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WHAT SUCCEEDS AND WHAT FAILS IN PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING? LESSONS FROM WAŁBRZYCH (POLAND)

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Abstract

Participatory budgeting is a popular democratic innovation used for engaging citizens in public decision-making, enabling meaningful participation in the allocation of public funding. Dating back to the 1980s it gained a momentum in the beginning of 21st century, soon becoming a mainstream tool for local governance in many parts of the world. Today the concept seems to lose its initial impetus, mainly due to the decreasing number of submitted projects and declining voter turnout. This paper presents a case study conducted in Wałbrzych (Poland) – a city having a continuous participatory budgeting programme since 2013/2014. A research workshop organised for municipality representatives in 2023 enabled an in-depth analysis of the recent dynamics of participatory processes in the city. The results offer an indicative diagnosis of the challenges faced by the city followed by the search for possible solutions. They also enable a critical review of the state of the art regarding the issues experienced in implementing participatory budgeting worldwide.

Keywords

citizen participation, participatory budgeting, urban governance, Wałbrzych

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Introduction

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a democratic process that grants citizens a direct influence on how part of the public budget is spent. The seminal work in the field (Sintomer et al. 2008) defined PB as allowing the participation of non-elected citizens in the conception and/or allocation of public finances, following particular criteria. That said, PB is commonly understood as a democratic innovation that provides citizens with a genuine

opportunity to engage in public deliberation and particularly to identify, discuss, and prioritise public spending.

However, like any other innovation in public governance, PB also suffers from various implementation issues. They are related to the local political context (including the characteristics of particular communities), representativeness of the people and groups involved in the process, marketing and promotion patterns (depending on the communication channels used by the authorities), technical aspects (adopting online and offline tools), organisational nuances (such as support offered to the project proposers) as well as the track record of the previous participatory activities (number and effectiveness of past PB attempts).

The main purpose of this paper is to outline the key issues experienced by particular municipality officials in implementing PB and to confront them with current academic insight. Such confrontation will result in a more realistic, verified and updated picture of PB practices. The hypothesis is as follows: the current international academic approach to PB does not match the hands-on experience of the local authorities.

The presented study focuses on the practical experience of a selected municipality in organising the PB programme. The main research questions are what are the dynamics of participatory budgeting in subsequent yearly cycles? What are the pitfalls and challenges faced by the local authorities? What solutions could be implemented to mitigate the possible crisis?

To answer the research questions above, a case study has been selected: Wałbrzych, a city in Poland. Having a strong track record of participatory budgeting, Wałbrzych demonstrates great values for observing and analysing PB development. The following parts of the paper include a literature review on the topic, description of the Wałbrzych programme, outline of the research methods, presentation of the results and key conclusions.

State of the art

The origins of PB date back to the well-known case of Porto Alegre in Brazil in the early 1980s, but has since been diffused and used in different ways across the globe. Whereas PB practices in the global South served to supplement weak political regimes for the provision of (basic) public goods, in Europe and the US they are supposed to legitimise or support existing political institutions (Mutz, 2006, Rousson Gilman, 2012; Błaszak 2023). Despite its different roles, PB is commonly considered to be one of the most successful democratic innovations in terms of its spread and replication across the world in a wide range of political, social and economic contexts.

The central feature of PB is a structured process of engagement where ordinary citizens are given a key role in decision-making in the allocation of public funding, even if the existing models and approaches vary widely in terms of involved stakeholders, objectives, decision-making, use of digital technology and the core participatory features. The participants in PB can include citizens or specific groups such as young or older people, migrants or inhabitants of a specific territory, civil society organisations and taxpayers, as well as randomly selected groups of citizens. As a result, PB designs vary significantly, combining in different ways elements of deliberative and representative democracy, rang-

ing from simple information events on the budget to intensive participatory consultation with citizens (Wampler, 2000; Ganuza & Baiocchi, 2019).

