



# Grassroots Representation or Pro Forma Exercise? Cooperation and Participation in the Revitalization of Polish Municipalities

Justyna Przywojska<sup>1\*</sup>, Aldona Podgórnia-Krzykacz<sup>2</sup>,

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**Abstract.** This article explores a participatory approach to revitalizing degraded urban areas. The study examined whether revitalization committees in Poland serve as platforms for cooperation among various stakeholders and to assess local authorities' views on the importance of individual stakeholders in the revitalization process. This article presents the concept of sustainable revitalization as a response to urban crises and discusses the dilemmas and challenges associated with the participatory approach to planning and implementation. To gather opinions from local authorities on the functioning of revitalization committees and other advisory bodies that include revitalization stakeholders, quantitative research was conducted in 573 Polish municipalities. The online survey questionnaire was addressed to mayors or heads of villages and their deputies. The research results indicate that the permanent involvement of stakeholders in revitalization is not common among Polish municipalities. Although local leaders highly rated the importance of partnerships and local cooperation in revitalization and reported no difficulties in establishing revitalization committees, these committees operated in only 27% of the surveyed municipalities. The established revitalization committees are characterized by both administrative and social functions, predominantly comprising local government officials, local authorities, and NGO representatives. Business communities, vulnerable groups, and institutions addressing socio-economic issues in the revitalized areas are relatively underrepresented in these committees. A key finding of the study is the mismatch between the high importance assigned by local leaders to certain stakeholder groups and the limited presence of these groups in the composition of revitalization committees.

**Keywords.** urban revitalization, revitalization committee, public participation, revitalization stakeholders.

## Introduction

The 2030 Agenda with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the New Urban Agenda have laid down the foundations for increased attention to the importance of local action in global sustainability efforts. The localization of the SDGs informs the basic tenets of local government policies, including the balance of social, economic, and environmental dimensions of local development, concern for the well-being of future generations, the use of endogenous resources, and the involvement of residents and partners in development planning, steering, and

<sup>1</sup> University of Lodz, Department of Labour and Social Policy (\*Corresponding author) email: justyna.przywojska@uni.lodz.pl

<sup>2</sup> University of Lodz, Department of Labour and Social Policy

monitoring. At the same time, there is a clear call for the implementation of local strategies prioritizing urban regeneration and the pursuit of inclusive communities (United Nations, 2016). The contemporary approach to revitalization breaks down the previous strict divisions between physical renewal, social equity and inclusion, local economic development and environmental sustainability. Sustainable regeneration aims to rebuild residential, commercial or public urban spaces taking into account social and cultural values, leading to improved economic, physical and environmental conditions in degraded areas (Bararatin & Agustin, 2015; Chahardowli & Sajadzadeh, 2022; Rahbarianyazd, 2017). The process is intended to benefit both the city's current residents, as well as its future population, with the key aim of improving the quality of life for the local community. Revitalization, understood in this way, implies various objectives and activities, including reducing unemployment, improving education quality and access to cultural assets, renovating buildings and infrastructure, preventing crime in degraded areas, protecting historical monuments and environmental resources, and developing publicly accessible green spaces (Marra et al., 2016). These activities are integrated to enhance the quality of life for the local community and ensure its social sustainability (Alpopi & Manole, 2013; Chahardowli, Sajadzadeh, Aram, & Mosavi, 2020; Przywojska, 2021). In dynamic terms, social sustainability may be described as a process of achieving a better quality of life through the participation and interaction of community members (Ali et al., 2019; Razia & Abu Bakar, 2023). At the same time, the increased awareness among residents has coincided with rising expectations regarding their right to participate in decisions that are important to the community at the local level. Traditional top-down planning approaches may no longer be suitable for identifying community needs, while participatory planning approaches are gaining increased usage. Sibyan's research (Sibyan, 2020) on slum improvement indicates that top-down planning approaches tend to neglect the community perspective. This results in the implemented strategy not being tailored to the needs of the community. A participatory and collaborative approach, on the other hand, takes into account the community perspective and leads to a better understanding of the revitalization assumptions and the involvement of residents in the change processes. Therefore, planners should promote the importance of a better understanding of how people interact with the urban environment and its heritage (Silverman et al., 2020; Tokey et al., 2020). A sustainable revitalization of degraded areas should be inherently participatory to effectively utilize local knowledge and consider diverse interests and perspectives. For these reasons, urban regeneration has become an excellent arena for participatory processes (Savini, 2011) and has also been the subject of academic analyses in this context (Davies & Pill, 2011; Fagotto & Fung, 2006; Li et al., 2020).

This study investigated whether the revitalization committees (RCs) in Polish municipalities genuinely provide a platform for cooperation among various stakeholders. Furthermore, we wanted to verify how local authorities assess the importance of different stakeholders in revitalization. We also wanted to check whether the type of municipality impacts how cooperation within revitalization committees (RCs) is organized and whether the challenge of securing the interests of vulnerable groups in revitalization is realized by decision-makers.

The choice of Poland as a research area for studying participation in urban regeneration, particularly the functioning of regeneration committees, is justified for several reasons. Firstly, in Poland, public participation in regeneration processes has been formally embedded in the national legal framework. The 2015 Act on Revitalization introduced an obligation to establish regeneration committees as tools to engage residents and other stakeholders in the planning and implementation of regeneration activities. Poland thus represents an interesting case of the institutionalization of participation in urban policy.

Secondly, the regeneration committee, as a platform for cooperation between local authorities and a broad range of stakeholders (including residents, NGOs, and entrepreneurs), reflects the principles of participatory and collaborative governance, which are increasingly promoted as standards in urban management. The analysis of how these committees function can therefore serve as a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of formal participation mechanisms.

Finally, the implementation of the Revitalization Act and the establishment of regeneration committees in Poland vary significantly across municipalities. This provides favorable conditions for comparative analysis and for assessing to what extent the adopted legal solutions translate into meaningful stakeholder collaboration in regeneration. Poland therefore offers not only a theoretical but also a practical field for studying participation in a legal-institutional context that supports its formalization, while at the same time leaving considerable room for local interpretation and implementation.

In the first section of our paper, we present an overview of the latest knowledge on the participatory approach to urban regeneration planning and implementation. We highlight not only the strengths but also the risks that this approach entails. In the next section we discuss the legal basis for stakeholder involvement in the revitalization of Polish municipalities. We then present the results of our own research, carried out among local authorities in Poland on participatory practices in revitalization. In the discussion section, our findings are summarized and confronted with the results obtained by other researchers, and we formulate general conclusions and recommendations based on them.

