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THE IMPACT OF CHANGES IN METHODOLOGY OF PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING OF DĄBROWA GÓRNICZA ON THE QUALITY OF SELECTED PROJECTS

WPŁYW ZMIANY METODOLOGII PRZEPROWADZANIA DĄBROWSKIEGO BUDŻETU PARTYCYPACYJNEGO NA JAKOŚĆ WYŁONIONYCH PROJEKTÓW

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Summary: In recent years there has been a growing interest in tools that enable a dialogue between local authorities and members of local community, hence participatory budgeting has been gaining in popularity. The aim of the article is to examine conceptual and methodological changes in participatory budgeting in Dąbrowa Górnicza and the methods of completion of particular stages of the process. The article focuses on the diversity of methodologies of selecting projects and the process of projecting tasks. It contains an analysis of the transformation of participatory budgeting of Dąbrowa Górnicza and its impact on the quality of eventually selected projects, and the local development of specific districts. The introduction of new mechanisms in participatory budgeting is crucial to ensure that a participatory budget reflects real urban co-governance.

Keywords: evaluation, participatory budgeting, participation.

Streszczenie: Obecnie obserwuje się coraz większe zainteresowanie narzędziami umożliwiającymi podejmowanie dialogu między władzą lokalną a mieszkańcami, w związku z czym wzrasta popularność budżetów obywatelskich. Celem artykułu jest przeprowadzenie badań nad zmianami koncepcyjno-metodologicznymi budżetu obywatelskiego w Dąbrowie Górniczej oraz sposobem realizacji poszczególnych jego etapów. Artykuł zwraca szczególną uwagę na zróżnicowanie metodologii wyboru projektów, a także procesu projektowania realizowanych zadań. Przeprowadzona została analiza przekształceń procedury Dąbrowskiego Budżetu Partycypacyjnego oraz ich wpływu zarówno na jakość ostatecznie wyłonionych projektów, jak i rozwój lokalny danej dzielnicy. Wprowadzanie nowych mechanizmów w modele budżetów obywatelskich jest kluczowe, aby stanowiły rzeczywisty przejaw współzarządzania miastem.

Słowa kluczowe: ewaluacja, budżet obywatelski, partycypacja.

1. Introduction

In this day and age societies in many places all over the world are plagued by diseases of affluence that compromise the social capital. Technological advancements also reduce interpersonal contacts, however, this trend is slowly turning around. Currently more and more people recognise the value of their closest environment and feel the need to interact with neighbours. In Poland, too, one can see the growing desire of residents to have a say over the appearance of their backyards, districts or towns. One of the tools that gives them such an opportunity is participatory budgeting (PB).

Social participation is becoming more and more popular all over the world and it has reached local governments in Poland, too. Local authorities and administration are oftentimes convinced of PB following pressure from local community, which is why it is essential to continue to improve the methods of implementation and performance of social participation. In this context, the mechanisms of application of PB in Poland become crucial [Bluj, Stokłuska 2015, p. 7]. Unfortunately, some claim that the investments arising as a result of such mechanisms become chaotic and sometimes lack actual public support. In some instances they seem more like a plebiscite or a grant competition than a process that involves local community in the decision-making process.

The article examines the changes in the methodology of participatory budgeting in the context of exploitation of social potential. It looks at the issues related to identification of the needs and real problems of local communities in such a way so as not to confuse them with ambitions of individuals who wish to expand their sphere of influence. Currently in Poland voting is the most popular form of decision making and one will find many recommendations regarding the form, time and place of voting whose aim is to make the process as transparent as possible and to engage as many people as possible. Nonetheless, one cannot forget experimental workshop-based methods the aim of which is to select the best projects. The use of innovative mechanisms introduces a new quality in participatory budgeting.

