana in 2004 and 2007. In addition, we will present the deconstruction of similar sub-local bodies in Sweden and the reasons for that. When UQCs were implemented in Copenhagen the stated goals of the UQC trial included "strengthening and elaboration of citizens' influence, increased potential for contact between citizens and politicians, improved participation in local elections, and a greater sense of identification with the urban district" (Bäck et al., 2004: 53). The reasons *for* implementation are quite obvious, yet why are these same cities deconstructing UQCs after decades of their existence and, moreover, why are these bodies being simultaneously implemented in EEC cities as if they are unaware of their destiny in decades to come?

## **Perception of sub-local entities: A case study of the Slovenian capital, Ljubljana**

Slovenian legislation provides some mechanisms for enhancing *local* democracy in its purest form<sup>4</sup>. According to early theories (Sharpe, 1979; Mouritzen, 1989; Verba, Scholzman and Brody, 1995) these mechanisms are applicable in small local communities but rarely used in big

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<sup>4</sup> The Slovenian local self-government system enables citizens to participate in different forms of direct local participation. The most direct is the municipal assembly. It is an assembly of all inhabitants of a local community. Unlike other forms of direct decision-making, the municipal assembly is an informal convention in which all inhabitants can collaborate, therefore making it an important element of cohesiveness and integration in the local community. Another form of direct democracy in the municipality is a referendum. A referendum has a more recent origin than the municipal assembly and is also a more formalised and organisationally and financially demanding form of local democracy. The third form of Slovenian local democracy is called a "popular initiative". The institute of a popular initiative enables a group of at least 200 local residents to demand an arrangement of any local issue by a representative body. The fourth form of direct local democracy is the right to petition. This right enables people to send written petitions to a representative body.

city municipalities. Approximately half of all Slovenian municipalities have less than 5,000 inhabitants and the biggest one, the City Municipality of Ljubljana, has almost 300,000. In comparison with other European countries, Slovenia is with its average of 10,300 inhabitants per municipality somewhere in the middle (Brezovšek in Brezovšek and Haček, 2005: 73)<sup>5</sup>. We can see that most Slovenian municipalities (because they are so small) can effectively use some mechanisms for enhancing local democracy (referendum, popular initiative, petition and municipal assembly). However, how do big city municipalities cope with the *democratic deficit*?

The answer to this problem was offered with Article 18 of the Local Self-government Act from 1994 which allowed the restoration of narrower parts of a municipality (village or local communities and city quarter communities). At the end of March 2001, the city council of the City Municipality of Ljubljana (hereinafter: CML) had established 17 city quarter communities as the lowest organisational form of the CML. The only elected body of the city quarter community is an urban quarter council (UQC). Thirteen to seventeen councillors are directly elected to the UQC for a four-year mandate. The exact number of councillors depends on the number of citizens in each city quarter community (Bačlija, Brezovšek in Rosenbaum, Nemec, 2006).

To test whether the citizens has accepted UQCs as an additional form of local democracy and how they are perceived, in 2004 we conducted a survey among citizens and repeated it in 2007<sup>6</sup> to conclude if there was any shift in opinions. Although the questionnaire was lengthy we wish to present just a few highlights here; knowledge of UQCs (formal authorities, councillors...), the perception of changes in the local environment after implementation of the UQC, the accessibility of the UQC compared to the city council and how (if) ways of political participation had changed after the UQC was introduced.

First we wanted to know how many citizens knew that the CML is divided into city quarters (note that the first elections to the UQC happened in 2001). In 2003, 87 percent of the citizens knew that the CML was divided into city quarters and this figure rose slightly (to 90%) in 2007. Knowing in which city quarter they live in rose from 76 percent in 2003 to 86 percent in 2007. In four years, the city quarters had become slightly more recognisable. We then asked citizens if they knew what formal authority the UCQ has and, in their opinion, how great they are. In 2003 just 13.1 percent of Ljubljana's citizens knew what formal authority the UQC has, while in 2007 the number had risen to more than 25 percent.

*Table 2: Citizens' assessment of the UQC's formal authority (in %)*

	<b>2003</b>	<b>2007</b>
(N=)	(170)	(272)
Too much formal authority	0	47
About right	114	247
Too little formal authority	60	518
Don't know	268	188

Source: Research »Participation of the citizens of CMU«, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, 2003 and 2007.

