



Poland: participatory budgeting and local democracy

Participation by citizens in public life is increasingly encouraged in Poland. One of the factors driving this trend is participatory budgeting (PB), described as a "mechanism or process in which ordinary people decide or help to decide how some or all public funds are allocated"¹.

The first participatory budgeting process was developed in Porto Alegre in Brazil at the end of the 1980s. Its success² was such that the practice began to be developed in Europe from 2001³, particularly in Poland: "Poland appears to show the strongest rate of PB at present"⁴, and it has been particularly prolific over the last two years. Although the phenomenon is a recent one, it is growing rapidly: in October 2013, the Ministry of Administration and Digitisation⁵ listed only 40 initiatives in the country; by February 2014, more than 80 cities, committees and provinces had established participatory budgeting processes⁶ (there are between 1,269 and 2,778 participatory budgets worldwide⁴).

An environment conducive to the propagation of participatory budgeting

The rapid growth in this practice can be attributed to the fact that "after decades of an authoritarian regime and planned economics, civic initiative and self-organisation by citizens are valued as alternatives to state intervention, an approach that is now being curtailed"⁷. Also, damaged public confidence in institutions all over Europe has given rise to the development of new forms of participation by citizens in public life⁸.

These internal factors combine with the role of international organisations. In fact, on the one hand, the World Bank facilitated the recognition of this new form of democracy by promoting it as a good governance practice⁹, on the other, international development agencies and NGOs are frequently behind projects of this type in Central and Eastern Europe¹⁰. A case in point is the pioneering city of Plock¹¹, for which the UNDP¹² played a key role in implementing subsidised funding. Created in 2003, and initially funded by the UNDP, the municipality along with PKN Orlen¹³ and Lévi-Strauss subsequently contributed to the fund. Around thirty social assistance, educational and cultural projects, selected by personalities in the local community and voluntary services, were established thanks to this funding¹⁴.

¹ <http://ww2.unhabitat.org/campaigns/governance/documents/FAQPP.pdf>

² <https://repository.unm.edu/bitstream/handle/1928/12264/Porto%20Alegre.pdf?sequence=1>

³ <http://www.revues.msh-paris.fr/vernumpub/09-Talpin.%202009.pdf>

⁴ http://www.in-loco.pt/upload_folder/edicoes/1279dd27-d1b1-40c9-ac77-c75f31f82ba2.pdf

⁵ <https://mac.gov.pl/budzet-partycypacyjny>

⁶ <http://www.institutobywatelski.pl/21593/komentarze/budzet-partycypacyjny-w-polsce-wielka-ewaluacja>

⁷ "Entre dynamiques locales et transferts de modèle : un "partenariat intersectoriel à Plock"", Dorota Dakowska, *La démocratie participative inachevée*, Éditions Yves Michel, 2010.

⁸ http://www.ef.umb.sk/dsr_2013/pdf/Markowska-Bzducha.pdf

⁹ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/PSGLP/Resources/ParticipatoryBudgeting.pdf>

¹⁰ "Participatory Budgeting in Central and Eastern Europe", Alta Fölscher in Anwar Shah, *Participatory Budgeting*, World Bank, March 2007.

¹¹ <http://mojemiesto.plock.eu/>

¹² United Nations Development Programme.

¹³ Polski Koncern Naftowy Orlen: an oil and chemical industrial complex that dates from the communist period.

¹⁴ https://utopia.sk/liferay/documents/2867538/2934663/Participatory+Budget_Ewa+M.B..ppt/c65ec9d3-fe86-491c-af5f-3c7b90cff2f2

From Plock to Warsaw via Sopot: what kind of participative budgeting practices are used?

The number and size of cities adopting this practice vary greatly: big cities such as Poznań (552,393 inhabitants), major medium-sized cities such as Radom (220,062 inhabitants) and Plock (124,048 inhabitants), small cities like Sopot (38,584 inhabitants), and even smaller cities like Karpacz (5,026 inhabitants)¹⁴.