## **Literature Review**

Urban regeneration, understood as a multidimensional and multi-actor process, requires not only physical interventions but also profound social change rooted in participation and cooperation among stakeholders (Wang et al., 2021). These stakeholders – ranging from governmental institutions to private developers, NGOs, and residents – often have divergent priorities and expectations, particularly regarding environmental sustainability, housing affordability, and commercial viability. Such complexity necessitates a governance approach capable of integrating diverse interests and balancing power asymmetries in decision-making processes.

Despite the social sustainability principles for revitalization described in the introduction, this process may lead to unfair distributional effects, placing different burdens on social groups, particularly disadvantaging those at the lower end of the socio-economic scale. Given the nature of a degraded area, especially its territorial stigma (Ročak & Keinemans, 2023), local government officials involved in revitalization should be aware of the varying social networks and levels of cohesion in and around the revitalization area. They should also be prepared to adapt their engagement practices to the needs and capacities of the local community. This entails creating a collaborative environment where residents can understand the assumptions of revitalization and the roles of local authorities and other stakeholders, thereby preparing and motivating them to engage (Mui et al., 2022).

In planning, urban planners must understand and assess the social, economic, and environmental effects of their actions, necessitating collaboration with stakeholders. This, moreover, is in line with the very idea of urban regeneration, where the instruments for its implementation are primarily physical, but the objectives set are sustainable and inclusive. Revitalization should therefore be seen as a social investment, with its greatest beneficiaries being the residents themselves (Figueiredo et al., 2022; Ng et al., 2001; Ostanel, 2017). A prerequisite for

recognizing and understanding their needs is community participation in revitalization. To be effective, it should follow some basic principles. Participation channels and information should be available to all beneficiaries of the revitalization. Furthermore, participation should extend beyond mere consultation; deep involvement in decision-making and determining future development should be encouraged and facilitated (Ng et al., 2001). When making changes, it is important to remember to safeguard the interests of traditionally overlooked groups and to promote civic participation to counteract the significant influence of institutional actors in decision-making. This understanding of participation in revitalization addresses issues of equity and social justice in planning and enables all stakeholders to engage in the participatory process and express their views (Arbab et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, the conceptual framework adopted in this study draws on the model of collaborative governance – a form of public administration that emphasizes joint decision-making between public agencies and a broad spectrum of stakeholders, including community members. This model, developed in response to the limitations of traditional top-down planning, envisions citizen participation not as a token consultation but as a process of co-creation and shared responsibility (Baek & Zhang, 2022; Goetz & Clarke, 1993). This concept advocates the collaboration of public actors with public, private and community stakeholders, as well as residents at the stage of public policy making as well as public service delivery. It has been implemented at the local level as collaborative urban governance (Goetz & Clarke, 1993), supported by the need to empower and strengthen the influence of residents on local affairs. Collaborative governance is a recommended approach in addressing problems that arise in the management of urban revitalization projects (Liu et al., 2021).

Collaborative governance involves governance arrangements in which one or more public agencies directly engage public and private stakeholders in a collective, formal, consensus-oriented and deliberative decision-making process to develop or implement public policy or manage public programs or assets (Baek & Zhang, 2022). This approach holds promise for overcoming the complexity and decision-making conflicts that affect urban governance. However, it requires deeper reflection if it is to be implemented in degraded areas, where regeneration must balance the often competing interests of various stakeholders. Establishing conditions for meaningful, engaging, and sustainable participation, along with fostering strong commitment from community leaders, can also serve as sources of support (Brombal et al., 2017). Community leadership is vital for inclusive decision-making (Mui et al., 2022), as leaders can effectively communicate revitalization changes, fostering relationships among residents. In the Polish context, these ideas resonate with the institutional role of the revitalization committees (RCs), which are designed to embody the principles of collaborative governance. RCs offer a platform for stakeholder cooperation, promoting civic involvement in both the planning and implementation phases. The following section explores their legal foundations, institutional design, and potential for enabling inclusive decision-making in regeneration processes.

### *Organizational and Legal Premises for Participation in Revitalization in Polish Municipalities*

The availability of EU structural funds for financing revitalization projects has established revitalization as a key area of local development in Poland. Interest in revitalization intensified significantly, leading to the drafting of Poland's first Revitalization Act in 2015, which outlines the main principles, values, and methods governing this process in Polish municipalities. The Revitalization Act (Act of 9 October 2015 on Revitalization, 2015) defines revitalization as “a

process of leading degraded areas out of the crisis, through integrated actions for the benefit of the local community, space, and economy. It is territorially embedded and conducted by revitalization stakeholders based on a municipal revitalization programme.”

The Act clearly suggests that public participation is a key principle of revitalization. This entails the genuine involvement of stakeholders, including representatives from the public, private, and social sectors, as well as residents, in various stages of the revitalization process: planning, implementation, and evaluation of actions carried out (Act of 9 October 2015 on Revitalization). In addition to the public consultation procedures detailed in the Act, permanent stakeholder involvement in revitalization committees (RCs) is envisioned, as RCs serve as platforms for cooperation and dialogue between stakeholders and municipal authorities regarding revitalization preparation, implementation, and evaluation. The committees act in an opinion-giving and advisory capacity for the executive body in the municipality. Revitalization committees established in the early 2000s as part of Canadian urban regeneration pilot projects were attributed similar functions and scopes of action. In Canadian cities, committees are involved in developing revitalization programs. Their composition can vary, albeit somewhat limited by City Hall guidelines, and includes representatives from public agencies, community organizations, private companies, local residents, and parishes (Jamal, 2018; Queirós, 2010).

In Poland, the Revitalization Act provided for a transitional period until 31 December 2023. This led to considerable flexibility in carrying out revitalization activities, including in the establishment of revitalization committees. Considering the formal-legal basis for revitalization in Poland, we can identify two premises for establishing revitalization committees: a) obligatory revitalization committees in municipalities which have chosen the statutory revitalization path, thus committing to establish a committee under Art. 7.1 of the Act; b) optional revitalization committees or other advisory bodies, established in municipalities pursuing revitalization efforts outside the statutory route, based on a strategic document other than the municipal revitalization program that specifies how revitalization will occur.

This division implies potential differences in the organization and functioning of the committee. It also affects how their composition is determined and how members are selected. Municipalities adhering to the statutory requirements should ensure at least the participation of the following stakeholders in revitalization:

1. Residents of the revitalized area, real estate owners, perpetual usufructuaries, entities managing real estate (e.g., housing cooperatives, housing communities, social housing initiatives, social housing associations), and members collaborating in residential investment projects;
2. Residents from outside of the revitalized area;
3. Entities conducting or intending to conduct business activities in the municipality;
4. Entities conducting or intending to conduct social activities in the municipality, including NGOs and informal groups;
5. Local government units and their organizational structures;
6. Public authorities;
7. Other entities exercising the powers of the State Treasury in the revitalization area.

The rules for organizing committees and selecting their members are defined by a resolution of the municipal council, while the mayor is responsible for establishing the committee. This results in revitalization committees potentially differing across municipalities.