There was also a shift in opinion on how much formal authority the UQCs have (see Table 2). In the 2003 survey none of the respondents believed that the UQCs had too much authority and the majority (60%) believed that they have too little formal authority. Four years later, the answers *about right* had more than doubled while the number of those who had no opinion

<sup>5</sup> In comparison to Sweden, that has on average 29,500 inhabitants per municipality.

<sup>6</sup> The research was conducted at the Centre for Political Science Research, Institute for Social Sciences, Ljubljana.

dropped. This implies that citizens have more knowledge of the UQC functions but are not in favour of the UQCs acquiring more formal authority.

Second, we wanted to conclude if the sub-local authority (quarter councillors) is closer to the residents than the local authority (city councillors). Since this was one of the main arguments in favour of implementing the UQCs, we expected that the citizens would know the quarter councillors better and that familiarity with them had risen in this four-year period.

*Table 3: Familiarity with city councillors*

How many city councillors can you name? (in %)	2003	2007
(N=)	(175)	(272)
All	0	4
More than half	35	70
Less than half	276	389
One or two	322	322
None	367	215

Source: Research »Participation of the citizens of CMU«, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, 2003 and 2007.

We can see (Table 3) that city councillors were fairly recognisable in 2003 and that citizens are more and more familiar with them. However, familiarity with quarter councillors is much lower (see Table 4) and this also did not change in the four-year period. This firmly implies that the UQCs are lacking the citizens' attention, probably due to many factors. One could be poor media exposure or a perception of unimportance due to the low level of formal authorities.

*Table 4: Familiarity with quarter councillors*

How many UQC councillors can you name? (in %)	2003	2007
(N=)	(175)	(272)
All	0.6	2.6
More than half	3.4	3.3
Less than half	10.4	12.5
One or two	34	28.3
None	51.6	53.1

Source: Research »Participation of the citizens of CMU«, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, 2003 and 2007.

To assess the closeness of local political organs (like the city council, mayor, UQC), we asked citizens if they believed that they could, if they wanted, contact an individual city councillor and if they had contacted one in the past. In the 2003 survey, 13.2 percent of citizens had already had contact with (at least one) city councillor. Of the remaining 86.8 percent who had not made contact yet, 80 percent believed that they could if they wanted. These figures were somewhat lower in the 2007 survey, where 11.1 percent of the citizens had already contacted city councillor(s) and only 71.5 percent believed that they could if they wanted.

A similar question regarding the approachability of district councillors was proposed. In the 2003 survey only 9.1 percent of citizens had already made contact with a district councillor, while of the remaining 90.9 percent almost 83 percent believed that they could (if they wished) make contact. This number rose significantly in the 2007 survey, where 20 percent of the citizens

interviewed had already made contact with a district councillor and 81.4 percent believed that they could (if they wished).

Third, we were interested in what has changed since the implementation of UQCs. Table 5 shows the estimated changes in the CML after the UQCs were introduced. CML residents believe that the introduction of quarter communities failed to bring about any considerable changes. In 2003 citizens believed that the biggest change was the enhancement of political parties' power and, interestingly, that trust in local government had slightly decreased. We expected that the answers in the 2007 survey would vary to some extent, primarily because the UQCs were functioning for almost two mandates. However, this was not the case. In the citizens' opinion the quality of life in CML even decreased (this could also be a result of wider socio-economic reasons) and political parties held on to their powers. We also added the category *involvement of citizens in decision-making* in the 2007 survey. Although the assessment is quite low (2.88; with 3 being the average) we cannot compare it to any previous results.

*Table 5: Assessments of changes after the UQCs were introduced*

	<b>2003</b>	<b>2007</b>
(N=)	(170)	(272)
Quality of life in CML	3.05	2.94
Trust in local government	2.85	2.87
Power of NGO	3.05	2.85
Power of political parties	3.35	3.14
Involvement of citizens in decision-making		2.88

Source: Research »Participation of the citizens of CMU«, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, 2003 and 2007. Citizens were asked to assess listed changes from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning decreased and 5 increased.

The absence of residents in the participation process is noted everywhere. Including residents in the process is both a cause and a consequence of their social inclusion, relating to the distinction drawn by *Rousseau* between the subject and the citizen. The subject obeys the law, whereas the citizen takes part in its elaboration. Participation opens the door to active citizenship and it is the better antidote to social exclusion (Blanc, 1998). There are several (already mentioned) forms of local democracy in Slovenia. Our goal was to reveal how (if) UQCs have become established as a new form of local democracy. Table 6 reveals a considerable change in the use of all forms of political participation from 2003 to 2007, with *talking to the quarter councillor* being the one that increased the most.

