
Implementation of Participatory Budgets: Experience from Poland

Submitted 13/01/24, 1st revision 11/02/24, 2nd revision 22/02/24, accepted 15/03/24

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Abstract:

Purpose: In recent years, participatory budgets have become an increasingly popular form of social participation and encouragement for residents to engage in activities for their immediate surroundings. The aim of the article is to present how participatory budgets are perceived by local activists in Poland, and to pinpoint best practices, so that other countries can use it in their own national policy connected with implementation of participatory budget.

Design/Methodology/Approach: In order to achieve the goal of the paper the method of desk research, quantitative and qualitative research were used. The first part of the research was based on a literature review and the second was conducted through in-depth individual interviews (IDI).

Findings: We have got answers from 22 activists participated in the IDI, comprising 5 from Warsaw, 3 from Krakow, 4 from Lodz, 4 from Wroclaw, and 6 from Poznan. The majority represented local associations and foundations working on behalf of and for the residents of these cities.

Practical Implications: The article outlines the most frequently encountered issues related to participatory budgets and suggestions for improvements within the implementation of citizen budgets proposed by activists.

Originality/Value: The research has enabled to develop a conceptual understanding of implementation of participatory budget and opinion of local activists. The article presents research results conducted through in-depth individual interviews (IDIs) among representatives of local activists in Polish cities.

Keywords: Participatory budget, social participation, local activists, city, Poland.

JEL Code: H70, O30.

Paper type: Research study.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, an increasingly popular form of social participation and encouraging residents to engage in activities for their immediate surroundings has become the citizen budget, also known as the participatory budget (Szczepańska, Zagroba and Pietrzyk, 2022). This is an instrument that enables residents of a particular unit (town or district) to actively participate in the decision-making process regarding the distribution of financial resources at the local level (Park, Butler, Petrovsky, 2022).

The world's first implementation of the participatory budget took place in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre in 1989 (Sanches, 2021; Manes-Rossi, Brusca, Orelli, Lorson, and Haustein, 2021). The primary motivations behind its introduction were the desire to regain residents' trust, improve living conditions, and address social inequalities (Abuhasirah, Shahrou, 2021; Ostrowska, 2020).

Porto Alegre was the pioneering city at that time to experiment with what was then termed as the participatory budget (PB) (Marquetti, Schonewald and Campbell, 2012; Su, 2017). This local government unit opposed the government's policies and was considered a primary center for contesting state decisions while simultaneously serving as a power base for the working class (Gatto, Sadik-Zada, 2021).

The participatory budget can be regarded as a tool for rebuilding social trust, as exemplified by the situation that occurred in 2003 in the Italian town of Pieve Emmanuele (part of the Milan metropolitan area). When a new center-left party won the elections and aimed to regain residents' trust in the local authorities, they introduced the participatory budget (Grima *et al.*, 2019; Grima & Thalassinou, 2020).

Active engagement of residents in managing community affairs is considered a cornerstone of civil society. This enables the creation of effective systems to meet the population's needs, strengthens grassroots initiatives, and fosters trust in local authorities (Bartocci, Grossi, Mauro, Ebdon, 2023). Thus far, the form of social participation in city management known as the participatory budget has been well-received in many countries worldwide and quickly gained global significance, spreading across Europe, Africa, Asia, and North America.

The real boom in citizen budgets occurred in the 21st century when, in the first decade alone, 1500 cities adopted this solution in public management. Participatory budgets varied and continue to do so in many places concerning procedures, scope, and goals (Hartwich and Romanowski, 2021). This process is referred to in global literature as the 'diffusion of a democratic innovation.'

Perhaps the success of this tool lies in the widespread belief today that the 'citizen budget is one of the most successful participatory instruments of the past 30 years' (Mattei, Santolamazza, Grandis, 2022; Podgórska-Rykała, 2019). Over 3000 cities have implemented the citizen budget (Su, 2018).

An interesting example is Madrid, which developed the online platform 'Decide Madrid,' utilized by over 30 local governments (Aziz and Shah, 2020). The citizen budget is employed in numerous countries, and the budget's issues are the subject of research by many authors on the international stage.