In 2018 and 2019, the total number of active revitalization committees and advisory bodies in Poland was 790 and 811, respectively. In both years, most RCs were established on an optional

basis in municipalities that opted not to follow the statutory revitalization procedure. Research by Statistics Poland indicates that, apart from local administration representatives, revitalization committees were composed primarily of local residents (22.8% of all members) and NGO representatives (15.5% of all members). The representation of the business sector was much more modest (8.8% of all members) (Research and Statistical Education Centre of Statistics Poland, 2020). The other potential stakeholder categories were not included in studies carried out by Statistics Poland.

## Research Assumptions

The paper focuses on cooperation and participation in urban regeneration. Our first assumption, based on the literature review presented in the literature review section, is that cooperation is a *sine qua non* condition for sustainable revitalization. Based on the review of existing legislation, we further assume that, in the Polish context, revitalization committees provide a space for the revitalization stakeholders to act together. Another assumption is the conviction that it is necessary to take action to safeguard the interests of the weakest social groups in revitalization, so that the effects of the process are equitable and promote social inclusion. The final assumption is the significant role of local authorities as coordinators and initiators of revitalization. This aligns with the provisions of the Revitalization Act, which designates the preparation, coordination, and facilitation of revitalization, as well as its implementation, as municipal responsibilities. We propose that analyzing the composition of revitalization committees, alongside local authorities' views on the importance and process of participation, will help address the following research questions:

- RQ 1: Which categories of stakeholders are represented in revitalization committees (RCs)?
- RQ 2: Does the type of municipality where the RC has been established influence the composition of the committee?
- RQ 3: How do Polish authorities perceive partnership and cooperation in revitalization?
- RQ 4: How do local leaders assess the importance of individual stakeholder groups in revitalization process?
- RQ 5: Do representatives of executive authorities in Polish municipalities perceive the need to secure the interests of the most vulnerable members of the community in the revitalization process?

## Data Collection

To answer the above research questions, we conducted a quantitative study between January and March 2018 in Polish municipalities. The survey questionnaire is an original work, featuring a block of questions focused on participation and revitalization stakeholders. Some questions were designed to gather information on local authorities' perceptions of the importance of participatory processes and stakeholder involvement in revitalization. The respondents identified the composition of revitalization committees by selecting from a list of eighteen groups provided in the questionnaire. The reasons for including each of these groups are presented in Table 1. Including all of these stakeholder groups in the study of the composition of revitalization committees allows for a comprehensive assessment of the representativeness, participatory character, and effectiveness of the revitalization process, as well as the identification of potential deficits in social and institutional inclusion.

**Table 1.** Justification for including individual stakeholder groups in the study of the composition of revitalization committees

No.	Stakeholder Group	Justification
1	City/municipality office staff	Key decision-makers and implementers of revitalization activities; they possess administrative, operational, and strategic knowledge.
2	NGOs and informal groups	Represent local needs and grassroots initiatives; often carry social trust.
3	Residents of the revitalized area	Most directly affected by the revitalization process – their needs and opinions are crucial for the success of actions.
4	Councilors	Fulfil representative and decision-making roles; co-decide on the directions of local policy.
5	Employees of organizational units in the municipality	Possess specialized knowledge (e.g., in planning, investment, environmental protection).
6	Management of social services center	Know the situation of people at risk of social exclusion, who are important beneficiaries of revitalization.
7	Entrepreneurs from the revitalized area	Co-create the local economy and are interested in improving the space and conditions for conducting business.
8	Residents from outside the revitalized area	Their voice is often less represented, but as municipal stakeholders they can be important for understanding broader perceptions of revitalization activities.
9	Social workers from the revitalized area	Work directly with individuals in need of support – they are a reliable source for diagnosing local problems.
10	Representatives of schools from the revitalized area	Education of children and youth is a key element in preventing exclusion – schools also serve as local integration centers.
11	Representatives of sub local administrative structures	Represent the local community and can influence revitalization priorities.
12	Experts and consultants	Bring external knowledge and support the professionalization of the revitalization process.
13	Entrepreneurs from outside the revitalized area	May be interested in investing or cooperating, which can enhance the effectiveness of revitalization activities.
14	Police representatives	Important in the context of public safety, which is often a concern in revitalized areas.
15	Representatives of health care facilities	Participate in activities supporting public health and combating marginalization.
16	Family assistants from the revitalized area	Work with families in crisis, making them a valuable source of knowledge about social needs.
17	Representatives of the district employment office	Support the vocational activation of residents in revitalized areas – a crucial element in improving quality of life.
18	Scientists	Provide analysis, diagnosis, and evaluation – influencing the quality of planning and implementation of revitalization.

Source: Own elaboration

Perceptions of partnership and cooperation in revitalization, as well as the importance of protecting the interests of the most vulnerable residents, were measured using a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The importance of revitalization stakeholder groups was also assessed using a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 (not important at all) to 5 (very important).

The committee composition analysis was conducted according to municipality types. The type of municipality used in this study reflects the current typology of municipalities in Poland, i.e., (a) cities with county status, (b) urban municipalities, (c) urban-rural municipalities, and (d) rural municipalities.

A pilot study was conducted in five municipalities of different types and the questionnaire was reviewed for clarity and accuracy, with no errors or ambiguities identified. The invitation to the online survey was sent to all municipalities in Poland through the procedure for accessing public information. 1236 of the total population of 2478 municipalities participated in the research. The respondents provided their answers anonymously. Due to the adopted procedure, approval from an ethics committee was not required. The questionnaire was addressed to mayors or heads of villages and their deputies because of their key role in managing revitalization.

In the sample, urban municipalities constitute 15%, urban-rural municipalities 22.2%, and rural municipalities 61.3%. Municipalities from all sixteen Polish regions (*voivodeships*) were included in the study, providing a comprehensive overview. The sample structure closely mirrors the structure of the population in terms of municipality type (with a similarity index of 97%). The sample also reflects the distribution of municipalities in Poland in terms of territorial coverage, with a similarity index of 95%. Since these two criteria are key to the study, the strong match between the sample and the total population allows for comparing revitalization practices across different types and sizes of municipalities and supports generalizing the findings to all municipalities in Poland. Ensuring the representativeness of the sample by municipality type makes it possible to examine whether the type of municipality influences the composition of revitalization committees, the perceived importance of different categories of revitalization stakeholders, and the assessment of needs and challenges related to participatory processes in revitalization.

Among the investigated municipalities, 573 (46% of the survey sample, 23% of the total population of Polish municipalities) were engaged in revitalization projects and were considered in the analyses discussed in this paper (Table 2).

