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# CHALLENGES OF SOCIAL PARTICIPATION MANAGEMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC – THE CASE OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETS IN BIG CITIES IN THE ŁÓDZKIE REGION

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**Abstract:** COVID-19 has changed both society and the economy. Therefore, it has significantly influenced local communities and their ability to fulfill public needs. Social interactions have been essentially limited, and the revenues of local communities' budgets substantially reduced. The paper refers to the new and not yet thoroughly studied process of social participation during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to examine whether and how the pandemic affected the process of social participation which is considered one of the most significant ways of adjusting public services to the needs of the citizens. Participatory methods of public management are also consistent with the new paradigm of public management, the public value concept. The author studied participatory budgets in cities in the Łódzkie region. The research consisted in desk research and online questionnaires, and revealed that the participatory activities were limited in their scope, and that there were obstacles which hindered their management.

**Keywords:** public management, public value management, social participation, participatory budgets.

## 1. Introduction

Social participation is an indispensable element of modern developed democratic societies. Cities and communes have at their disposal many instruments of participatory management, thanks to which they are able to better meet the needs of the inhabitants, create bonds between the authorities and citizens, increase the level of citizens' responsibility for public affairs, and strengthen the sense of local identity. This approach is also worthwhile in light of the concept of public value, which is now a very attractive paradigm of public management. One of the participatory methods is the civic budget, the implementation of which, if certain requirements are met, allows to contribute to the creation of public value at local level. The period 2020-2021 was special in every way. The pandemic has changed the way people function around the world and also how public issues are dealt with at local level. It is predicted that humanity will face more pandemics in the future. Hence, it is important to recognise the participatory activities carried out during this period, in order to be able to better adapt public management in this aspect to the changing conditions over the coming years.

## 2. Participatory budgets in public value creation

Participatory management is in line with the concept of public value, which is gaining in popularity. This value is generated when members of society, who are at the same time those who incur expenditures on the activities of the public sector, and thus (by analogy to the enterprise sector) are its "stakeholders", achieve the state of meeting the collective needs expressed through the activities of a given authority when accepting its actions. This concept was introduced in 1995 by Moore (1995). In accordance with the concept of public value, the public authority must have a full social mandate not only with regard to the directions of undertaken activities, but also the methods and tools used. In this context, participatory methods appear to be extremely promising.

Participatory management is based on systematic interactions between the local administration and members of society, which is possible through appropriate participatory and consultation procedures; its specific features include the involvement of all entities for the city, openness and transparency of decisions made, no discrimination in access to public service, responsibility and striving for sustainable development (Hausner, 2008), thus increasing the effectiveness of government actions. In this concept, public administration institutions constitute an element of civil society in which individual interest groups present different, often contradictory goals. One can talk about the beginnings of social participation in Poland in connection with the establishment (or rather reactivation) of local government at local/commune level. In 1990, self-government in communes was

reactivated, and in 1999, 'powiat'(county) and voivodeship self-government was established.

In recent years the participatory (civic) budget has become a popular tool of social participation in Polish territorial units. This instrument gives residents the opportunity to co-decide on the allocation of funds. Financial resources may be allocated to tasks included in the catalogue of the statutory tasks of a given territorial unit.

The history of participatory budgets goes back to the 1980s. Such a budget was first implemented in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and by 2010 it was adopted in some 510 South American cities. It then became popular in Europe (about 200 cities), Africa, Asia and North America. This phenomenon has therefore gained a global character (Ganuza and Baiocchi, 2012). In Poland the participatory budget was introduced for the first time in 2003-2005 in Płock, then in 2011 in Sopot, where it was called the "civic budget". From then on, other Polish cities followed the example of Sopot (Kębłowski, 2013, p. 6).

The necessary elements of participatory budgets creating public value are (Wisniewska, 2018):

- 1) compliance of a given case with the definition of the citizens' budget,
- 2) fulfillment of the condition of generating public value as the main goal,
- 3) meeting the criterion of the collective legitimisation of the process,
- 4) utility from the perspective of an individual inhabitant,
- 5) ensuring organisational capacity based on local partnerships.

