



## CHECK HOW THE PARTICIPATORY BUDGET WORKS IN YOUR COMMUNE

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## Abstract

An interest in the participatory budget procedure and in particular in the monitoring of its implementation in Poland is a response to a rapid increase in the number of communes in which this budget has been implemented, satisfaction of the need to show interest in what is new in the functioning of local communities, a necessity to expand the areas of social life subject to social control, as well as development of methods of that control. All these elements have contributed to the implementation of the „Check how the participatory budget works in your commune” project, the aim of which was to develop and test the methods and tools for an ongoing and ex post monitoring of the implementation of this procedure in local governments at the local level, as well as to implement the idea of social control and monitoring of various aspects of public life in the local community.

The goal of the project was to determine the scope of the monitoring, select the monitoring methods, prepare the monitoring tools, develop a piloting tool, correct the tool and finally conduct a proper research. The pilot phase of the project was carried out in autumn 2014 in 6 communes of the Silesian province. The actual test was performed in the period from March till the end of 2015 in 6 communes participating in the pilot phase and in 12 additional communes from 9 provinces.

The persons responsible for the initiation of the participatory budget procedure strongly believe that its purpose is to increase the participation of the residents in the management of the local government, aphoristically dubbed as the „recovery of the city.” However in practice - mainly due to the elements affecting the tasks to be implemented under this procedure: the financial envelope, type of the task, the maximum cost, implementation time - this remains an unfulfilled promise. The residents can generally indicate the tasks which meet only some of their needs, but which neither solve the problems of the community nor meet the needs of groups and social categories who do not actively participate in the public life.

The participatory budget is included in a catalogue of public consultation instruments, although it is often over-regulated to a degree making it similar to a local referendum, which somehow results from the demands of the residents themselves, who do not trust the rulers of their communities. This means that the participatory budget - just like many other activities in the area of social participation - is not supported by one of the basic principles- the mutual trust.

Under the project the monitoring covered all elements of the implementation of the participatory budget in selected communes: starting from the development and content of the rules, through all the stages (setting, verification, selection and performance of tasks, assessment of the effects of the applied procedure), and ending with the conditions for its implementation (actors, information policy, financial envelope, duration, connections with local politicians and the organization side, including the incurred financial costs, involved personnel and organizational effort).

On the basis of the conducted research one can draw the following conclusions and ask the following questions:

1. The participatory budget has become a mechanism of governance in Polish local governments for the first time involving in its preparation the residents to such an extent, as contrasted to other similar mechanisms, like village council funds, the local initiative, the resolution adoption initiative, which have not won so much popularity. One can even speak of a specific trend for participatory budgets in Poland. However, the initiation of this procedure by a given local government is actually unrelated to other activities strengthening the social participation, e.g. the amount of funds from the local government budget allotted for the financing of the activities of non-governmental organizations or the resolution adoption initiative.

2. The assumption is that participatory budget should be a social participation process, while in the Polish reality it is rather an administrative procedure - a variant of social consultations, in extreme cases, too close

to a local referendum. This results from the over-regulation in their rules, which often takes place at the request of the active residents. This is an expression of their widespread distrust of the local authorities.

3. The participatory budget procedures implemented in our country are to a large extent of competitive nature and they promote individual creativity at the expense of deliberation and community. This is determined by among others the manner of choosing the tasks to be implemented, often in the form of a one-time choice or facilitations in the process of filing the applications by individuals (for example, elimination of the requirements to win a particular level of support for a given project). Various forms of deliberation, determination of the priorities and tasks at the community level take place only occasionally. If this do happen, it is a spontaneous process taking place rather in cliques and coteries than communities. Quite often, this takes the form of the so-called „tactical“ submission of applications and voting, which in turn leads to the selection of the minimum number of tasks (one or two in a given area / district). This weakens the influence of the residents and seems to deny the principle of participation.

4. An important question asked at the stage of the process development and evaluation is that of the role of the local authorities in this procedure: should it be transparent, neutral, i.e. how deep the authorities and the administration can / should interfere in the content of the tasks proposed by the residents? Should they accept all their ideas? We deal here with a connection between the participatory budget and the city politicians, with whom, as is evident from the monitoring processes - are quite poorly connected. The need to consider by the applicants the provisions of the existing strategies, programs and plans of activities of the local government appears relatively seldom in the catalogue of conditions of admissibility of the proposed tasks. In the first place one records here the requirements arising from the general legal and system conditions (the legality and competence of the local government, the status of the land, cost limitations, including the maintenance of implemented investments, a possible performance of the task during the financial year).

5. Another important question concerns the involved (the middle class, the local activists, creative persons, internet users), and the not-involved (members of disadvantaged and dysfunctional groups) social categories in the participatory budget. The fact that this is one of the unsolved problems is indicated by the analysis of the performed task, which in most cases do not serve the purpose of resolving the problems of communities or other key categories and groups (e.g. related to the functioning of the education, health care, culture and transportation systems), but rather allow one to meet the needs of groups and individuals who are active socially. Besides, the role of the residents is too often limited to two stages only: submission of the projects and voting on the projects that have been positively verified. The residents are usually excluded from other, not less important stages, i.e. from the preparation of the rules, implementation of the tasks and assessment of the entire procedure.

6. In general, the next editions of participatory budgets are implemented without the evaluation of the previous experience or with the conduct of such evaluations on the „ad hoc“ basis only, without the application of relevant evaluation methods. Despite this, virtually in every case one has introduced changes in the implementation of the next edition - sometimes dictated by the result of the legal supervision by the provincial governor, and sometimes by the criticism from the participants and outside observers, although the level of social control of this phenomenon is relatively low.

7. There is a general lack of information about the costs of implementation of the participatory budget procedure: involvement of the personnel (officials, organizational units, councilors), incurred expenses (e.g. for promotional campaigns) or used resources (e.g. premises and municipal buildings lent for use).

8. Despite a kind of „trend“, interest and participation in the participatory budget is moderate. The number of voters turns out to be much lower than the already low turnout in the elections for the governing bodies of these authorities. Perhaps - leaving aside all the other reasons why the society does not participate in the public life - this is due to the fact that the residents are not interested in taking a decision about a playground or an outdoor gym, because they would rather decide about other, more important problems.

9. The declared goals, justifying the initiation of the participatory budget in the surveyed communes, especially those consisting in the strengthening of the civil society or public participation, are not implemented, mainly because of a lack of relevant instruments in those procedures. Thus, participatory budgets fulfill the promise of increasing the impact of the residents on the functioning of local government (the so-called „Recovery of the city“) only to a very limited extent.

10. The participatory budgets implemented in Polish local governments should meet the minimum standards of socialization, transparency and disclosure, be open and friendly to potential participants, provide space for deliberation, support the activity of the residents and be characterized by a long-term thinking. The budgets that do not meet those criteria, that are dysfunctional, that were developed out of fashion or that do not arouse much interest, should not be implemented. There are other ways to support the social activity of the residents which can be successfully applied to the governance in the local government.

11. The project results confirm the fact that it is possible to monitor - on a regular and ex post basis - implementation of the participatory budget in a given local government. It is really worth doing as in most cases the comments and recommendations made by us have been - to a greater or lesser extent - taken into account when developing the rules (regulations) for the subsequent editions. However, such monitoring requires commitment, regularity and organization of work. We hope that one can make use of the tool developed and tested during the project as well as the experience and results of several monitorings collected in reports made available on the project website.