A large body of research shows that PB can generate individual and collective societal benefits, offering a unique mechanism for optimising scarce financial resources in line with citizens' expectations and preferences. To that end, it can improve citizens' lives, including those of poor and marginalised groups in society. PB can also be conducive to the modernisation of local administrations and the empowerment of citizens and communities. Better dialogue and mutual confidence contribute to civic culture, social capital and governance.

However, the impact of participatory budgeting is variable and highly context dependent. It can differ with the purpose of PB, budgetary issues, who participates, the relations with decision-makers, the rules governing interactions and voting, the information provided, prior beliefs, substantive outcomes, and socio-economic conditions. PB can have short-lived effects or significant early results which then dissipate over time, and yet others have lasting impacts (Sintomer et al. 2008).

Moreover, while PB is often referred to as 'deliberative', this is heavily dependent on the actual amount of power that is delegated to the citizens. Some PB programmes fall short of the standards of "public deliberation": municipalities provide merely some kind of forum for "selective listening" or allow only a constrained choice between predetermined proposals. But a simple aggregation of votes over predetermined proposals is no more "deliberative" (Dryzek, 2002). In short, there are deliberative and non-deliberative ways of structuring PB.

It becomes clear that the contemporary version of participatory budgeting differs significantly from its Brazilian prototype in terms of radicalness and has evolved into a popular, mainstream tool for local democracy. One of the undoubted side-effects of this development is reshaping the perception of democracy, influencing both large cities and small towns, albeit in varying ways (Ufel 2023).

The state-of-the-art presented below has been conducted using a structured content analysis. The corpus of the literature has been built by adopting two approaches: the "PRISMA statement" (Page et al. 2021) and the traditional "snowball" method.

The "snowball search" is a way of tracking down related works by using the reference list at the end of an article. It is particularly useful when looking for general definitions of the studied terms. It enables finding the core works related to the main research subject. In this review, the 'snowball' method was applied to the most popular scientific databases: Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.com/>) and Scopus (<https://www.scopus.com/search/form.uri?display=basic#basic>). As a result, several academic papers have been found, read and analysed, providing the basic knowledge on PB issues.

The PRISMA approach – Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (Page et al. 2021) – has been adopted in the search for works related to PB issues and challenges. This method offers a systematic step-by-step review of current literature, including the identification of potentially relevant records, screening them, then including the most eligible ones. The search was conducted in Scopus and Google Scholar databases, which had been chosen for their reputation in indexing high-quality and peer-reviewed papers.

The following keywords were used to search the individual databases: "participatory budgeting risks" and "participatory budgeting issues". This selection allowed for a com-

prehensive coverage of the subject area while limiting the search for overly general articles. The keyword “participatory budgeting problems” was excluded as it returned too many records unrelated to the topic.

The first stage of the literature review consisted of selecting the papers that are most closely related to the research problem under consideration. Articles were not analysed in detail – the initial positive inclusion of an article in the corpus was determined by the title suggesting relevance to the topic and the abstract (summary) provided on the website. The second stage of the literature review was based primarily on the elimination of articles repeated in searches from different databases and the criterion of availability of full texts. From the previously selected articles, those which could be accessed free of charge on publicly available websites or by using an account at the Wrocław University of Technology Library were accepted for further analysis (four publications were rejected at this stage). The final stage of the review consisted of carefully reading the texts from the second stage and selecting those that best explained the issue of the risks associated with the implementation of participatory budgeting (at this stage 1 publication was rejected – Table 1).

Table 1. The stages of the literature search using the PRISMA method.

Platform	Stage I	Stage II	Stage III
Scopus	10	7	7
Google Scholar	10	6	5

Source: authors' own research.

While PB has been mostly praised for its potential to increase citizen involvement, accountability and equity in decision-making, there are particular risks and issues associated with its implementation. The first one is a limited **representation**: despite efforts to involve different segments of the population, some groups may still be underrepresented in participatory processes. This may be due to barriers such as language, education, socio-economic status or lack of awareness of the process. Social, cultural and economic factors need to be taken into account in order to make PB accessible to all citizens and able to accommodate different expectations. The **inclusiveness** and representativeness of PB remain as key issues, especially in non-democratic and poor countries. Societies where disadvantaged people are overlooked and poverty-related biases are detectable in co-determination processes. The design of PB should take into account structural constraints related to gender, disability, race, language and wealth. Inclusivity problems also exist in rich countries, where affluent and well-educated residents are often overrepresented among voters (Bassoli 2012, Williams et. al. 2017, Touchton, Sugiyama, & Wampler 2017, Levenda et al. 2020).