As regards the first issue, the necessary elements of a given budget in this regard are:

- 1) public discussion among residents as an indispensable component of the participatory budgeting process,
- 2) clearly defined financial resources, both in relation to individual submitted projects, for groups of projects in the system of districts or for districts, and generally, for all the funds allocated to the participatory budget,
- 3) binding nature. Meeting the formal requirements and winning at the voting stage should ensure the implementation of the notified project,
- 4) cyclicity. The tool, which is a participatory budget, should be implemented annually to ensure the real participation of residents in making public decisions.

The next step should be to verify whether a given civic budget provides the ability to generate public value. The following matters should be assessed:

1. Results (long-term, not only quickly measurable effects) that are achieved as a result of the implementation of projects under the civic budget. A valuable perspective is to assess whether the implemented projects contribute to the creation of public positive externalities or the elimination of negative externalities. A given budget should also deal with the development priorities of a given territorial unit and go beyond the design logic.

2. To ensure the availability of funds for each inhabitant, it is necessary to distinguish territorial scales as well as the division into 'hard' and 'soft' projects. This will allow for the implementation of a wider range of initiatives, with area availability.

3. It is necessary to ensure the proper quality of the implemented projects, their durability and economic efficiency.

4. It is important to ensure that at various stages, the process is free from pressure from stronger or privileged social groups.

The next stage of the assessment should concern the collective legitimacy of the process, namely:

1. The budget should be accompanied by the participatory establishment of rules, implementation and assessment of the budget, including the participation of residents in the bodies responsible for the given edition of the participatory budget.

2. Projects should be endorsed by a specific group of stakeholders at the notification stage.

3. There should be the possibility of the collective preparation of ideas (such as "marathons of writing applications"), including collective innovation, e.g. in the form of so-called Living Labs.

In the next stage, the given budget should be verified from the point of view of individual utility, i.e. from at least two points of view:

1) availability of the budget process itself for each resident in each stage, so that every resident, regardless of mobility, technological or time constraints, can take part in it;

2) considering the flexibility of the proposed solution in the formal requirements for projects, its personalisation in various dimensions.

Finally, the given budget should meet the requirement of ensuring operational capacity based on local partnerships:

1. Various stakeholder groups should be involved in the process of developing, implementing and assessing the budget.

2. With regard to the implementation of projects, the main priority is to involve local entities, including third-sector organisations, and to conclude public-private partnerships. If it is necessary to implement public procurement, it is important to use Polish law in a way that paves the way for local contractors.

The fulfillment of the above-mentioned requirements by the implemented civic budgets creates a fair possibility that these initiatives will constitute a path for generating public value in a sustainable manner.

At first, Polish legal provisions did not directly regulate the creation and operation of the civic budget. Each territorial unit could adopt its own rules specifying the methods of submitting projects to the budget and the methods of their consultation and selection.

In 2018 the legal situation changed. From that moment, implementing a given type of social consultation was related to a clear indication of the obligatory carrying out

of this form of social consultation in a given local government unit (Article 5a of the Act of March 8, 1990 on the Municipal Government). With regard to the legislature, the legal nature of conducting a participatory budget in a given territorial unit now depends on the legal status of this unit. Cities with county (poviat) rights are obliged to implement a participatory budget to the amount of at least 0.5% of the expenses resulting from the last submitted report on budget execution. The communes which are not classified as such cities can carry out the social consultations with their citizens under their own rules, specifying the methods of submitting projects to the budget and the methods of their consultation and selection. The change in legislature imposed therefore on the bigger municipalities (cities with poviat rights) the obligation to introduce a participatory budget each year. These legal regulations, combined with new perspective the pandemic, transformed social participation into a duty, instead of being a voluntary, bottom-up process.

### 3. Participatory budgets in the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic, also known as the coronavirus pandemic, is an ongoing global pandemic of COVID-19 disease. The disease is caused by acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China. The World Health Organization declared a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 30 January 2020, and later a state of pandemic on 11 March 2020. As of 7 July 2021, more than 184 million cases were confirmed, with more than 3.99 million deaths attributed to COVID-19, making it one of the deadliest pandemics in history (Wikipedia).

To combat and limit the spread of the disease, special restrictions had to be implemented on social activity. In Poland, the restrictions began on 8 March 2020 by recommending the cancellation of mass events, and then affected many spheres of Polish social life and of economic activity. The restrictions were adjusted to the state of the epidemic and continue to this day. In response to the economic crisis, governments of many countries introduced economic recovery programmes. In Poland this was implemented through the Act of 2 March 2020 on special solutions related to preventing, counteracting and combating COVID-19, other infectious diseases, and crisis situations caused by them (Act of 2 March). The social and economic losses caused by the pandemic are significant and indisputable. Restrictions in movement and interpersonal contacts also influenced the possibilities of conducting social activity both by local governments and other organisations.