**Table 2. Municipalities engaged in revitalization projects, categorized by type [n = 573]**

Municipality	Number	%
Urban municipalities (M)	113	19.7
Cities with county status (MP)	39	6.8
Urban-rural municipalities (MW)	184	32.1
Rural municipalities (W)	230	40.2
No data	7	1.2
Total	573	100.0

Source: Authors' own research

The questionnaire data were analyzed using basic descriptive statistics:

- arithmetic mean of respondents' ratings on a scale from 1 to 5
- median – the middle point of the dataset arranged in ascending or descending order
- standard deviation – measure of the dispersion of values around the arithmetic mean.

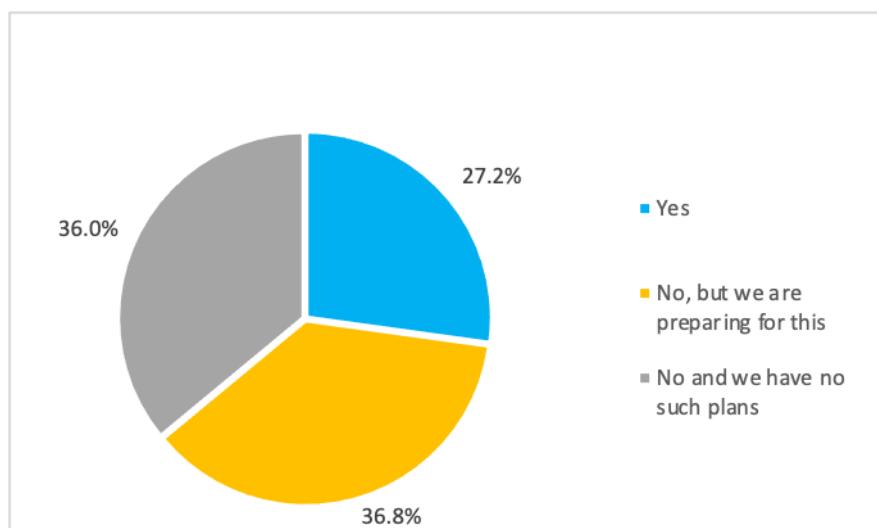
The Kruskal-Wallis test, or the Spearman's rank correlation coefficient (rho). The significance of correlation coefficients was assessed using a two-tailed t-test. These methods were used to identify the relationship between the composition of the revitalization committee (RC) and the municipality characteristics (type, affluence).

## Research Results

### *Composition of the revitalization committees in Polish municipalities*

Revitalization committees have been established in only 27% of municipalities engaged in revitalization, while 36% of municipalities had no intention of establishing one (Fig. 1). It is worth noting that the Revitalization Act of 2015 allowed a transition period until December 31, 2023. Starting in 2024, municipalities wishing to undertake revitalization must base their efforts on a municipal revitalization program (MRP), with the scope and preparation procedure (including the establishment of a revitalization committee) defined by the Act. Until the end of 2023, mayors were not required to comply with the Act's provisions or establish revitalization committees and could still receive EU structural funds for urban revitalization.

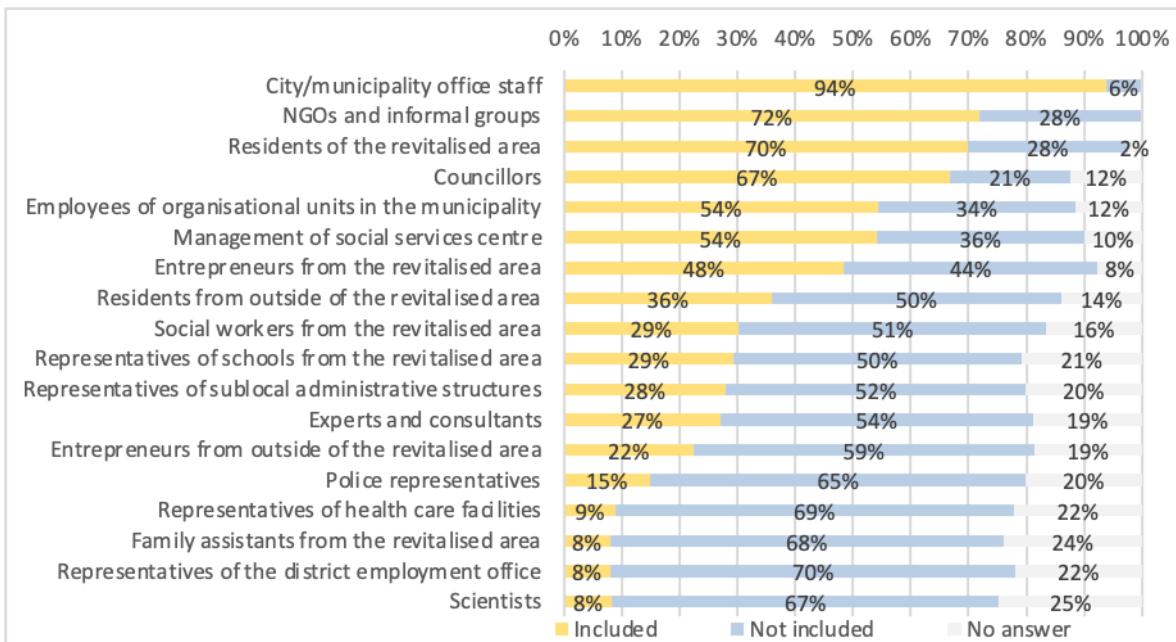
Notable differences can be observed in this regard, particularly between cities with county status – where such a body is least often established (around 20%), with nearly half not even considering it – and urban-rural and urban municipalities. Statistical analysis revealed that these differences are not significant ( $p = 0.285$ ), indicating that the establishment of revitalization committees does not vary substantially between these types of municipalities.



**Figure 1.** Was a revitalization committee established in your municipality?  
(% of municipalities) [n = 573].

Source: Authors' own research

Furthermore, in the 159 municipalities where revitalization committees (RCs) were established, the composition of these committees reveals important trends. The majority of RC members are local authority officials, present in 94% of the committees (Fig. 2). In nearly three-quarters of the municipalities, representatives of NGOs and informal groups are involved; in 70%, inhabitants of the revitalized areas; and in 67%, councilors. Around half of the municipalities engage employees from other organizational units, social work center management, and entrepreneurs from the revitalized area. It is worth noting that for most of the analyzed groups, around one in five respondents could not identify their involvement in the revitalization committee. It can be assumed that, even if they were members, they were such inactive participants that municipal authorities did not remember them from the committee meetings. Scientists, as well as representatives from county labor offices, family assistants, and primary healthcare units, play a marginal role, participating in fewer than 10% of committees. Almost 70% of committees reported excluding them from their composition.