The second issue are the limited **resources**: participatory budgeting require significant time, money and expertise to be allocated in order to organise and maintain the whole process. Local governments may find it difficult to allocate these resources efficiently, particularly in contexts with competing demands for attention and funding (Sintomer et al. 2008, Bassoli 2012, Williams et. al. 2017). The limited financial autonomy of local governments in some countries, combined with the local political culture and rather weak

civil society attitudes, may determine the existence of major challenges to the adoption of democratic budgeting (Klimovský, Junjan, Nemec 2021).

Influence of **politicians** may also be a problem. Despite the intention to empower citizens, the influence of politicians and political parties on participatory budget processes can be significant. They may try to manipulate or control the results to serve their own interests, undermining the authenticity and effectiveness of citizen participation (Sintomer et al. 2008, Bassoli 2012, Williams et. al. 2017, Mattei, Santolamazza, Grandis 2022).

Capacity and **expertise** are revealed to be of great importance. Engaging citizens in budget decision-making requires a certain level of understanding of complex financial and political issues. Without adequate support, education and resources, participants may struggle to make informed decisions, leading to suboptimal outcomes (Mattei, Santolamazza, Grandis 2022).

As it has already been noted, the main characteristics of PB differ around the world, depending on the national and local regulations, political cultures and to-date experiences. For example, recent research conducted in select European countries (Mendez et al. 2022) demonstrates that the level of funding allocated to PBs can vary from 0.5% to 2% of municipal budgets per year. In some cases the budget can be supplemented by external funds like the EU operational programmes. Also, the amounts allocated to individual projects range from a few thousand euros (small grants) to several hundred thousand euros (large-scale projects). The geographical scale of PB is usually two-tiered and involves the scale of the city (e.g. Paphos, Ayia Napa, Cork) and the scale of the neighbourhood (e.g. Ioannina, Chalandri, Kifissia, Dublin, Rotterdam, Fife). Only some municipalities require project proposals to be aligned with the city's strategy, but most of them define some policy areas that the PB should address by providing leading topics such as: infrastructure, green/environmental projects, and social justice/inclusion.

The process of creating ideas also differs in various locations. It can be fully open (individuals can submit simplified projects themselves), facilitated (individuals or groups of citizens are supported by professionals) or delegated (citizens are involved through voting). Digital tools such as websites, social media, and mobile apps are increasingly important at various stages of PB, which is often supplemented by institutional local media and in-person meetings with the municipality officials.

The range of citizen participation in the PB varies in terms of the target audience and the groups involved. The main participants in PB initiatives are citizens representing specific groups (like neighbours or dog owners) and network participants (involving institutional stakeholders and professionals). It is important to note that participants who actively engage are likely to do so repeatedly. However, local authorities have shown an interest in reaching out to marginalised communities and engaging them: they seek to achieve this through education, innovative engagement strategies, or officially established cooperation with NGOs (Mendez et al. 2022).

The case study of Wałbrzych (Poland) will be discussed as an example of a relatively successful PB implementation, whilst currently facing particular challenges. The following parts of the paper include the general description of the case study city, the method adopted to retrieve information and the key findings on the issues recently experienced in the process. Those sections will be complemented with a juxtaposition of particular practical challenges with the literature review presented above.

The Wałbrzych participatory budgeting experience

The history of participatory budgeting in Wałbrzych began in 2013 before the first successful implementation of the programme in 2014. Since then PB has been held every year, with the exception of the 2019 edition (when a new national regulations regarding PB were introduced) and the 2024 edition (which was suspended due to the war in Ukraine). In the years 2014–2018 it included both city-wide and local (district) projects, and voting was possible both in person and online. Since 2020 Wałbrzych PB has covered only city-wide projects and voting takes place online only. The results of all the to-date editions include a total of 70 implemented projects. Twenty-two projects were not implemented due to financial or legal barriers (underestimated costs of projects, lack of a building permit, lack of contractors).