2. Assumptions of participatory budgeting

Participatory budgeting is a form of social dialogue and in recent years in Poland it has been gaining in popularity. The assumption is that local authorities allocate a part of the public budget and citizens engage in democratic deliberation about how these funds will be spent. In Poland the allocated funds usually make up less than one per cent of the municipal budget, which is still enough to implement projects that can bring visible changes in the neighbourhood. What makes PB different from other tools of social participation is the resulting joint decision making process. The municipal authorities give citizens a guarantee that the selected projects will be approved and implemented. This gives the citizens the power to make direct decisions about how municipal funds are spent [Martela 2013, p. 25].

Participatory budgeting looks different in different parts of the world. What is known as participatory budgeting in one part of the world may be seen as something entirely different somewhere else [Sintomer et al. 2014, p. 2]. Yet despite the differences, one can identify several criteria that must be fulfilled for a process to be considered participatory budgeting [Kraszewski, Mojkowski 2014, p. 4]: the decisions taken by citizens are binding upon the authorities; the creation and management of PB is transparent and open; the citizens are given space to freely discuss on equal and easily understandable terms; supporting initiatives of citizens; ensuring long-term and repeatable collaboration; allocation of a reasonable amount of budget (it must be sufficient to make the citizens feel that they have real power to change their neighbourhood).

Participatory budgeting was first introduced in the late 1980s in Porto Alegre (Brazil) [Sorychta-Wojsczyk 2015, p. 423]. Soon the idea of PB reached other towns in South America and, later on, other continents. The first town in Poland to implement participatory budgeting was Sopot in 2011. Soon it was joined by other local government units. The popularity of participatory budgeting quickly grew to the point that we can now say it is common in Poland. The PB procedure in Polish towns is usually based on a few steps: collecting ideas put forward by local community members; reviewing the ideas in terms of feasibility (land ownership, investment plans of towns, etc.); presenting projects that are possible to implement; selecting projects to be implemented by vote of citizens.

Despite all the similarities, participatory budgeting looks different in different parts of Poland. Local authorities establish different rules for applying and reviewing projects. They use different voting methods (e.g. some award points; others accept voting via the Internet). Some participatory budgets are split into smaller district-specific budgets, while in other towns projects are selected for the entire city [Niklewicz 2014, p. 101]. There are significant differences in the amounts allocated from the public budget. For instance, in 2017 the city of Łódź allocated PLN 40 million for PB, while Kęty and the municipality of Unisław allocated PLN 3.4 million and PLN 350,000 respectively. The amounts are usually smaller in small towns, however, one should note the share of the funds in total expenditure. As it turns out, the allocated funds make up only 0.97% of the budget in Łódź and as many as 3.43% in Kęty [Fundacja Instytut Myśli Innowacyjnej].

3. Development of participatory budgeting of Dąbrowa Górnicza

Participatory budgeting of Dąbrowa Górnicza (*Dąbrowski Budżet Partycypacyjny – DBP*) took effect in 2013. The town was divided into 27 historical and customary districts for which community members could submit projects. One of the criteria to be met during the first edition of DBP was for a project to be supported by a group of at least 15 community members aged minimum 16 (the applicant had to be 16 or older, too). In the following stage the projects were reviewed by competent bodies of

the Municipal Office, which prepared a cost estimate and verified whether the project would be possible to implement. Negative opinions were accompanied by a statement of reasons or sometimes a recommendation for an alternative solution[1].

The next stage of DBP were District Residents' Forums (*Dzielnicowe Fora Mieszkańców – DFM*) which were an unusual, on the scale of Poland, element of the process. The aim of the forum was to clarify the opinions issued by authorities and compile through discussion between community members the list of projects that would be subject to vote in a given district. That was an opportunity to present and clarify all the submitted projects. The meetings involved councillors and applicants who explained the idea behind their investments. DFM were open to everyone interested. Once the list of projects was compiled, it was subject to vote – via electronic means, by post or directly at consultation points. Each and every resident of a given district, aged 16 or more, had the right to award from 0 to 10 points to projects they liked. The projects which scored the greatest number of points were implemented. In most districts those were projects which enjoyed the greatest support until the pool of money allocated for a given district was used up. In several cases the scenario was different. There were eight districts in which the project with the greatest support that was to be implemented did not use up the entire allocated pool of money and the value of projects that directly followed it exceeded the available budget. In those circumstances, the projects which were implemented were those with fewer votes, which still fell within the district's budget. The only exception was the district of Okradzionów where the record turnout was rewarded – the district was awarded two additional projects which took second and third place during the vote. Those two investments were financed with the funds unused by the other districts.