**Figure 2.** Composition of revitalization committees (% of municipalities) [n = 159].

Source: Authors' own research

Polish RCs can be described as bodies that are administrative and social by nature with an overrepresentation of officials and local authorities, a large representation of representatives of NGOs, a relatively large representation of local residents (mainly from the revitalized area), and a moderate representation of the business sector. This is accompanied by a clear deficit of stakeholders involved in the day-to-day work with clients of the public system of social services, healthcare, protection of public safety, education and active labor market measures targeting the residents. Against the backdrop of a sustainable approach to revitalization, these areas are crucial for achieving social sustainability, as they directly support community well-being, inclusivity, and resilience in revitalization efforts. Participation of scientists in revitalization committees is also marginal.

Analyzing the data in Table 3, which lists the top 10 to 11 key stakeholders involved in the work of revitalization committees in municipalities of different types (based on groups of committee members indicated by representatives of at least three out of ten municipalities), it can be confirmed that office staff play a significant role. Regardless of the type of municipality, their participation was reported in most committees.

**Table 3.** Key stakeholders engaged in revitalization committees by municipality type [n = 159].

Urban municipalities (n = 35)	Cities with county status (n = 9)	Urban-rural municipalities (n = 46)	Rural municipalities (n = 69)
City/municipality	City/municipality	City/municipality	City/municipality

office staff	office staff	office staff	office staff
NGOs	NGOs	NGOs	Residents of the revitalized area
Councilors	Management of social services center	Councilors	NGOs
Residents of the revitalized area	Entrepreneurs from the revitalized area	Residents of the revitalized area	Councilors
Employees of other organizational units in the municipality	Councilors	Employees of other organizational units in the municipality	Residents from outside the revitalized area
Management of social services center	Experts and consultants	Management of social services center	Entrepreneurs from the revitalized area
Entrepreneurs from the revitalized area	Residents of the revitalized area	Entrepreneurs from the revitalized area	Management of social services center
Social workers from the revitalized area	Employees of other organizational units in the municipality	Residents from outside the revitalized area	Employees of other organizational units in the municipality
Residents from outside the revitalized area	Residents from outside of the revitalized area	Representatives of schools from the revitalized area	Residents from outside the revitalized area
Experts and consultants	Representatives of sub local administrative structures	Social workers from the revitalized area	Representatives of sub local administrative structures
	Scientists		Social workers from the revitalized area

Source: Authors' own research

Entities listed in subsequent positions vary across types of municipalities. However, in all municipalities, the top three include non-governmental organizations and informal groups, although their role is more prominent in urban, urban-rural municipalities, and cities with county status (ranked second) compared to rural municipalities (ranked third). In rural municipalities, residents of the revitalized area are ranked second (while they rank fourth in urban and urban-rural municipalities and only seventh in cities with county status, after social work center management, entrepreneurs, councilors, or experts). Cities with county status are also the only ones where the scientific community appears among the most significant stakeholders (Table 2). This could be explained by the fact that cities with county status are the largest units in the study sample, often hosting a branch or an independent university, which facilitates cooperation with scientists. It is also noteworthy that in all municipalities included in the study, residents and economic entities from outside the revitalized area were rarely involved in revitalization efforts. Yet, urban regeneration concerns the entire city and the revitalized area should be accessible and attractive to a diverse range of users. Therefore, this exclusionary approach to revitalization programming and monitoring is surprising.

Local authorities reported that the evaluation of candidates for the revitalization committee primarily focused on experience with socio-economic projects, which applied to an average of 77.5% of municipalities that have established such committees. This evaluation was conducted slightly more frequently in cities with county status (six out of eight surveyed) and rural municipalities (82%), and relatively less often in urban municipalities (69%). However, the differences in this regard were not statistically significant ( $p = 0.494$ ).

### *The Relevance of Stakeholders in Revitalization*

Municipal authorities also assessed the relevance of various partners for the course of revitalization. The most important data in this respect are summarized in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Relevance of revitalization stakeholders (assessed on a scale from 1 to 5) [n = 573]

Partner category	Total							Mean by type of municipality				p
	n	Mean	STD	Q1	Me	Q3	M	MP	MW	W		
Residents of the revitalized area	565	4.55	0.831	4	5	5	4.70	4.76	4.46	4.51	0.014*	
Real estate owners and perpetual usufructuaries, entities managing real estate located in the revitalized area, including housing cooperatives, housing communities, and social housing associations	437	4.16	0.982	4	4	5	4.50	4.52	4.25	3.87	<0.001*	
Social work centers	558	4.08	0.958	4	4	5	4.36	4.28	3.94	4.05	0.003*	
Entities conducting or intending to conduct social activity in the municipality, including NGOs and informal groups	554	3.97	0.930	3	4	5	4.07	4.38	3.90	3.91	0.029*	
Entities conducting or intending to conduct business activity in the municipality	555	3.84	0.932	3	4	5	3.92	4.16	3.73	3.85	0.074	
Institutions of culture	550	3.83	0.934	3	4	5	3.87	4.10	3.88	3.76	0.231	
Schools	556	3.75	0.929	3	4	4	3.83	3.72	3.75	3.74	0.874	
Police	554	3.68	1.029	3	4	4	3.87	3.81	3.65	3.59	0.070	
Labor office	549	3.47	1.140	3	4	4	3.69	4.09	3.45	3.31	<0.001*	
Other units of the local authorities and their organizational structures	554	3.42	1.087	3	3.5	4	3.54	3.63	3.40	3.37	0.406	
Healthcare establishments	551	3.28	1.107	3	3	4	3.27	3.06	3.25	3.33	0.615	
Consultants or experts	549	3.24	1.108	3	3	4	3.41	3.55	3.26	3.10	0.037*	
Church	552	3.18	1.104	2	3	4	3.06	3.45	3.28	3.14	0.181	
Residents from outside the revitalized area	556	2.97	1.045	2	3	4	2.95	3.22	2.94	2.97	0.575	
Representatives of regional authorities	554	2.93	1.124	2	3	4	2.79	2.94	2.87	3.02	0.305	
Scientists	548	2.62	1.153	2	3	3	2.73	2.90	2.72	2.45	0.017*	
Representatives of central administration	550	2.44	1.170	1	2	3	2.43	2.50	2.36	2.50	0.695	
Other entities	505	2.36	1.084	1	2	3	2.58	2.44	2.28	2.31	0.150	
Developers	551	2.35	1.126	1	2	3	2.53	2.77	2.39	2.18	0.005*	

p – probability by F test of analysis of variance or Welch's test (after omitting missing responses); a p-value of less than 0.05 indicates a statistically significant difference between groups; \* – statistically significant differences ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ); type of municipality: M – urban municipality, MP – towns/cities with a county status, MW – urban-rural municipality, W – rural municipality; Q1 – quartile 1, Q3 – quartile 3, Me – median, STD – standard deviation, n – number of municipalities for which a given group of

entities/persons was assessed; grey color indicates groups with the highest average assessment of the relevance of a given entity

Source: Authors' own research.