Table 2. Wałbrzych participatory budgeting statistics.

Item	2014	2015	2016	2017/2018	2020	2021	2022	2023
Total budget available (Polish zloty)	4 m.	5 m.	5 m.	4 m.	3.1 m.	3.26 m.	3.725 m.	4.2 m.
Number of submitted projects	121	100	60	59	27	6	17	20
Number of projects shortlisted for voting	71	94	47	49	19	4	11	12
Number of winning projects	no data	no data	no data	no data	5	4	5	4
Total number of votes	24342	32534	27485	14710	6688	1241	5116	4893
Paper votes	18577	24576	23911	10572	0	0	0	0
Online votes	5765	7958	3574	4138	6688	1241	5116	4893
Voting turnout (as a share of total population eligible of voting)	22.12%	25.41%	23.32%	12.18%	6.01%	1.13%	5.75%	5.74%

Data courtesy of the Wałbrzych municipality 2023.

Over the years, the Wałbrzych municipality has demonstrated a great commitment to citizen participation, consistently improving and developing its PB programme. Despite those commendable efforts, the city is currently facing a critical change in civic participation, reflected in a decreasing number of submitted projects and a declining voting turnout (Table 2).

Materials and methods

There are so many factors affecting PB performance that it is difficult to draw any reliable conclusions using only quantitative data. Qualitative methods provide a much deeper insight into the interrelated phenomena taking place in local governance. In particular, participatory techniques and action research are a good source of knowledge about the reasons for success or failure of particular PB projects, as well as about the general impact of PB programmes on local democratic practices.

In this study a moderated, interactive workshop was conducted in Wałbrzych in November 2023 within the DEMOTEC research project (<https://demotec-project.eu/>) funded by the European Commission in the years 2021–2024 within the Horizon 2020 programme (grant number 962553). The workshop had a structured agenda agreed in advance with the operator and communicated to the participants. The agenda defined the roles, tasks and responsibilities of individual institutions and people participating in the workshop. It included the following items: presentation of the previous findings of the DEMOTEC project, sharing the opinions and experiences of practitioners as well as a common critical reflection and consensus-building process on the current PB situation.

The event involved the key municipal stakeholders involved in the Wałbrzych PB programme, including employees representing the municipal secretary office, the IT department and the municipal organisational office. Together with the research team and the moderator, a total of 10 people participated in the scheduled activities. Each of them was informed about the aims and contents of the workshop and personally signed a standardised consent form.

All the planned activities were moderated by a professional facilitator and audio-video recorded by an authorised video producer, employed by the event operator IMAS International sp. z o. o. The final discussion was recorded in an anonymised transcript, and its content was analysed and summarised in this paper. Selected results are illustrated with quotations from the discussion, using anonymised identification numbers (persons 1–5 being representatives of the office, persons 6–9 being the DEMOTEC team). The following abbreviations were used in the paper: PB – participatory budgeting in general, WPB – Wałbrzych Participatory Budgeting programme.

Results

PB stakeholders and their needs

The results of the workshop confirmed the general information about the PB participants. There are several groups involved in the Wałbrzych PB (Table 3).

Table 3. Participants of the PB process as defined during the moderated workshop.

Group of PB participants	Description
Residents – both applicants and voters	Some groups, e.g. parents of school children or seniors, can be very active in projects that concern them.
People lobbying for particular projects	They can be residents (individuals or groups), as well as institutions such as the Church, the Police, the Fire Brigade and NGOs.
NGOs/institutions	NGOs are often the initiators of PB project applications, also active in promoting them, even when officially the applicants are individual citizens.
Local media	Local journalists – both institutional and individual (like bloggers, vloggers, YouTubers).
Officials and authorities	Including the Mayor and the Secretary of the City personally, officials in various departments of the municipality, carrying out tasks related to the PB.