After the first edition of the process was concluded, consultation was held as part of "Obywatelska Dąbrowa" project to discuss it, which gave rise to a series of workshops dedicated to DBP in the following years. During the consultation conclusions were drawn from the first edition and some changes in the procedure were proposed – some of them were introduced in the following year. The mere fact that the DBP procedure was subject to consultation attests to the awareness of the local authorities of the importance of social participation. The authorities perceived the need to discuss not only particular projects, but also the format of DBP.

During the next three editions, the participatory budgeting procedure underwent more changes. The authorities acted on suggestions such as: "5-minute visual presentation of projects by applicants" [Stokłuska 2013, p. 12] during DFM, the criteria of general access and minimum number of votes that a project needed to receive to be implemented so as to reduce the risk of implementing projects with small support. The time limit for voting was extended and applicants were given more responsibilities – they had to enclose required approvals with their projects and provide a cost estimate. The division of the city into historical and customary districts

[1] Information included in this section comes from http://twojadabrowa.pl or from my personal experience.

was continuously modified. As a result, the number of districts grew to 35 and some parts of the city with a strictly general-purpose character were excluded from the process. As time went by, DFM also changed – in many instances they started to resemble a plebiscite during which the authors of particular projects strived to arrive at an agreement so as to win greater support and use as much of the funds allocated to their district as possible.

The new model – DBP 2.0., was developed by a special team. It involved the so-called "DBP Public Hearings" during which participants could submit comments about particular stages of the process. Eight district activators were hired under the new model, who in a way became the patrons of their respective districts, to hold talks with the citizens at particular stages of the process.

The activators are not employed by the Municipal Office. They have normal jobs and live in Dąbrowa Górnicza – they were assigned districts other than that in which they live for fear of the impact of the relations between neighbours on the course of the process. The first stage under the new model involves activating meetings, the so-called "District Mapping" – their function is similar to the function of DFM, but they also involve identification of key needs of a given community. During the workshop, community members have a chance to discuss priorities and directions for growth of their district even before the stage of reporting problems to be solved starts. The outcome is a map with important and problematic areas which determines local resources. The meetings are an opportunity for the community members to get to know the district activator and present him/her with their vision for the district.

The following stage involves submitting ideas – it has taken the place of the "submission of projects". Under the new model, every resident, irrespective of their age or home address, can contribute an idea for the betterment of their district. The form designed for submitting ideas has been simplified – it does not require any signatures of supporters nor a cost estimate. It is enough to describe the idea and assign it to a given location. The ideas are then verified by municipal officers from the point of view of land ownership and compliance with planning law and the city's intentions for the location in question.

The following stage consists in the choice of ideas for projects and it involves a series of meetings aimed at selecting those ideas that will be later implemented (the new model departs from voting). Once the winning ideas are selected, everyone sits down to work on projects – during the workshops the activators and municipal officers are supposed to define more details of the planned investments. At this stage the costs of particular undertakings are estimated and the shape of investment tasks is defined. The final stage under the model is the presentation of prepared projects.

The greatest challenge of the new DBP model is the development of a cutting-edge workshop whose aim is to select the best ideas, which could easily replace conventional voting. During the current edition, the workshops received support from the foundation: "Fundacja Napraw Sobie Miasto". The district activator makes a provisional division of all the ideas so as to draw attention to such ideas that are duplicated or exclude one another. Unlike in the previous editions, where

applicants could promote their projects during DFM, the assumption of the new model is that ideas have no authors and the pool of ideas constitutes resources of a given district.