The following three groups were mentioned as the most important stakeholders (mean score above 4 with max = 5): the residents of the revitalized area ( $Me = 5$ , almost 2/3 of respondents rated their importance as 5), as well as real estate owners, users and managers in the revitalized area and social work centers; representatives of  $\frac{3}{4}$  of municipalities rated their importance as no less than 4. The lowest rates (mean score below 3) were given to developers, representatives of central administration and regional authorities, scientists and residents from outside the revitalized area.

We should also note that the opinions on the importance of individual stakeholders are positively correlated in pairs, with the majority of these correlations being statistically significant. Particularly clear is the relationship between the assessment of the importance of representatives of the central administration and regional authorities ( $\rho = 0.750$ ,  $p < 0.001^*$ ), the police and social work centers ( $\rho = 0.726$ ,  $p < 0.001^*$ ) and entities conducting economic and social activities in the revitalized area ( $\rho = 0.710$ ,  $p < 0.001^*$ ). The importance of labor offices is strongly correlated with that of social work centers ( $\rho = 0.606$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), as well as the importance of schools in relation to primary healthcare establishments ( $\rho = 0.665$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and the police ( $\rho = 0.651$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Thus, those who assigned greater importance to the central administration also perceived the role of regional administration as more significant. Similarly, the importance of entities involved in both economic and social activities in the revitalized area was rated in a comparable manner. Respondents who rated social work centers more highly also attributed greater importance to labor offices and the police, while those who assigned higher importance to schools considered healthcare establishments and the police to be more critical for the revitalization process.

Overall, however, the above assessment has limited impact on the composition of the revitalization committees. When examining the strength of the relationship between the number of stakeholders from a given group on the revitalization committee (Figure 2) and the importance attributed to them for the course of revitalization (Table 4), it becomes evident that this relationship is significant for consultants/experts ( $\rho = 0.187$ ,  $p = 0.016^*$ ). The relationship is also quite strong for entities conducting business in the revitalized area ( $\rho = 0.137$ ,  $p = 0.075$ ) and for scientists ( $\rho = 0.143$ ,  $p = 0.067$ ). However, for the remaining entities, the perceived importance of a given stakeholder group does not translate into concrete actions aimed at increasing their involvement in the preparation and course of revitalization in the municipality.

When analyzing the importance attributed to different stakeholder categories in revitalization, certain differences can be observed between municipalities of various types (Table 4). Firstly, there are statistically significant differences in the evaluation of the importance of: residents of the revitalized area ( $p = 0.014^*$ ), real estate owners/managers ( $p < 0.001^*$ ), entities conducting or intending to conduct social activity in the municipality, including NGOs and informal groups ( $p = 0.029^*$ ), social work centers ( $p = 0.003^*$ ) and labor offices ( $p < 0.001^*$ ), as well as consultants, experts ( $p = 0.037^*$ ) and scientists ( $p = 0.017^*$ ), and developers ( $p = 0.005^*$ ), with the greatest differences usually occurring between cities with county status (where the score is higher) and rural municipalities.

#### *Perception of Revitalization Needs*

Local authorities also assessed selected aspects of revitalization implementation (Table 5). The participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements on a 5-point Likert scale: "Successful revitalization requires partnership actions by various entities" and "The interests of the most vulnerable groups should be secured in revitalization". The first statement was supported by three-quarters of municipal representatives, with nearly one in three strongly agreeing. In urban municipalities and cities with county status these percentages were even higher, reaching almost 100%. The arithmetic means calculated from the ratings of respondents representing various types of municipalities confirm strong approval for partnership as a condition for success in revitalization across all groups, with the lowest mean recorded in the rural municipalities group.

The second aspect of revitalization examined here was the need to secure the interests of the most vulnerable social groups. There were few opponents to this approach – they represent only 7% of the municipalities engaged in revitalization, but nevertheless a large proportion of them (27%) found it difficult to take a stance on it. Securing the interests of the most vulnerable is important for more than 80% of cities with county status and 70% of urban municipalities, this aspect scored slightly lower in the remaining municipalities, although also in rural and urban-rural municipalities the percentage of respondents who agree with this approach is high (63%). However, these relationships are not statistically significant ( $p = 0.059$ ).

**Table 5.** Perception of revitalization needs by municipality type [n = 573]

Statement	M	MP	MW	W
Successful revitalization needs partnership actions pursued by various entities (p < 0.001*)	Strongly disagree	1	0	0
	Disagree	0	0	2
	Neither agree nor disagree	9	4	7
	Agree	46	48	64
	Strongly agree	45	48	28
	Mean	4.33	4.45	4.17
The interests of the most vulnerable groups should be secured in revitalization (p = 0.059)	Strongly disagree	1	0	0
	Disagree	4	0	7
	Neither agree nor disagree	26	19	30
	Agree	48	63	46
	Strongly agree	22	19	17
	Mean	3.86	4.00	3.73

p – probability in Kruskal-Wallis test; a p-value of less than 0.05 indicates a statistically significant difference between groups; \* – statistically significant differences ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ); M – urban municipality, MP – towns/cities with a county status, MW – urban-rural municipality, W – rural municipality

Source: authors' own research.

### *Challenges in Stakeholder Cooperation for Revitalization*

Representatives of all municipalities carrying out revitalization projects were also asked to assess how difficult it is to ensure cooperation between revitalization stakeholders. They used a Likert scale from 0 to 5, where: 0 indicated that no such activities are carried out in the municipality, 1 meant the issue was very easy, and 5 meant the issue was very difficult. The results are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Challenges in stakeholder cooperation for revitalization [n = 573]

Type of cooperation difficulty	Does not occur (%)	Total					Mean by type of municipality			p	
		n	Mean	STD	Q1	Me	Q3	M	MP	MW	
Engaging private real estate owners in revitalization	9.3	497	3.70	1.205	3	4	5	3.83	4.07	3.85	3.48 0.010*
Engaging business entities in consultations related to revitalization	2.2	537	3.59	1.120	3	4	5	3.80	3.87	3.63	3.42 0.005*
Engaging residents of the municipality in social consultations related to revitalization	2.0	541	3.53	1.144	3	4	4	3.80	3.74	3.55	3.36 0.002*
Establishing partnerships with entities from various sectors	12.7	476	3.49	1.163	3	4	4	3.74	3.69	3.55	3.29 0.453
Establishing partnerships with entities from the public sector	12.8	479	3.39	1.178	3	3	4	3.54	3.48	3.41	3.27 0.510
Engaging NGOs in social consultations related to revitalization	2.7	536	3.19	1.160	2	3	4	3.31	3.29	3.28	3.04 0.048*
Setting up the revitalization committee	N/A	443	2.81	1.236	2	3	4	2.75	3.13	2.71	2.86 0.494

p – probability by F-test of analysis of variance or Welch's test (after omitting missing responses and municipalities where the solution is not applied); a p-value of less than 0.05 indicates a statistically significant difference between groups; \* – statistically significant differences ( $\alpha = 0.05$ ). Type of municipality: M – urban municipality, MP – cities with county status, MW – urban-rural municipality, W – rural municipality; Q1 – quartile 1, Q3 – quartile 3, Me – median, STD – standard deviation, n – number of municipalities for which a given group of entities/persons was assessed; grey color indicates groups with the highest average assessment of the importance of a given entity