Source: authors' own research.

It was pointed out that the national regulations do not clearly define which categories of participants – residents and/or institutions – can take part in the PB. This is determined locally by the municipality and the PB terms and conditions may enable for example only registered citizens (instead of all persons residing in the city; for example, students); they may also refer to their age, allowing only adults to take part in the process (i.e. excluding children and youngsters below 18 years old).

One of the most important groups in the Wałbrzych PB are local activists, who often ask well in advance about the next edition of the programme. Some of them are associated with local NGOs or institutions. It is notable that there is a lack of cooperation between these people: the Wałbrzych PB often receives applications on similar topics from various groups.

Local institutions such as schools, churches or fire departments are very important actors in the Wałbrzych PB. In the past, the institution's projects have been very popular and successful. Now, according to the current regulations, they cannot submit applications themselves, but still they are highly active in promoting them.

We used to have a project to buy cars for the police [...]. Parents in schools reported that there were not enough police patrols. At that time, such a PB project was created and 12 police cars were bought for one million zlotys. The proposer of the project, the initiator were a policeman and a school principal. The whole police lobbied for it, they informed about it every time [...]. In the history of Wałbrzych, it was an unrivalled project in terms of the number of people who signed that there was such a need. (Person 5)

According to the representatives of the Office, a relatively uninvolved group in the Wałbrzych PB are young people – teenagers and young adults.

Teenagers, from the age of 14. These people were the least involved because they didn't think they needed it. They don't have families, they're going to go to university in a moment and they're going to leave the city anyway. (Person 5)

However, workshop participants pointed out that communication about the Wałbrzych PB is not addressed to young people very well, and may not reach this group due to the language used. Only several specific projects in the past, with some interesting actions (e.g. the Fire Brigade project involving rescue dogs), seemed to be effective in motivating young people to vote. It is worth following them in the future.

Also the lack of media activity makes it difficult to promote the Wałbrzych PB. On the other hand, what the city does for the media is to invite them to an event, such as a press conference or a meeting with the mayor.

We inform the media that there is another edition. We invite them, for example, to a press conference, and that's how they get to know. But would they be interested in it themselves? I don't think so. It is a pity, because the media could help us a lot in such public participation. They could ask residents, for example, what they need in particular districts. Nobody sees the need to get involved. (Person 5)

In fact, the journalists do not receive ready-made messages regarding the PB, and they don't get any partial information during the voting that they could put in their news to motivate residents, even when they ask for it. This demotivates them to write about the Wałbrzych PB. The low activity of journalists is also due to the low attractiveness of the

process for their readers (e.g. the large number of projects related to playgrounds in one of the past editions).

It is difficult to determine to what extent Wałbrzych PB responds to the needs of residents. After previous experience with district budgets as part of the participatory budget in the years 2013–2018, the PB in Wałbrzych is now focused on city-wide projects, which are intended to represent and engage all the city's residents. The residents' motivations leading to the preparation and submission of the project to the PB by the applicants is beyond the inspection and knowledge of the Office. The needs assessment made by the applicants can be, and probably generally is, a reflection of a narrow group of residents. This group rarely consulted with a wider group that may ultimately be affected by the project. Thus, the needs defined in the applications or the solutions implemented later do not necessarily address the perceived deficiencies or problems, and their support in voting by a given resident is rather the result of their recognition of their rightness by the initiators or personal support for the given people, rather than resulting from one's own beliefs or experiences.

The people who are reached by the applicants vote [...]. I think that the mistake lies in the fact that the needs of the neighbourhood or a larger community are not fully recognised, because the projects are prepared by narrow groups that initiate the process, diagnose the needs – perhaps correctly or perhaps not, but it is a narrow group. If a larger group of people were involved at the stage of creating an idea or proposal for a project, it would translate into a large number of voters. (Person 1)

The discussion agreed that a more general and broader diagnosis of residents' needs could help to increase the involvement of all residents and to better tailor projects. However, it is a complicated process that requires dedicated funding and involvement of a significant number of people, including journalists.