The choice of ideas is based on the priorities established during the initial 'mapping' meetings and involves an assessment of every idea by community members in view of the following criteria: target group (Who is the intended recipient of the idea? Who may take advantage of it? Who are the potential users? How old are those individuals? Where do they live? What is their job?); positive and negative consequences of the idea for the district; response to real needs (What kind of problems does this idea solve? To what extent?). A skilfully conducted workshop allows for identification of the attitudes of a group towards the analysed ideas. The activator may ask some questions about some of the ideas if he/she thinks they have been assessed unreasonably compared to others. The activator may minimise residents' attempts to manipulate the outcome of deliberation through moderation of the workshop (also through getting back to the priorities established for the district at the earlier stages of the process). The district activator draws conclusions from the assessment made by community members and presents them to those present.

At the following stage, the discussion shifts to rationality of financing given ideas under current edition of DBP. The citizens contemplate whether it would be possible to acquire funds from other sources (e.g. local initiative), whether the idea should be implemented under the current edition and whether it will be in any way good for the development of the district. Such evaluation of the ideas is similar to assigning the tasks a position on an axis of time so as to identify those which are more and less important. The activator also discusses the aspect of the complexity of ideas (a given idea may turn out to be impossible to implement or it might require a supervisor, etc.). Finally, the map of resources and ideas positioned on a matrix are joined by a cost estimate. At this point community members can combine some ideas into one project that will be implemented.

Despite the clear framework of workshops concerned with the criteria of selection of ideas, they had to be adapted to specific requirements of every district. The format and number of meetings hinged on the turnout, number of evaluated ideas, strength of social relationships or diagnosed conflicts and a series of individual circumstances arising from the specifics of a given neighbourhood. The activator had to respond to every situation and adjust the format of the workshop on an ongoing basis. The outcome of the action should be a list of ideas, which will be turned into projects, put in order of importance.

In case of disagreements between the participants of the workshop, the new model allows a maximum of three groups of ideas, which, as an option, may be subject to vote at the end of the process. During the 5th edition of DBP only one out of 35 districts took this option (Errors). The residents of the other districts managed to arrive at an agreement during the workshops. The winning ideas are ranked in line with the priorities of the district to make sure that in case of any errors in the cost estimate, it is clear which ideas are to be implemented first.

4. The impact of the introduced changes on the quality of implemented projects

The 5th edition of DBP is still in progress, but it is already possible to draw some conclusions. Firstly, the new model allowed for a more individual approach to every district which, after all, can be substantially different from one another. The differences concern not only the size of population (which translates to the pool of money available to a given neighbourhood under DBP) but also the area, degree of urbanisation, number of municipal properties and relationships between neighbours. The previous editions put all the districts in a common framework and concluded with voting. Under the new model it is not enough to get community members to sign under an idea, one has to encourage them to attend the workshops. While it might be true that this way the number of people involved in the decision making is reduced, the people who actually get involved really care about their district and its development. A fact worth a mention is that the workshops aimed at selection of ideas demanded a lot of effort on the part of the activator and residents. In some instances there were more than twenty ideas to evaluate, hence the community members had to show a lot of persistence and dedication.

An undisputed advantage of the new model is the stage of participatory preparation of projects. The residents no longer need to focus on the proposed solution, for which they could vote, but can discuss the problem and come up with an alternative solution. A good example is a project that aims to widen a road. The Municipal Office can immediately reject such an investment if, for instance, it is not possible to implement due to limited space. Under the new model the activator is familiar with the circumstances behind such an idea. If the purpose of the solution is to restore normal traffic on a road that is regularly blocked by illegally parked cars, it is easy to come up with an alternative. Perhaps it will be enough to install parking posts that will prevent drivers from illegal parking.