Source: Authors' own research

Cooperation with the business sector in revitalization presents challenges, as engaging private property owners is perceived as particularly difficult (average score of 3.7), with cities holding county status reporting the greatest difficulty (average score of 4.07). Municipalities, especially urban ones and cities with county status, also encounter challenges in involving residents and businesses in social consultations related to revitalization (average scores: 3.53 for residents, 3.59 for business entities), while engaging NGOs is relatively easier (average score of 3.19), particularly in rural municipalities. The involvement of property owners in revitalization is crucial for enabling repairs and modernization across the entire revitalized area, not just within the public housing stock. Private property owners may also need to participate in financing investments, which often exceed the capacity of the public sector. Preventing gentrification is essential. Strategies for including property owners in revitalization and its financing through public-private partnerships should be implemented, emphasizing the increase in property value and the attraction of new investments and residents. Developing strategies to protect the original residents is also important. Multi-sector cooperation is seen as slightly more challenging than public sector partnerships alone. Setting up a revitalization committee, however, is considered relatively manageable across all types of municipalities (average score of 2.81) (Table 6). Given this, the limited interest in establishing revitalization committees in the surveyed municipalities is surprising, which may be caused by the difficulties in engaging certain stakeholders in participation diagnosed in our study (Table 6).

#### *Summary of Research Findings*

The conducted study allowed for the formulation of general conclusions, which are presented in Table 7.

**Table 7.** Key findings from the study

Key Findings	
<b>Composition of the revitalization committee in Polish municipalities</b>	<p><b>Overrepresentation of Officials and Local Authorities:</b> Across all types of municipalities, revitalization committees (RCs) are dominated by officials and local authorities, potentially limiting the diversity of perspectives and experiences in the revitalization process.</p> <p><b>High Presence of NGOs:</b> Particularly in urban municipalities, RCs include a significant number of NGO representatives, often the most active and entrepreneurial residents. While beneficial, this may limit the representation of less active residents' viewpoints.</p> <p><b>Deficit of Key Service Stakeholders:</b> There is a notable lack of stakeholders involved in daily work with clients in social services, healthcare, education, and active labor market sectors. Their absence may adversely affect the socio-economic impact of revitalization efforts.</p> <p><b>Minimal Involvement of Academics:</b> Academic representation in RCs is marginal (present only in cities with county status), potentially limiting the use of expert knowledge and innovative solutions. Including academics in these structures could enhance understanding of social issues and improve the planning and execution of revitalization activities.</p> <p><b>Study Limitation:</b> The study does not explain why some stakeholders are underrepresented, which limits a deeper understanding of participation dynamics in RCs.</p>
<b>Relevance of partners for revitalization</b>	<p><b>Key Partners in the Revitalization Process:</b> Residents of revitalized areas, property owners, social assistance centers, and NGOs are perceived as the most important partners in the revitalization process. In contrast, developers and representatives of central and regional administrations received low ratings, suggesting that their influence on the revitalization process is limited.</p> <p><b>Need for Enhanced Stakeholder Integration:</b> A significant positive correlation was observed between the importance ratings of various stakeholder groups (central and regional administrations, police, social assistance centers, and business and social entities), indicating a need for better integration of these groups in the decision-making process.</p> <p><b>Underrepresentation of Important Stakeholders:</b> Despite high ratings of importance for certain stakeholder groups (e.g., employees of other municipal organizational units), their representation in revitalization committees remains limited.</p>
<b>Perception of Revitalization Needs</b>	<p><b>Difficulty in Addressing Vulnerable Groups' Interests:</b> 27% of respondents have difficulty taking a stance on the need to safeguard the interests of the most vulnerable social groups, suggesting a need for further education and discussion on the importance of supporting these groups in the context of revitalization.</p> <p><b>Support for Partnership Actions:</b> The majority of municipal representatives (75%) agree that the success of revitalization requires collaborative actions by various entities, with nearly 100% agreement in urban municipalities and cities with county status. This highlights a strong awareness of the importance of cooperation between different stakeholders in the revitalization process.</p>
<b>Challenges in Stakeholder Cooperation for Revitalization</b>	<p><b>Challenges in Business Sector Cooperation:</b> Cooperation with the business sector in the revitalization process faces significant challenges, particularly in engaging private property owners, which is especially problematic in cities with county status. It is recommended to develop more effective strategies to facilitate the involvement of this sector in revitalization efforts.</p>

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#### Key Findings

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**Limited Interest in Establishing Revitalization Committees:** Although the establishment of revitalization committees is seen as relatively feasible in all types of municipalities, the limited interest in creating them in the surveyed municipalities is surprising. This may suggest a lack of awareness or understanding of the benefits of such structures and their role in effective revitalization. Education on the importance of collaboration is necessary.

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Source: Developed by the authors

## Discussion

A participatory approach in planning, carrying out and monitoring sustainable urban regeneration has been advocated by a large group of researchers (Boeri et al., 2022; Fu et al., 2023; Kim et al., 2021). They emphasize the need for sustained, bottom-up involvement of stakeholders from different social groups (Ferilli et al., 2016; Ostanel, 2017; Simon, 2023). However, the practice observed in Polish municipalities diverges significantly from these normative ideals. The findings from our research suggest that sustainable stakeholder engagement is not a popular approach in Polish municipalities. Although local authorities highly rated the importance of partnerships and local cooperation for revitalization and did not perceive difficulties in setting up revitalization committees, in 2018 only 27% of surveyed municipalities had established revitalization committees. Research conducted by Statistics Poland (2020) also shows little interest in setting up revitalization committees, despite their mandatory status for revitalization projects carried out under the Revitalization Act. In 2019, 46 municipalities having municipal revitalization programs (MRPs) failed to confirm that their revitalization committees or other consultative and advisory bodies were up and running (in 2018 there were 61 such municipalities).