Advantages and disadvantages of the PB

According to the representatives of the office, the unquestionable advantage of the Wałbrzych PB are its effects – tangible, completed projects that would probably have not happened without it (e.g. playgrounds, brine graduation tower). In the initial period, it was also a tool for recognising the needs of residents and their activities.

[PB as a diagnosis of residents' needs] took place in previous editions – at the beginning, when the budget was not mandatory yet. At that time, it was evident at the meetings with the mayor, where the people's needs were clearly expressed. We've seen how it has evolved over the years and how those needs have changed. (Person 5)

During the workshop discussion, the general advantages of the PB as a public consultation and activation of residents were also noted. It can be assumed that the promotion of the PB is a lever for contacts between the authorities and residents, although, as mentioned earlier, these are unsystematic observations.

Currently, especially in the context of the decreasing number of projects and low voting turnout, as well as difficulties with the implementation of the winning projects, those advantages are falling apart. One of the workshop assignments was to imagine what would

happen if the Wałbrzych PB was stopped now. The results demonstrated that the absence of PB would not have caused major losses. The benefit would be less work for civil servants.

It's nice to talk about it, but no one realises how difficult it is in practice. Like welcoming all these people who need to be given information in addition to the work that you normally do. We have to do it and we are aware of it. Each of us has a sense of mission, because we want it to be done in the best possible way, but if they tell us "you don't have to do it", we won't do it. (Person 5)

An indirect proof of the relatively low social importance of the Wałbrzych PB is its suspension in 2023 (no PB cycle for 2024) in accordance with the national act on supporting Ukrainian citizens. The participants of the discussion noted that the fact that the Wałbrzych PB was suspended was noticed mainly by local social activists waiting for the next edition, but it did not arouse much social discussion.

No one said 'it's a pity that there isn't the PB because I wanted to submit a project'. There was no voice at all that it was a pity that something was not there. (Person 5).

In summary, it may be noted that the implementation of the Wałbrzych PB is associated with a large organisational effort and additional costs for the office, which are not taken into account in the city's budget and the structure of the officials' tasks. With the low attractiveness of the PB and the declining interest, its advantages cease to matter, which means that the effort is not balanced by the benefits, and the motivation of the organisers decreases.

Communication in the PB process

The municipality communicates the Wałbrzych PB issues through multiple channels. According to its representatives, this communication is particularly intensified at the voting stage of the process. A special role seems to be played by the mayor of the city through meetings with residents in the districts. Less was said about communication during and after the implementation of projects. This may be related to the rather long period from the voting to the completion of the investment.

Let's say there is a participatory budget from 1 March, We give information on the website "a new edition has started." On social media, on the mayor's website, there is the information. This is often followed by a press conference. Outdoor advertising, press releases, posters, leaflets, meetings with the mayor. (Person 5)

At the application stage, the office provides assistance and resources for consultation for those who are interested in submitting a PB project. From the workshop discussion it can be seen that communication is rather driven by the needs of the applicants, and that the office works rather reactively.

The communication during the voting deliberately does not include information about the current turnout, nor are the results reported. From the journalists' point of view, however, such information would be interesting and could have a pro-turnout effect.

Simultaneously communication from the office to the applicants is limited to motivating them to collect votes, without giving details. This may lead to a certain artificially inflated turnout due to the increased activity of the most committed voters.

After publishing the PB results, the communication between the office and the residents is less intensive, which is probably related to the difficulties in the implementation process. Even though these processes are not really media-friendly, such communication may have particular promotional potential, strengthening the sense of agency among citizens. Lastly, the media's communication about the Wałbrzych PB is monitored by the municipality, but no systematic action or support from the office has been declared.

Voting turnout

Participation in the Wałbrzych PB is measured by two main categories of indicators: the number of projects and the turnout of voting in a given year. Both of these indicators have been significantly lower in the last four years than in the PB editions before 2020. A significant part of the discussion in the workshop was devoted to analysing the causes of this decline and its significance.