The Sopot example is frequently mentioned because it draws on a methodology that is very close to the definition and fundamental criteria of participatory budgeting¹⁴. It came about through a project that was initially backed by the leaders of a public group, the Sopot development initiative¹⁵, and eventually won the trust of the local authorities and succeeded in getting off the ground. In 2012, a participatory budgeting process was established as follows¹⁶:

- project submission phase: all Sopot inhabitants (with the right to vote in local elections) and all non-governmental organisations with their head office or a public assignment in Sopot may participate;
- project verification phase: a provisional city council committee for participatory budgets verifies the financial and legal feasibility of projects, votes on them (simple majority) and publishes them on the internet;
- project selection phase: the public votes on the projects (*in situ* or online).

Project amounts must reach at least 1% of the total budget¹⁴. A variety of projects, mainly infrastructure-related, have been established, such as the creation of bicycle paths, implementation of a waste recycling system, development of green spaces, and financial support for small businesses¹⁷. Most of the country's participatory budgeting takes inspiration from Sopot and uses similar practices⁶.

Participative democracy is growing rapidly but needs to be consolidated

There are many advantages to participatory budgeting, such as greater transparency, more efficient management, and less corruption because citizens get to have a say in how public funds are used¹⁸. Even if, as Yves Sintomer, French sociologist and political analyst, tells us "social justice is rarely one of the goals sought in Europe, but rather greater government efficiency, more modernised representative democracy and encouragement of citizens to participate in public life¹⁹". Citizen participation also helps to improve the general efficiency of urban policy¹⁷. Generally speaking, participatory budgeting favours citizen awareness and the dissemination of information to users¹⁷. Sometimes a joint-decision making process is established³. Ultimately, the public's trust in the government is reinforced and citizens are given the opportunity to take ownership of public policies⁵.

There are also limits to this practice which need to be highlighted. Low participation by citizens due to a general mood that nothing will change is regrettable in certain cases (in Sopot, first-stage citizen meetings attract attendance of around a dozen participants)¹⁷. Broad participation must be ensured to avoid discussions being hijacked by small activist groups⁸. Certain researchers have stressed that one of the conditions for success is the level of autonomy and knowledge of public affairs by the citizens involved⁸. On the other hand, there are political leaders who are not yet ready to give up some of their power⁵. What's more, the amounts concerned are still very low²⁰: between 0.2% and 1.3% of budget receipts¹⁴.

Over and above this aspect, many agree that it is difficult to implement participatory budgeting. In the first place, the guidelines for implementation on the Ministry of Administration and Digitisation's⁵ website point this out from the beginning. Despite very promising statistics in Sopot²¹, there has been no radical transformation of power among players, or administrative reform in the proper sense¹⁷. To avoid disappointment for citizens participating in this new form of democracy, the mechanism must be consolidated⁸. Reflection is underway on the adoption of a law to provide a better framework for participatory budgeting²².

Virginie Ma-Dupont

¹⁵ Sopocka Inicjatywa Rozwojowa.

¹⁶ Resolution of the Sopot city council dated 11 May 2012.

¹⁷ "Participatory Budgeting Polish-style. What kind of policy practice has travelled to Sopot, Poland?" W. Kębliński, M. Van Crielingen, in *Hope for Democracy. 25 Years of Participatory Budgeting Worldwide*, p. 369-377, April 2014.

¹⁸ <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTRANETSOCIALDEVELOPMENT/Resources/Zamboni.pdf>

¹⁹ Yves Sintomer, *La Gazette des communes*, 3 October 2014.

²⁰ http://m.obserwatorfinansowy.pl/tematyka/in-english/participatory-budgeting-or-pocket-money-for-voters/?wmp_switcher=mobile
²¹ Between 2011 and 2013, 67 municipal proposals and 140 district proposals were reviewed by the committee, which selected 14 and 61 respectively.

²² <http://www.instytybywatelski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2014/07/budzet-partycypacyjny-web.pdf>