For instance, research has been conducted in Slovakia (Mikuš, Brix, and Šmatlánek, 2021), in the Czech Republic (Chovaneček, 2022), in Romania (Boc and Lazăr, 2022), and in many other countries. Noteworthy studies on the citizen budget were presented, for instance, by Nemec and Špaček in their publication 'Unraveled Practices of Participatory Budgeting in European Democracies,' offering an analysis of budgets from various nations (Sintomer, Herzberg, Röcke, and Allegretti, 2012) conducted a comprehensive analysis of the functioning of participatory budgets in 20 cities worldwide, utilizing a single research tool.

However, they pointed out that there is no single practical formula for participatory budgeting. Therefore, defining this tool succinctly might overlook the diversity and specificity of all its processes. The aim of the article is to illustrate how the implementation of the PB is perceived by local activists in five Polish cities: Warsaw, Kraków, Łódź, Wrocław, and Poznań.

Additionally, the goal is to identify any potential issues in the functioning of citizen budgets and to pinpoint best practices, so that other countries can use it in their own national policy connected with implementation of PB.

2. Literature Review- Social Participation and Participatory Budget

Social participation entails the activity of an individual or a group of individuals in various domains of societal space, through which society influences decisions made by public authorities, particularly concerning local affairs (Pietraszko and Furmanek, 2012). Social participation serves as a means to prevent an excessive concentration of power, minimizing the negative social impacts of centralization, and involves joint decision-making, knowledge sharing, and citizen collaboration in public life (Kampka and Oross, 2023).

Furthermore, social participation can serve as a way to resolve contentious issues by providing an opportunity to listen to the opinions of all involved parties, alleviate local conflicts, and contribute to building compromise within the public authorities-citizens (Benade, Nath, Procaccia, and Shah, 2021). Participation can be discussed when the local community self-organizes and takes responsibility for managing and solving existing problems.

Primarily, it involves actions that entail assuming responsibility by identifying problems or issues to be resolved, followed by planning and effectively executing these actions (Szaja, Sadowska, and Włodarek, 2019). Participation is not only a form of civic engagement (the essence of democracy) but primarily contributes to

the development and improvement of the local environment's functioning (Boryczka, 2016; Popławski and Gawłowski, 2023).

Therefore, participation is a strategy through which ordinary citizens (without power) join decision-makers and have an impact on setting goals and actions, as well as on the allocation of public resources or program management (Fung and Wright, 2003; Dylik, 2023).

The PB can be defined as a decision-making process wherein residents decide on allocating a specific portion of funds from the general budget of a particular unit for a specific purpose (Lehtonen, 2022). The goal of the citizen budget is the direct involvement of residents in both the decision-making process regarding the selection of public tasks within the allocated budgetary funds and the assumption of some responsibility (Peter, Pierczyński, and Skowron, 2021).

It is worth emphasizing that citizen participation in the budget can take various forms (Quispe, Mújica, and Mayuri, 2022). It can be direct (occurs when informed citizens meet, discuss fiscal priorities, and submit their proposals to decision-makers) or indirect (when citizens elect members of parliament who then convene to deliberate on budget priorities) (Bräutigam, 2014).

3. Research Methodology

The subsequent research questions have been formulated to be in line with the aim of the study:

RQ1: How is the participatory budget perceived by activists in Polish cities? What is the most important aspect of implementing PB in cities?

To address specific questions, the authors conducted a comprehensive analysis of the PB concept using appropriately selected research tools. To attain the defined objectives and respond to the research questions, the following research methods were employed:

- an examination of national and international literature,
- a survey addressed to local activists.

The research methodology involved the selection of local governments with established PM in Poland, operational for several years, to assess the impact of legislative changes on the standards they have developed. These governments had to have implemented various projects of different scales, enabling an evaluation of the sensibility of their execution and the quality of the social participation procedures (Kempa, 2020).

Therefore, five major cities—Warsaw, Krakow, Lodz, Wroclaw, and Poznan were

chosen for direct research. Several reasons informed this selection. Firstly, these cities consistently receive a high volume of project submissions across diverse subject categories annually, allowing for the examination of dominant project types and the evolution of societal preferences.

Secondly, they typically serve as educational, scientific, and cultural hubs in their regions, attracting numerous active and creative individuals. They often represent the nucleus of social movements, including urban movements that shape the character and structure of cities. The presence and activities of such entities facilitate understanding the opinions and evaluations of the societal side participating in the entire process, given their typically formalized structure, allowing for contact and inclusion of their voices in the study.