*Table 6: Forms of political participation in CML (in %)*

	<b>2003</b>	<b>2007</b>
(N=)	(175)	(272)
Voting at local elections	82	93
Talking to a city councillor	10	28
Talking to a quarter councillor	13	50
Talking to the Mayor	5	22
Signing a petition in the CMU	21	24

Voting at a local referendum	48	63
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Source: Research »Participation of the citizens of CMU«, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Ljubljana, 2003 and 2007. Multiple answers were possible.

Although citizens use more forms of political participation (see Table 6), other indicators such as knowledge of UQCs, contacting quarter councillors and the assessment of improvements after implementing the UQCs show us a relatively dim picture. We may conclude that city quarter communities through the UQCs are not fulfilling their primary purpose to boost participation at the local level of government in CML. At the time of establishing the UQCs there were some major criticisms from the opposition ranks within the city council. These criticisms were oriented to the lack of attention to the quality contents of the formal authorities and the inaccurate division of tasks between the UQCs and the CML. The criticisms were somewhat valid. The formal authorities of the city quarter communities are noted down in the Statute of the CML, which gives the UQCs an extremely narrow framework of competencies, especially financially they are insufficient and totally dependent on the CML. They have no self-dependent tasks; they only deal with local matters that each year are separately devolved to them by the CML. The CML has not been very generous during the last few years. If the city quarter communities are in fact to bring about greater decentralisation in the UML, they should then be provided with more formal authority and greater financial independence so they can realise their primary purpose.

### **Destruction of sub-local entities: A case study of Swedish cities**

The introduction of the institution of the UQC in Swedish local government is clearly coupled with the amalgamation reform of 1952-74. The reform reduced the number of municipalities from 1,037 to 278. Since then, the number of municipalities has grown slightly due to the partition of some municipalities. On the other hand, mergers increased the population of the average municipality from 1,500 to 29,000<sup>7</sup>. The motive for the reforms was the achievement of an economic foundation for a professionally run organisation for service production. The guiding principle was economic efficiency. This gave rise to suspicions that democratic values would suffer. The cure came to be the idea of sub-local political decentralisation (Bäck, 2004).

The main reason behind implementation of UQC in Sweden was the ongoing discussion of Local Government Democracy Committee<sup>8</sup> about “various ways of giving people greater influence on communal policy-making” (Montin, Persson in Bogason, 1996: 71), which finally resulted in the right that was given to the municipalities to create UQC. The implementation of the UQC started as a “the free municipality experiment”<sup>9</sup> and the total number of UQC increased from 50 in 1983 to 140 in 1993. From financial perspective the UQC were not independent from the city council. The UQC got their money in “a bag” from the city council. The amount depended on the neighbourhood population and the social structure. The surplus or deficit of the UQC followed them into the next year. Some times the city council wrote off the deficit and kept the surplus. One of the main reasons for many of the municipalities in Sweden for not implementing UQC was actually the fear of raising costs. The councillors in UQC were appointed by the city council; however that is not with the spirit of enhancing political participation at the lowest level. The effects of direct elections of UQC’s councillors would probably be increased legitimacy.

<sup>7</sup> Half of all the municipalities have less than 15,000 inhabitants. Eleven municipalities in Sweden have more than 100,000 inhabitants. The largest county council (Stockholm) has more than 1,850,000 inhabitants, while Jämtland, which is smallest, has 130,000. Twelve county councils have between 200,000 and 300,000 inhabitants.

<sup>8</sup> The Committee was established on the basis of the Local Government Act of 1977.

<sup>9</sup> Some facts are given from an online interview with Ann-Sofie Lennqvist-Linden from Örebro University.

In the beginning the purpose behind the implementation of UQC was both decentralisation and deconcentration of power. In the study that was done in 2001 the conclusion could be made that the responsibility for the heavy tasks was decentralised but the power to decide was centralised. "In the early 1980s there were expectations that the neighbourhood council reform would be a very important instrument to enliven local democracy. However, when evaluation suggested that the reform did not come up to the expected level of participation, and when local economic problems became a commonplace, the advocates of the reform redefined the purpose to it, now emphasizing the efficiency aspects" (Montin, Persson in Bogason, 1996: 77). According to Montin and Persson (1996), the main argument behind the implementation of UQCs is that they should vitalise the political inflow side of the local political system. This strategy puts the stress on the citizen as a political actor. The idea is that if people can be motivated to engage in local politics within UQCs it will make the whole municipality more vital as a democratic institution. Participation in local matters, it is believed, can enhance the sense of responsibility for handling common affairs at the local level.