Several reasons contribute to this situation, including ongoing preparatory work for establishing revitalization committees, appointing committees only during the drafting of the MRP, and a lack of potential participants willing to serve on the committees. In our research, most municipalities reported that a revitalization committee had not been appointed (or that the appointed revitalization committee failed to take any action) without giving any reason. In the light of the results of our research, the reason may be the overall difficulty in setting up a permanently operating cross-sectoral advisory forum such as a revitalization committee. An assessment of the difficulty in carrying out activities, such as creating local partnerships or engaging various entities in consultations, showed that local authorities are more successful when organizing cooperation within the public or non-governmental sectors than within the economic or civic sectors. As a result, in the municipalities covered by our study, revitalization committees are primarily administrative-social in nature, with their composition clearly dominated by local government officials, local authorities, representatives of NGOs, and residents. Business entities, vulnerable groups, and institutions responsible for addressing the socio-economic challenges of the revitalized area are relatively underrepresented. On the other hand, the respondents rated the importance of these stakeholder groups highly in the revitalization process. It can be assumed that their limited participation in the revitalization committees is a result of a lack of political will. Our research also highlights the challenges in engaging business entities in the participatory process. This results in the composition of revitalization committees being inadequate in relation to the complex socio-economic problems of the degraded areas. This observation is confirmed by the research of the Supreme Audit Office (Polish abbr. NIK), which shows that little use was made of the potential of the revitalization committees. The consultative and advisory function performed by them was

limited in practice, which was due, *inter alia*, to the fact that these committees were not appointed or were often appointed late, or their composition was inadequate (NIK, 2021). The successful establishment of a committee that actively supports revitalization efforts largely depends on clearly defined member selection criteria to ensure proper representation of groups genuinely invested in the municipality's revitalization process (Jadach-Sepioł, 2021).

The findings of other researchers indicate the potential negative effects of poorly designed participatory processes in urban revitalization. Savini (2011) highlights the difficulty in ensuring participation in problem areas due to low social cohesion and political participation of citizens. This prompts local authorities to involve the existing networks of actors in regeneration projects in these areas, which may replicate the already existing practices of cooperation with NGOs. A similar phenomenon has been pointed out by Stapper and Duyvendak (2020). Referring to the sociology of critique, they drew attention to the negative consequences of participation in participatory processes (particularly those organized in the form of workshops) of active, locally engaged 'entrepreneurial' residents with good communication skills. Focusing the attention of local authorities on solving problems identified by 'entrepreneurial residents' who are local leaders may jeopardize the accomplishment of policy goals intended to serve all of the community. According to the authors, this phenomenon reproduces social inequalities, as it further strengthens the position of local leaders and marginalizes residents who lack entrepreneurial qualities. These findings point to the need to monitor participatory processes to prevent the exclusion of some residents from the process. When analyzing a regeneration project in Seoul, Shin (2022) explained the involvement and domination of planning processes by selected groups through the lens of social capital theory. He demonstrated that binding social capital played a stronger role in this case, which explains the project's reliance on close relationships centered around public officials. The research also suggests that traditional regeneration practices are driven by a powerful elite of city authorities and private developers. Urban regeneration and development strategies can be socially inequitable for lower-income communities, resulting in gentrification (Alves et al., 2023; Villanueva et al., 2017). Protecting their interests requires identifying their problems and understanding their situations. However, the results of our study indicate that representatives of the social services sector (such as social workers, family assistants, and labor offices) are very rarely included in revitalization committees – only 29%, 8%, and 8% of the committees, respectively, involve them as members.

The absence of representatives of local labor market or social work centers may result in a lack of innovative social investment initiatives advocated in the literature (Figueiredo et al., 2022; Ostanel, 2017). This is confirmed by the findings of other researchers. Jarczewski and Kułaczkowska (2019) note that, despite the strong emphasis on measures that address social problems in revitalization areas, there were not many innovative measures in education, activation or the labor market in the pilot and model projects. Frątczak-Muller's (2019) research has shown that social services are generally only involved in diagnostic activities for the purposes of revitalization (at an early stage, so as to meet the formal requirements of diagnosing related problems of a socio-economic nature). At the same time, the expert knowledge and experience of social workers in community work, are rarely used in revitalization programming and monitoring. It appears that local authorities, who initiate and coordinate the process, most likely perceive social workers and family assistants as employees whose tasks focus on emergency interventions, which entail income redistribution in the form of benefits and allowances or material aid. In this perspective, the knowledge resources of social services seem to be useful mainly for diagnosing social problems and the extent of social exclusion in a degraded area. Conversely, the expertise of social care workers in empowerment-oriented activities – aimed at building personal, interpersonal, or political skills and values that enable

individuals, families, or communities to take action for self-improvement (Baba et al., 2016) – is underestimated. Empowerment, however, should be recognized as a key focus of regeneration programs.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Urban regeneration encompasses not only the physical renovation of urban spaces but also economic and social restructuring, involving multiple stakeholders and creating a highly complex decision-making process. Similar to other socio-economic interventions in defined areas, it is shaped by competing interests. When implementing this process in areas that have faced significant crisis, it is necessary to identify a network of interrelated problems and phenomena in order to implement effective and socially desirable solutions. The key recipients of these activities will be the inhabitants and economic entities in the revitalized area, with the overarching goal of recovery being to improve the quality of life and the development of the city as a whole. Given the multidimensional nature of the regeneration process and its inclusive focus, there is a need for an interdisciplinary and participatory approach to its planning, implementation, and monitoring. Through social participation the community can influence decisions that affect them. This involvement fosters a sense of ownership among all stakeholders regarding the planning and implementation of changes. This results in a decision that is owned by all stakeholders.

We believe that ensuring participation in revitalization is crucial and requires a number of conditions to be met. We recommend ensuring (1) Early involvement: RCs should be established at the earliest stage of drafting revitalization programs. Where this is not possible, a broad group of stakeholders – including potential future RC members – should be engaged during program development. (2) Mapping stakeholders and local resources: a tool that identifies who has influence, who is affected, and who should be involved. It helps to avoid overlooking key groups. (3) Representation of diverse stakeholders: RCs should include representatives from a wide spectrum of interest groups relevant to the area's specific socio-economic challenges, including NGOs, residents, entrepreneurs, public service providers, and marginalized populations. (4) Support for marginalized groups: special efforts should be made to ensure the participation of residents at risk of exclusion. Participation mechanisms must be inclusive, accessible, and empowering. (5) Simplified and accessible forms of participation: meetings conducted in plain language, translations (sign language, other languages), provision of childcare, organizing meetings in places where residents usually spend their time (e.g., schools, libraries, community centers). (6) Use of local knowledge: social workers and local service providers possess valuable insights into community needs and dynamics. Their expertise should be incorporated into the regeneration process to foster socially innovative solutions.

This study reflects the perspectives of local decision-makers, without incorporating the views of RC members themselves. As such, it does not fully capture the internal dynamics of the committees or the lived experiences of their participants. Future research should include these voices to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the functioning and effectiveness of participatory mechanisms. Additionally, the reasons behind the underrepresentation of certain stakeholder groups require deeper, qualitative investigation.

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