Thirdly, citizen budgets have been operational in these major cities for longer periods than mandated by legal regulations, enabling an assessment of their implementation and the degree of social participation over a longer timeframe. Conducting research in these five cities allowed for a comparative evaluation of both the extent and scale of social participation and the performance of city authorities.

The research was conducted through in-depth individual interviews (IDI). A total of 22 activists participated in the interviews, comprising 5 from Warsaw, 3 from Krakow, 4 from Lodz, 4 from Wroclaw, and 6 from Poznan. The majority represented local associations and foundations working on behalf of and for the residents of these cities.

However, among the respondents, there were also "freelancers" who have been exceptionally active in shaping citizen budgets in recent years. The research were conducted following a script divided into six parts.

The first part comprised a standard set of questions to determine the respondent's age, gender, education, and place of residence.

The second part involved introductory questions about the respondent's experience and role in the citizen budget implementation process.

The third part of the interview focused on matters related to collaboration with officials and governmental bodies.

Subsequently, the fourth part centered on the nature of projects implemented thus far – their types and observations regarding their implementation.

In the fifth section of the interview, respondents were asked about the scope and forms of social participation in their cities, as well as their evaluation.

Finally, the sixth part of the interview focused on assessing national and local laws

regulating citizen budgets, including suggested changes and improvements.

4. Research Results and Discussion

All surveyed local activists had been involved in PB for at least two years, and some of them (such as in Poznan) had participated in the entire process since its first edition. The surveyed respondents held various roles: from idea contributors and advisors to project coordinators and leaders. While generally viewing the concept of budgets positively and recognizing their important functions - not only as tools for social consultation but also educational and integrative, they pointed out numerous problems and shortcomings on the part of city authorities.

The cooperation with officials was particularly poorly assessed. Although there was acknowledgment for promoting citizen budgets and conducting social consultations, everyone highlighted inadequate communication with project authors, unequal treatment, and the imposition of incomprehensible barriers (according to the activists' perception).

The negative opinions regarding municipal officials primarily surfaced concerning the pace of implementing selected projects, the reasons behind the non-implementation of some projects, and the maintenance of what resulted from the realization of residents' ideas. This was particularly evident in Warsaw, Krakow, and Lodz.

Activists, while acknowledging the complexity of certain projects, simultaneously stated that the timing of their implementation largely depended on which organizational unit the project landed in. They also attributed the non-implementation of some ideas chosen by residents to the reluctance or lack of knowledge among officials. According to their viewpoint, deliberate delays or inaccurate cost estimations by officials were the reasons behind this.

Additionally, there were negative comments about how the city takes care of past implementations. It was explicitly pointed out that the city neglects mainly small projects by not allocating sufficient funds for their maintenance. Some activists have attributed blame to officials for the implementation of certain misguided projects that were chosen through voting.

According to them, some of the projects submitted in previous years were proposed by councilors or even officials themselves, attributing to them the desire to carry out larger infrastructure projects or those related to municipal entities (such as schools or libraries), thereby using the participatory budget to fulfill the municipality's own tasks. Such opinions emerged in Warsaw and Łódź.

However, this isn't the view held by all activists. Some pointed out recurring ideas formulated annually by the same individuals specialized in project proposal writing.

During interviews, there was also the opinion that the questionable viability of some selected ideas is due to low interest from residents and, consequently, low voter turnout. Such opinions mainly concerned the budgets of Warsaw, Poznań, and Krakow.

According to activists, another issue is the recurring nature not only of the projects but also their location, which is most likely a result of a low level of satisfaction among residents regarding basic needs in recreation, culture, and infrastructure, particularly in specific, fixed areas. According to respondents, public interest in PB declined after the initial two editions and, despite a resurgence of interest in recent years, never reached the levels seen in 2014-2015.

Currently, the most active social groups, in their opinion, are activists, local leaders, and councilors, which, according to those participating in the survey, isn't beneficial for the entire process as it doesn't fully reflect actual societal preferences. Low turnout and weak engagement of residents, they believe, result from the dominance of certain social groups, but also from a disillusionment with the concept of participatory budgets.

They point to another cause; the general attitude of officials, which discourages people from participating due to excessively long project implementation, insufficient involvement, an opaque verification process, and influence over the final shape and scope of projects.