Many UQCs, thus, have not had a very long life. The most intense reform period when the systems were installed was the first half of the 1980s. Already during the following five-year period, five municipalities abolished their UQCs. In the first half of the 1990s six UQCs disappeared and one was downgraded. In the 1996-2001 period, another four UQCs disappeared and two were downgraded (Hood, 1991). "During the period from 1985 to 1992 eight communes deconstructed their neighbourhood council organization and started to develop other kinds of organization models. The official reasons were that the reform increased bureaucracy and made decision-making more difficult, that there was weak interest among the citizens, that it entailed the risk of declining professional competence at local level, that it constituted a threat to principles of equality and that it did not give the expected efficiency" (Montin, Persson in Bogason, 1996: 77).

A reason stated by those who wanted to keep their UQC was, surprisingly, that they were used to the UQC and knew where to address local questions. On the other hand, no research or public opinion survey was conducted about citizens' perceptions of local political participation through UQCs. This does not allow us to assume that it was (un)successful. When UQCs were deconstructed one would expect a void in political participation space; however, because of the lack of surveys and studies this also cannot be argued. The rapidly fading interest in neighbourhood reforms can be given different interpretations. One interpretation is that the reforms did not achieve their goals. The most important explicit objective of the neighbourhood reforms was countering centralisation and closing the gap between citizens and their representatives. A "more profound" local democracy, increased citizens' involvement and participation were the objectives to be achieved. Yet no such effects were observed. Instead, the objectives of the reforms tended to shift back from democracy to economic efficiency (Montin, 1989).

### **Conclusion: To decentralise or not to decentralise**

From urban renewal, crime and public safety through to education, health, unemployment and poverty and on to the environment, spatial planning, service delivery, science and technology, and even the legalisation of prostitution, policy actors in both the public domain (municipal administrations, police organisations, social workers) and civil society (housing corporations, voluntary organisations, community groups and independent professionals) have come to view the empowerment and democratic participation of citizens at the neighbourhood level as an indispensable tool for tackling cross-cutting 'wicked' policy issues.

When we compare the two presented case studies it is obvious that local political participation through UQCs is not a unique solution. This does not mean that UQCs cannot be efficient and successful in some local self-government systems. However, this is probably closely linked to

the wider socio-economical and traditional environment as well as important factors such as: (1) the extension of UQCs' formal authorities; (2) financial autonomy; and (3) forms of the election/appointment of UQC councillors.

Several important parallels can be drawn when comparing both systems. One is that for the construction of UQCs in Sweden no referendum was held, meaning that the local population was unable to directly decide if this was the form of local democracy they needed and/or would use. On the other hand, the City of Ljubljana held a referendum on this matter. The second relevant question is whether councillors in the UQC should be appointed or directly elected? In Sweden the UQC councillors were indirectly elected by the city council, usually composed of members who reside in the respective neighbourhood, but with no attention paid to the party-political composition of the local electorate. The City of Ljubljana has its UQC councillors directly elected and the expense argument was overthrown by organising UQC elections at the same time as elections to all other local bodies (city council and Mayor). However, the citizens are still dissatisfied with the UQC's work and actions. The answer to this is also probably very closely linked to the competencies of the UQC and its financial autonomy.

The official reasons behind the deconstruction of the UQCs in Sweden were that the reform increased bureaucracy and made decision-making more difficult, that there was little interest among citizens, that it entailed the risk of declining professional competence at the local level, that it constituted a threat to the principles of equality and that it did not yield the expected efficiency (Montin and Persson, 1996: 77). Results of a survey conducted among Ljubljana's citizens in 2003 and 2007 show that the UQCs are fairly recognisable and that inhabitants perceive them as a local political body. Yet further research showed that, while the citizens to some extent communicate with quarter councillors and are familiar with them, they were more hesitant about enhancing the UQCs' formal authority and about the fact that the implementation of the UQCs was to bring positive changes into the local self-government system. Since political participation through UQCs is on the rise, we can expect further integration into the local society system; nevertheless, the city government should be cautious when enhancing the UQCs' formal authority. Increasing the bureaucracy and costs of the UQCs should be avoided; however, the formal authority they have should be gradually increased so that the citizens will see UQCs as an important part of local democracy.

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