Scientists around the world identified and explored many aspects of social activities and ways the pandemic has influenced this sphere of life. It demonstrated that the possibilities of reaction of governments depended on many factors, such as decentralisation, financial condition, administrative capacity, regulatory framework and path dependency (Płaček, Špaček, and Ochrana, 2021).

The financial condition of local governments has deteriorated significantly because of COVID-19. As studies reveal, not only in Poland, but also in other countries, local governments despite decentralisation are still dependent on state funding or in some other ways dependent on the fiscal system introduced centrally. “The dependence of local self-government on incomes from the state brings financial instability to municipalities, which is significantly manifested especially in times of economic crises, which includes the current COVID-19 pandemic. In such periods, local self-governments react extremely sensitively to the deteriorating development of the economy at state level” (Papcunová, Hornyák, and Gregáňová, 2020).

According to Berenda (2020), the difficult situation in which local government units in Poland are currently facing is due to three basic problems related to the coronavirus epidemic: I) a severe decline in income; II) strong pressure and expectations from entrepreneurs regarding the support and provision of effective solutions minimising the effects of the coronavirus for the business sector, III) a sharp increase in spending on activities related to the fight against the epidemic (including in the area of healthcare, social assistance, disinfection of places of public use and public transport).

Although the pandemic is not over yet, one can already speak of its destructive impact on the financial situation of all local government units. In addition, the situation is systematically worsening, which forces local government units to seek savings and even abandon many previously planned investments (Klimek, 2020). Some research shows that the lockdowns were associated with a 10%-15% drop in local economic activity – twice the reduction in local economic activity suffered by municipalities not under lockdown (Asahi, Undurraga, Valdés, and Wagner, 2021). The effects are seen worldwide, some larger municipalities “have reported up to a sevenfold decrease in revenues, and in the others – between 6% and 35% for this period” (Karatova, 2020).

In such unstable conditions, many local governments had to analyse the possibility of suspending voluntary actions (including the voluntary participatory budget) in order to secure funds for unforeseen circumstances (Baranowski, 2020). The issues of financing, counteracting the effects of the pandemic became a source of conflict between the central and local government administration, the more so as, according to many local government officials the solutions undertaken by the government before the pandemic resulted in financial tensions in cities and communes (Bojarowicz, 2021). “It was found that as a result of this situation some local government units may have problems with financing current expenses and maintaining already started investments” (Baranowski, 2020). Unfortunately, despite attempts undertaken during the works of the Committee on National Economy and Innovation and the Committee on Budget and Public Finance of the Senate of the Republic of Poland to change the regulation into allowing the suspension of the civic budget by the cities with powiat rights, the regulations were not changed and these units had to implement the entire participatory budget procedure. There were only

changes made with regard to smaller municipalities which allowed them to suspend the procedure due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Baranowski, 2020). Even before the pandemic, experts stated that the obligation to implement participatory budgeting should depend on the financial condition of the unit, and not on the legal regulations (Ostrowska, 2020; Sobol and Rzeńca, 2019).

The crisis caused by the pandemic can, however, be seen as a situation that requires the involvement of society in deciding public affairs all the more. A crisis situation, i.e. a pandemic, causes a number of social changes, changes in values, strategic goals, needs, and expectations (Ćwiklicki and Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2020), and it should be assumed that consulting local communities about the directions of activities undertaken by local governments is needed. A crisis situation consisting, for example, in limiting production and services, reducing the market demand for certain products and services, and difficulties in the repayment of loans, all lead to changes in the existing functional relations (Zioło, 2013); there are also changes in the hierarchy of importance of strategic goals (Romanowska, 2016). At the same time, the need to cope with the new conditions makes entrepreneurs initiate innovative behaviour (Kaufman, Avgar, and Mirsky, 2007, 2015). The changes also concern social values, which may result in changes in social and intergenerational solidarity (Augustyniak et al., 2020; Auleytner and Grewiński, 2020). The importance of social capital is manifested in the ability to self-organize, and create formal or informal groups in order to achieve the adopted goals with a high level of direct involvement (Radziewicz-Winnicki, 2009, p. 19) in crisis situations, reducing the risk of undesirable consequences, corruption, wrong decisions, damage and even catastrophes themselves, caused by unfavourable and unpredictable circumstances (Stawasz and Sikora-Fernandez, 2020). Moreover, evidence suggests that outbreaks such as the COVID-19 pandemic are better handled in places where social capital is high (Cary Wu, 2020) and “an increase in social capital is correlated with slower COVID-19 infection spread and more adherence to social distancing protocols” (Varshney and Socher, 2020). To sum up, social participation related with social capital can counteract the effects of virus (Khongsai and Anal, 2021; Zareipour and Kalejahi, 2020).