When preparing a project together, everyone can take advantage of the knowledge of other community members. It sometimes happens that projects submitted for participatory budgeting are politically biased or related to extreme local patriotism. As a result, similar investments may appear close to one another. The open meetings give the opportunity to identify such ideas, discuss them once more or propose an alternative solution that will be a response to the real needs of the residents. After all, two investments with the same function can be entirely different. The stage of preparing projects can start with a reconnaissance walk whose aim is to engage the users of a given area, who so far have had no chance to take part in DBP and express their opinion, in the process. The table below presents the positive and negative aspects of the two models, which have impact on the quality of implemented projects.

Table 1. Disadvantages (–) and advantages (+) of the two models having an impact on the quality of implemented projects.

DBP 2014-2017	DBP 2018
– Projects have to be submitted by individuals aged 16 or more (residents of a given district) and be accompanied by signatures of at least 15 supporters subject to the same restrictions (a limited number of authors).	+ Ideas can be submitted by anyone, irrespective of age and place of residence. The meetings are open and everyone can attend (increased number of potential participants of workshops).
– The residents can take part in the process without dedicating a lot of their time – there is a risk that some may cast a vote without thinking. The voters face a dilemma when projects meet only part of their expectations.	+ It requires regular involvement from residents at meetings during which participants justify their views. Ideas can be divided and combined into any configurations.
– The intentions of voters remain unknown.	+ Identification of the advantages and disadvantages of ideas and cutting them into an appropriate shape.
– In some cases the implemented projects are those with small support, but they fall within the budget available to a district under a given edition of DBP.	+ Participatory preparation of projects allows for adjustment of tasks to the real needs, not the wishes of individuals.

Source: own work.

The above table presents the primary advantages of the new model which translate to improved quality of implemented projects. The key to success is the involvement of various groups of stakeholders in the process. The meetings are now open to everyone irrespective of the age and the district they live in. Citizens have a chance to learn about the investments planned by municipal authorities. They strive to work out a common local strategy which ensures that the implemented projects are not standalone and maladapted investments, but they are suited to the vision of a given district.

5. Conclusions

The growing interest in participatory budgeting appears to be a response to the visibly poor connection between local authorities and citizens. The residents often feel that they have no power to make decisions about their neighbourhood. Due to the format of participatory budgeting in Poland, many claim that the role of the citizens is limited to submitting ideas and voting, and liken it to other form of local activation, namely the local initiative. It involves a partnership agreement between citizens and local authorities which translates to the required contribution of the applicant in the process of execution of the undertaking. In participatory budgeting the party solely responsible for implementation of the winning projects is the local administration. In spite of the criticism, local governments that introduced

participatory budgeting have seen an increased activity among the existing municipal movements and non-governmental organisations, and development of new bottom-up groups aimed specifically at the process. The involvement of citizens usually increases with every new edition of participatory budgeting. Sadly, this does not necessarily translate into increased quality of selected projects. Kębłowski [2014, p. 35] points to the frequent politicisation of the entire process, which leads to competition between various social groups – holders of different views, residents of different neighbourhoods, etc. It is not uncommon that there is no open dialogue under the adopted procedures and its absence makes it difficult to see if the winning projects satisfy the needs of residents.

The new model of participatory budgeting of Dąbrowa Górnicza offers a solution to some of the above-mentioned problems. The open dialogue and diversified workshops with the participants require more work than a simple vote from each party to the process. Similar actions yield better results in the form of well-planned investments in a district. By directing debate onto the real needs, expectations and values that residents believe in, one can limit wishful thinking of individuals. Naturally, this new model will have to be subject to another evaluation. It currently serves as a kind of experiment among participatory budgets in other parts of Poland and it certainly is not free of flaws (the article focuses on the quality of implemented projects and skips the aspects of social engagement or means of information, etc.). Yet it seems clear that it is headed towards improvement of social participation in Poland.

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