On the other hand, they view the media positively for providing accurate information about participatory budgets, although there were also increasing concerns about the politicization of the media. The surveyed activists perceive the provisions of the Act amending certain laws to increase citizens' participation in the selection, functioning, and oversight of certain public bodies in an ambiguous manner. They are pleased that the participatory budget is now mandatory in cities with county rights and believe it should be implemented in as many municipalities as possible.

On the opposite, they recognize that the law provides too little time for task implementation, has reduced flexibility in fund allocation, and the participatory budget itself should be a bottom-up initiative initiated by the residents themselves.

Krakow was characterized by the lowest level of social participation, evident in the relatively small number of projects and voters. The allocated amounts in the city's budget were also at a relatively low level until the statutory regulation compelled the city to allocate 0.5% of expenditures to the participatory budget.

Krakow had the lowest turnout among the surveyed cities (ranging from 5% to 7%, except for a slightly higher turnout in the first edition). According to activists, there is minimal interest among originators as well.

Activists in Lodz considered reducing the allocated amount to the statutory minimum a mistake and a significant step backward (in 2020, this amount was reduced to 24 million PLN from 50 million PLN the previous year). Particularly because in earlier editions, there were projects whose value equaled the entire pool of funds allocated to a specific district. They are convinced that increasing the funds again would lead to a rise in the number of submitted projects.

During interviews, they also highlighted problems with the verification of some projects. They believe that not all projects should be allowed for voting. Consequently, in the past, several ideas were not realized because proper administrative approvals were not obtained, and their implementation would have been inconsistent with the law or local strategies.

In Wroclaw, activists expressed positive opinions about the city's municipal office. Their favourable assessment of the officials' actions primarily concerned communication and collaboration, both in the stage of preparing and submitting proposals, their verification, and implementation. However, they had reservations about the amount of allocated funds.

According to them, there is an insufficient amount of funds, necessitating unnecessary division of projects into multiple editions (staging). Unlike in other cities, activists in Wroclaw did not criticize officials for failing to implement selected ideas voted upon. Only one of them mentioned a poorly verified project; the rest either didn't perceive this problem or attributed its sources to other areas, such as unresolved property laws or regulations concerning heritage protection. Positive opinions also extended to the city's maintenance of what resulted from implemented projects.

In all surveyed cities, projects related to urban greenery, cycling infrastructure, and education have been dominant for years. However, according to those interviewed, this isn't a flaw because their implementation contributes to improving the quality of life and better represents residents' preferences. Simultaneously, they are convinced that not all projects should be carried out. This primarily concerns tasks that the city should already undertake and those that divide society. As one activist put it, the intention behind some projects was to generate media buzz (this includes monuments, memorials, etc.).

Based on conducted research, suggestions for improving participatory budgets can be identified. These primarily include:

- broadening social participation, both in the process of verifying proposals and in the final selection (through additional panels and discussions).
- improving the promotion of budgets and intensifying the information campaign to attract a greater number of individuals

submitting their ideas as well as voters.

- Providing alternatives by officials for projects that cannot be implemented.

The research conducted indicates that the fewest problems related to the functioning of PB were observed in Wrocław. This is evidenced by both the opinions expressed during interviews and the turnout in successive editions of the program. Activists view this tool positively, having few remarks about its operation in the city and not desiring significant changes in the future. It was also the only city where activists did not raise any concerns about the municipal office's work.

Activists in Łódź also gave favorable ratings to participatory budgets. In this city, too, the turnout is relatively high, and there is considerable interest. However, unlike in Wrocław, more issues arose regarding cooperation with officials and existing procedures. Respondents pointed to deteriorating communication with officials, noticing increasing discouragement from city authorities regarding the idea of participatory budgets, reflected in the reduction of its amount in the 2021 edition.

They also identified a problem with the low standard of maintaining the results of previous investments. Nevertheless, the overall assessment of this program's functioning was high, and besides the indicated shortcomings, there was significant satisfaction with the effects of implementing the PB.

The participatory budget in Warsaw is perceived slightly less favorably. Activists pointed out a significantly higher number of problems compared to the two cities discussed earlier. The turnout in Warsaw was also relatively lower. The main problems associated with the functioning of this tool in the capital, as indicated by activists, were numerous administrative barriers, insufficient communication between the city's office and residents, and excessively long project implementation periods. They also highlighted a lack of concern for the effects of previous implementations.