Social participation can therefore be perceived as a remedy for crisis and an effective instrument of addressing changing needs of local citizens. Nonetheless, such a way of making decisions has to be modified with regard to the changed circumstances. Social participation can be negatively affected by the pandemic, depending on the citizens mental health status (Schützwohl and Mergel, 2020).

To adapt to the new constraints related with the restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the information campaign has to be increased, widened and include ICT technologies (Baranowski, 2020). Another issue arises when older people are taken into consideration as those who are especially vulnerable (Kimura, Ojima, Ide et al., 2020). Therefore, regarding this issue, the budgets should be modified at least in three perspectives. First, it would be advisable to create a special part of the

participatory budget addressed directly to older people. Second, older people are not always keen on ICT technologies. Third, older people have more restrictions placed on them.

Another vulnerable group are children and young people. Children and their parents had to adjust to new normality. For children, this means an enormous effort to stay interested and concentrated on school duties, and for their caregivers to keep children “occupied, feeling safe, and attempting to keep up with schoolwork as best as possible” (NASP). These difficulties need support, as parents have their own duties and often work “home office” and do not always have the time or the possibility to control their children, nor provide them with enough attention which normally would come from schoolteachers and cultural/sport institution staff. The pandemic has also resulted in growing mental health problems in this group (NASP). According to UNICEF, “The coronavirus disease (COVID-19) brings with it feelings like anxiety, stress and uncertainty – and they are felt especially strongly by children of all ages.”

Rising concerns should result in strategies oriented to help these vulnerable groups, and should be included in participatory budgeting. Creating special sections of participatory budgets for children would be necessary and what is more, social inclusion strategies in these new circumstances should be focused on technology-based solutions (Ammar et al., 2020). The implementation of digital voting methods, which is inevitable and necessary (Noury, François, Gergaud, and Garel, 2021), must nevertheless take into consideration the limitations of groups potentially digitally excluded (older people). Generally speaking, methods of effective social communication are needed in the face of a possible pandemic outbreak both on a local, regional and central level, as well as between these levels (Plaček et al., 2021). Older people and children are not the only groups which should be especially included in participatory budgets in the face of pandemic. “Increasing concerns are arising about the economic consequences of lockdown and how it can disproportionately affect the weaker and the poorer” (Bonaccorsi et al., 2020). This means that within every commune, an analysis should be conducted to reveal the areas, structure and scale of the groups whose needs are affected, and implement proper activities in participatory budgeting.

## **4. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on participatory budgets in cities in the Łódzkie region**

### **4.1. Research method**

The research was conducted in June 2021 with a digital questionnaire directed to cities with over five thousand citizens in the Łódzkie region. The choice of research sample was made due to the following reasons:



1. The author has already conducted research in the region and this study can bring an added value to the existing findings.

2. It was not the intention of the study to analyse all the cities, but only those with experience in participatory budgeting.

3. It was not the intention of the study to generalise about the whole population of the cities, but to find some important threads.

4. The intention was to focus on relatively heterogenous sample (smaller cities stand out significantly in terms of development conditions).

5. The questionnaire study was preceded with desk research to identify cities which implemented participatory budgets for 2020, 2021 and 2022.

6. In the research, altogether 17 cities took part, among which three had all editions planned, six conducted at least two editions during 2020-2022, and seven cities which conducted only the edition for 2020.

The questionnaire was directed to public authority managers responsible for participatory budgeting in each city. The aim of the research was:

1. To identify the reasons underlying the abandonment of participatory budgets.

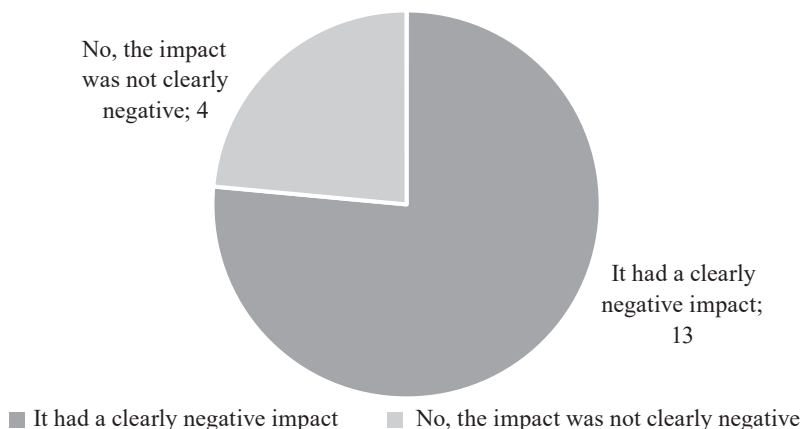
2. To identify the obstacles which occurred when implementing the editions which had been planned.

3. To verify whether the cities plan participatory budgets in the future.

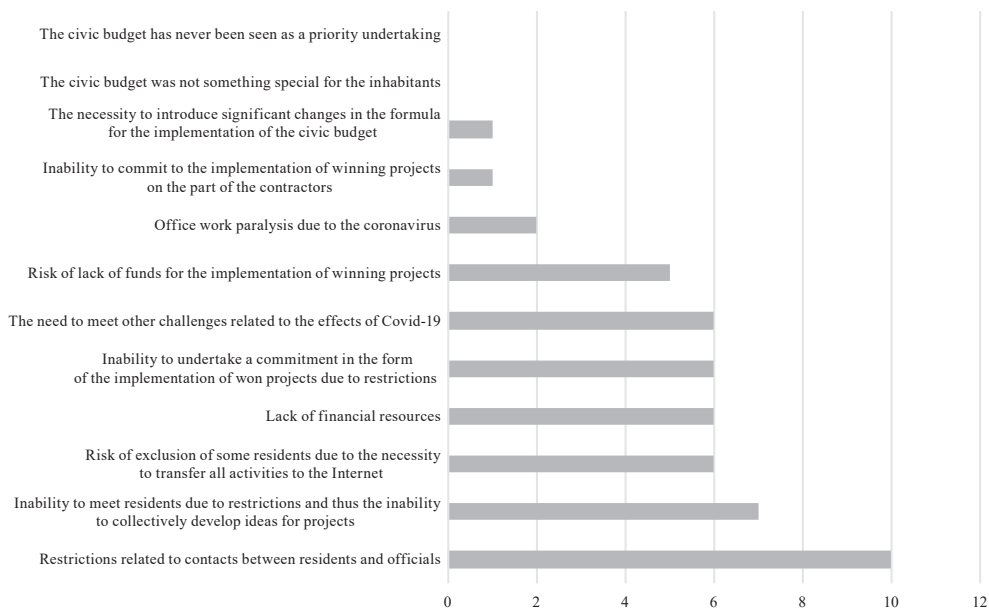
4. To verify whether the cities plan to include pandemic issues in the participatory budgets in the future.

#### **4.2. Research findings**

The research revealed that the most important factor which affected the abandonment of participatory budgeting were the restrictions between city officials and citizens. The inability to meet residents due to the restrictions, and thus not being able to collectively develop ideas for projects was the second important factor. In addition, the risk of exclusion of some residents due to the necessity to transfer all activities to the Internet, the lack of financial resources and inability to undertake a commitment in the form of the implementation of successful projects due to the restrictions, were contributory issues influencing the decision of withdrawing from participatory budgets, as well as the need to meet other challenges related to the effects of Covid-19. Another quite important issue was the risk of the lack of funds for the implementation of winning projects. The latter factor turned out not to be the most important. Furthermore, it was not obvious for all the studied cities that the pandemic had a clear negative impact (13 cities stated that it was clearly negative, but for 4 it was not obvious).