During interviews, activists from Poznań and Kraków gave the weakest assessment of the functioning of participatory budgets. In the case of Poznań, this is somewhat surprising since it was the first major city in Poland to undertake the implementation of such budgets. However, these opinions are not unequivocally negative. In both cities, activists appreciate the work of officials but point to the overall city policy as the source of problems. Perhaps the lack of dedicated organizational units in the offices of these cities that would solely focus on social participation and participatory budgets is the reason behind this state of affairs.

However, on the other hand, the absence of such organizational solutions might be evidence that the authorities in these cities do not see the PB as a tool that should be particularly developed.

In 2019, the legislature attempted to regulate the issue of PB. However, according to a significant portion of activists, these attempts cannot be considered successful. They believe that the adopted legal provisions are overly detailed and rigid, which could ultimately lead to a decline in the popularity of participatory budgets and, more importantly, the loss of their greatest values—educational function and aggregation of preferences—in the local context.

Excessive regulation, in their view, stifles spontaneity and the ability to test new solutions. The statutory definition of participatory budgets as a 'tool for social consultation' is also considered erroneous by those interviewed. The legislature reduced this tool to a plebiscite—an obligatory vote on ideas submitted by residents but not necessarily consulted. A significant flaw in the adopted regulations is the necessity to implement investments within a single budget year, leading, according to officials and activists, to unnecessary staging and limitations.

The most crucial demand appearing in almost all conducted interviews was to increase the role and scope of consultations at every stage of creating budgets. These consultations would be crucial in interactions between officials and activists, as well as between both groups and residents. The most radical idea signalled by several interviewees is a complete departure from voting in favor of a series of meetings.

Within these meetings, investments for implementation would be selected through consultation and consensus. Such conclusions were drawn based on experiences gathered during past budget editions. Most individuals appreciate the progress made in civic awareness, thanks in part to the educational function of participatory budgets.

5. Conclusions, Proposals, Recommendations

The initial editions of participatory budgets sparked significant societal interest. Between 2012 and 2014, all surveyed cities experienced record-breaking voter turnout and a high number of submitted projects. This led to the emergence of a group of urban activists, whose origins can be attributed to these pioneering participatory budget editions. These initiatives opened up new avenues for cooperation between residents and municipal officials, serving as a significant manifestation of social participation.

In subsequent years, efforts were made to refine the processes of collecting proposals, social consultations, education, promotion, and the voting mechanism itself. There were experiments with the allocation of funds for projects of various scales and their distribution across different parts of the cities (Wetoszka, 2022). The goal was to develop rules that would meet residents' expectations while aligning with the strategic development plans of each city. This evolution resulted in stabilization through the replication of successful approaches from previous years.

However, during this phase of evolution, a decrease in both the number of voters and submitted projects was observed. According to surveyed activists, PB became a routine ritual. City offices incorporated them annually into their financial plans, and residents accepted them as a regular element. However, this doesn't indicate a lack of acceptance by them for participatory budgets.

On the contrary, they see them as a specific tool for social consultations. Specific because it's more about asking residents for their opinions without bilateral discussions resulting in binding projects for implementation. They also point out other significant functions: activation, information, education. Overall, all respondents express positive views on participatory budgets, although they are aware of their drawbacks and limitations.

According to them, these budgets better cater to societal needs than the traditional municipal budget. In the activists' opinion, the statutory regulation of participatory budget issues was appropriate, although most of them would prefer giving greater autonomy to local governments, also regarding the frequency of budget voting. The demand remains to increase social control over the verification process of proposals (e.g., through citizen panels).

Another recommendation is to improve communication with officials and enhance promotion to increase voter turnout. PB are also very important in supporting green infrastructure (Meyer, 2023)

In summary, the implementation of PB in the analyzed cities is perceived differently by local activists. Wrocław received the highest ratings, so this city can be considered an example of best practices in implementing participatory budgets from the perspective of local activists. The weakest opinions were given by activists from Krakow and Poznan.

It is worth noting that this article serves as an introduction to further research on the implementation of participatory budgets in Poland and how this process is perceived by other entities, such as authorities or residents themselves. This study can be also an inspiration for future similar research in other countries.

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