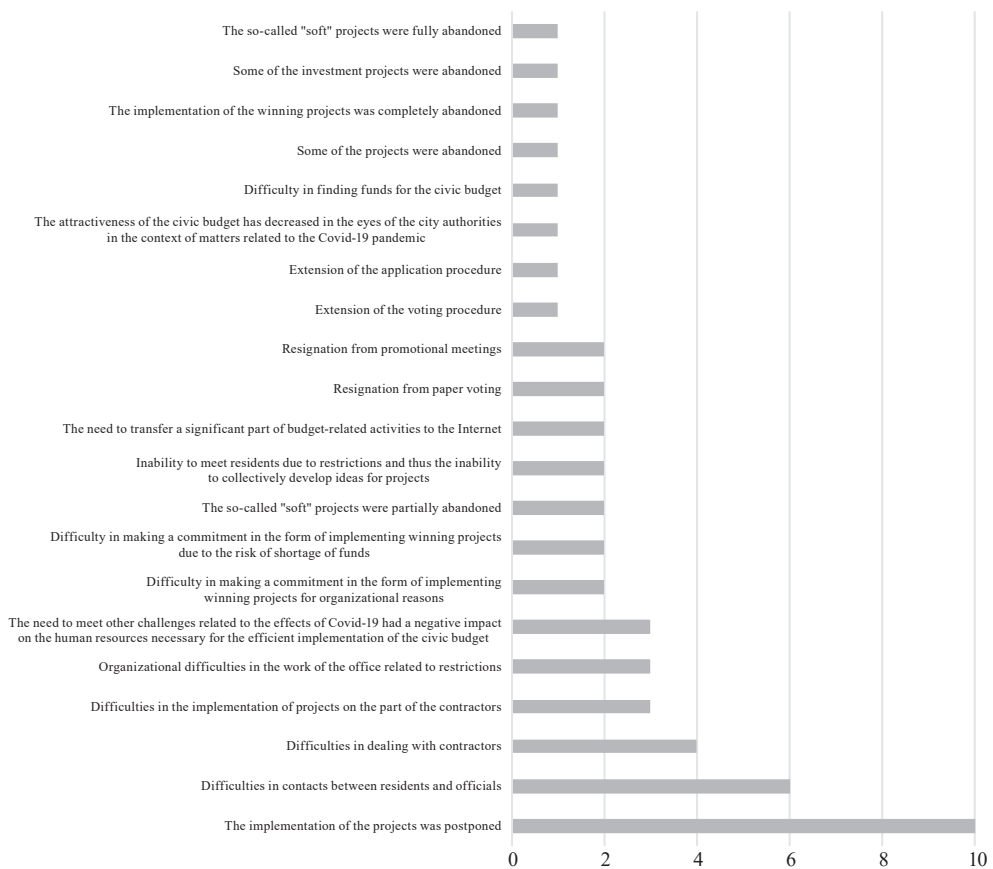
**Fig. 1.** The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on municipal finances. Number of answers  
Source: own research.



**Fig. 2.** Aspects which caused the withdrawing from the implementation of the civic budget for editions during COVID-19. Number of answers  
Source: own research.

When discussing the problems and actions faced during the implementations of participatory budgeting, the most important consequence was the necessity of postponing the realisation of some projects. Another important obstacle resulted

from the restrictions related to contacts between officials and residents, which proved the assumptions of the cities which abandoned the implementation to be true. Among other problems, the respondents pointed difficulties in dealing with contractors, difficulties in the implementation of projects on the part of the contractors, organisational difficulties in the work of the office related to restrictions and the need to meet other challenges related to the effects of Covid-19 (having a negative impact on the human resources necessary for the efficient implementation of the participatory budget).

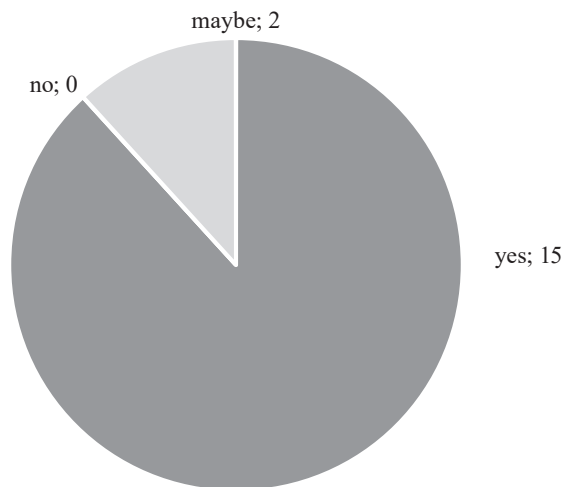


**Fig. 3.** The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the participatory budget in the editions that are being carried out. Number of answers

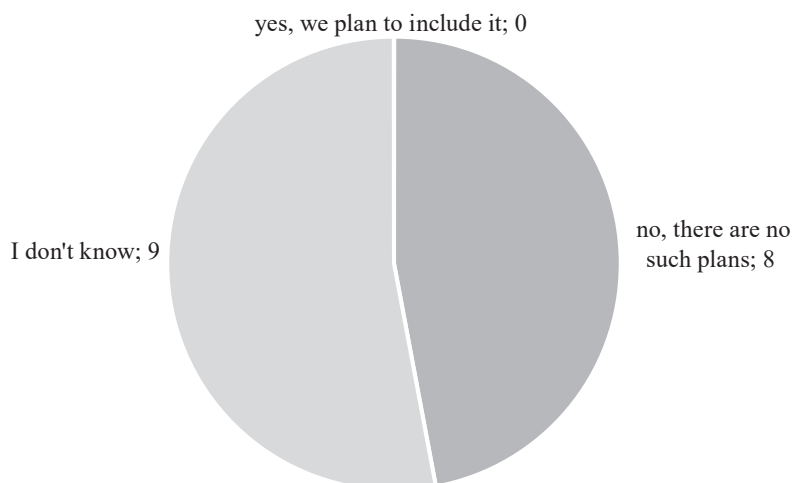
Source: own research.

Despite the problems which occurred, the vast majority of the studied cities (15) plan to conduct participatory budgets in the future. Nevertheless, none of them plans to include directly pandemic issues in the budgets in the form of separate pool

of funds, 8 declare directly that there are no such plans, 9 have not decided yet. An overall assessment of social participation processes is not yet possible. While nine cities declare that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative and a rather negative impact on social participation, 8 municipalities do not consider pandemic to have a clearly negative impact on it.

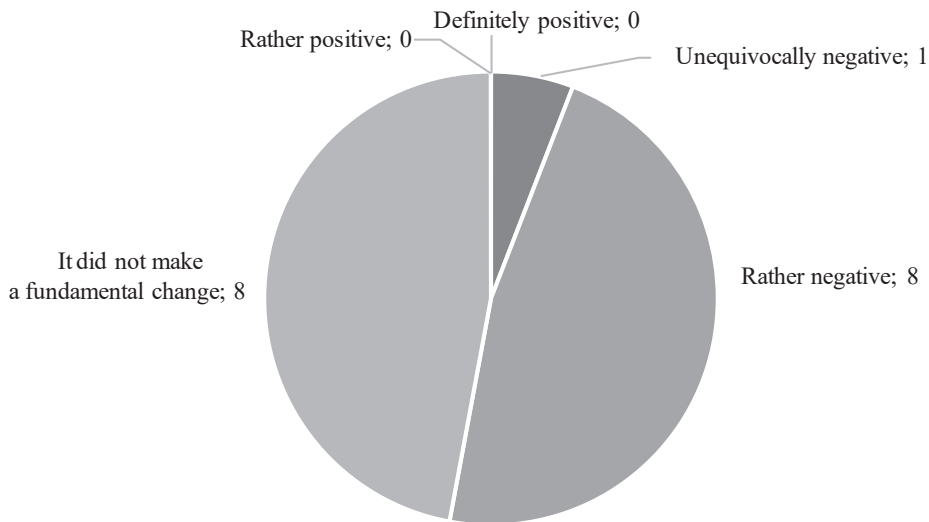


**Fig. 4.** The plans of implementation of the participatory budget in the coming years. Number of answers  
Source: own research.



**Fig. 5.** The plans to include in future participatory budgets a separate pool of funds for projects related to possible future pandemics. Number of answers

Source: own research.



**Fig. 6.** The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social participation in the studied municipalities. Number of answers

Source: own research.

#### 4.3. Discussion and limitations of the research

Public participation processes have definitely suffered as a result of the pandemic. As indicated by other authors (Berenda, 2020; Bojarowicz, 2021; Karatova, 2020; Papcunová, Hornyák, and Gregáňová, 2020), the finances of the analysed cities were reduced, which resulted in the abandonment of some projects. As also indicated in the literature, in times of crisis, the efforts of local self-governments undergo a reevaluation (Ćwiklicki and Sienkiewicz-Małyjurek, 2020; Romanowska, 2016), and this was the case during the pandemic with regard to participatory budgets. Social capital was used rather for the purposes of narrower relations – in the form of ensuring security in the networks of the closest groups of people, rather than in public matters. The availability of ICT has lost ground with the risk of excluding some members of the community.

Despite some findings, this article has significant weaknesses and limitations. First, the research was conducted on a small sample basis and cannot be generalised. In the research, certain issues were omitted or not examined deeply enough, in the author's opinion. It is important to answer the question to what extent the lack of normal, unhindered work of officials contributed to the fact that in some cases alternative forms of conducting the participatory budgeting process were not sought. Additionally, the article does not deal with psychological issues, such as the fear that can paralyse people at work and make it impossible to face normal life. The topic of caring for children staying at home as a factor hindering work and social activity

outside was not discussed. Particular interest should be paid to the risk of social exclusion and the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. An interesting topic may be to check to what extent the experience of the Covid-19 pandemic will allow to improve the processes of future budgets in terms of making the process more valuable, even in the conditions of possible subsequent pandemics. The pandemic is a harsh experience, but lessons can be learned from it. The question is whether local governments will manage to do this in the face of a new economic crisis, exacerbated by the political situation at the borders of Poland and in the world at large.

## 5. Conclusion

It is clear that despite the declarations of some respondents that the pandemic did not have a clear negative impact on participatory processes, 12 of the 17 studied municipalities have withdrawn from one of three editions of participatory budgets during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of the units feared the restrictions of contacts between people. Such meetings and cooperative arrangements are the core of social participation. The city officials were also aware of other risks which led them to withdraw from conducting participatory budgeting. Some predictions turned out to be true. The experience also revealed other difficulties, and not all of them were on the side of the public administration, while some obstacles were also encountered on the side of contractors. These obstacles fortunately did not affect the future activities in participatory budgeting. What seems to be surprising is the fact that the local governments do not perceive participatory budgeting as a tool to prevent future (probably inevitable) pandemics. As it is clear that the history may repeat itself, it would be advisable to consider undertaking supplementary activities to prevent and combat the future pandemics and their consequences, especially for the most vulnerable groups.

A more detailed investigation has to be made to fully understand the individual factors limiting the participatory processes, both on the side of the public administration and the external entities. Special interest should be paid to the risk of social exclusion and the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. More detailed research should also be undertaken to fully analyse the elements of “publicly valuable” participatory budgets to more efficiently manage the processes in the future. This was not taken into consideration in this study, but remains an essential issue, therefore future research in this area should be conducted.

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## WYZWANIA WOBEC ZARZĄDZANIA PARTYCYPACJĄ SPOŁECZNĄ – PRZYPADK BUDŻETÓW OBYWATELSKICH W MIASTACH REGIONU ŁÓDZKIEGO

**Streszczenie:** COVID-19 zmienił zarówno społeczeństwo, jak i gospodarkę. W ten sposób w istotny sposób wpłynął na społeczności lokalne i zdolność władz lokalnych do zaspokajania potrzeb publicznych. Interakcje społeczne zostały zasadniczo ograniczone, a dochody budżetów społeczności lokalnych znacznie zmniejszone. Artykuł dotyczy obszaru dotąd niewystarczająco zbadanego – wpływu pandemii COVID-19 na procesy partycypacji społecznej. Jego celem jest zbadanie, czy i w jaki sposób pandemia wpłynęła na proces partycypacji społecznej, który uważany jest za jeden z najważniejszych sposobów dostosowania usług publicznych do potrzeb obywateli. Partycypacyjne metody zarządzania publicznego są również zgodne z nowym paradygmatem zarządzania publicznego – koncepcją wartości publicznej. Na potrzeby artykułu autorka zbadła budżety obywatelskie w miastach województwa łódzkiego. Badanie wykonano metodą *desk research* oraz przy użyciu kwestionariuszy internetowych. Wykazano, że budżetowanie partycypacyjne w badanych miastach zostało ograniczone i obciążone było trudnościami w zarządzaniu tymi procesami.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zarządzanie publiczne, zarządzanie wartością publiczną, partycypacja społeczna, budżet obywatelski.