Representatives of the office seem to be concerned about both declines, they interpret it as a decreasing interest of the community in the PB process. The reasons for the decline are not clear as there is a lack of data, which makes it difficult to control and counteract. The outcomes may be as follows:

- when the public interest in PB is lower, the implemented projects may not be representative of the real needs of the residents,
- expenditures related to the implementation of the PB are still high regardless of the turnout, and the material effects for the community or communication and promotional effects for the city authorities are decreasing,
- the perceived sense of PB (spending a lot of money from the city budget on purposes without real consultation of the residents) is decreasing.

As a result, the motivation of not only the residents themselves, but also the officials dealing with the Wałbrzych PB may be weakened. In addition, it is not expressed directly, but it is possible that the low turnout may be interpreted as an expression of the poor effectiveness of the city authorities or the officials involved in it. However, it should be stressed that the initial interest in participatory budgeting and the later decline is a typical trend for many Polish cities, not only Wałbrzych.

On the other hand, a lower turnout or, even more so, a smaller number of applications means less work for the office and a reduction in the costs associated with its service.

Should this turnout in the participatory budget be such a 'bunny'? All in all, we meet certain needs. [...] We assumed that it was necessary to get a turnout, because it brings turnover, transparency, but in fact no one has created the conditions for this. (Person 7)

Among the reasons for the low turnout were the following hypotheses or observations:

- general inactivity of citizens resulting from the lack of concern about the common good

The problem here may be the lack of looking at common needs (...), as a project which, even though it is not directly in front of my block, can be cool, positive and I can go and vote. For example, if I do not have a dog, I will not vote because it is a dog run. If there was a greater sense of the common good, then such a citizen or resident could deduce that it is also in his/her interest, because I will not have poop on the pavement, for example. (Person 1)

- **weakening of interest after the initial novelty effect**

Looking at the whole picture, it is an accurate diagnosis of the reason for this decline in interest, that initially it was the effect of novelty, optimism (...). Later, when we collide with the bureaucracy, with the whole process, that we have to take care of the voting, make amendments, then maybe this interest has crumbled a bit. (Person 1)

- **lack of awareness, lack of knowledge about Wałbrzych PB due to insufficient communication**

If you don't motivate people and if you don't encourage them over and over again, they won't be interested. This is exactly the same as in [a discount market name] customer satisfaction survey. There used to be three buttons, after you did the shopping. If the lady would say 'please vote in the poll', you pressed green because it was good, or red if it was bad (...). There is no problem – everyone will vote. But when no one will ask you to do it, then even if they are standing right next to you, there is no need to do so. (Person 5)

- **reaching a maximum level of social activity**

Twenty-three percent voted in Wałbrzych. Twenty-three percent in Wrocław and Poznań was a little different. So the 20% of people who voted is the maximum in virtually all [...] the cities we analysed. (Person 6)

- **decrease in motivation as a result of achieving expected goals**

Maybe it's because we're already happy with the budget in the sense that 'I wanted to have a dog run and I have one'. This can be especially visible in cities where there are a lot of spatial projects, such as in Wałbrzych or Wrocław. (Person 6)

- **saturation with similar projects of a given area**

And now the question is, how much does such a district need? (Person 6)

- **decrease in motivation due to the ineffectiveness of previous editions of the PB**

If someone is waiting for a climbing wall and still doesn't have it, they don't want to do it anymore. (Person 2)

- **lack of personal relationship**

Engagement with a given topic and noticing a personal benefit is important for the motivation to vote. Some PB projects do not bring any change for a given person (e.g. due to the distance/location), and they do not generate any results close to the person. Local projects, dedicated to particular neighbourhoods, relatively inexpensive (which were abandoned in Wałbrzych due to large disproportions between districts) may result in increasing turnout in terms of the percentage of eligible voters, as the effect is more tangible and easy to imagine.

For example, in small towns with a population of 10,000–20,000, which have participatory budgets, the turnout is a little higher than in large cities. There [...] the budget is smaller and the financed projects are also correspondingly smaller, e.g. a bench or a rubbish bin (...). Maybe it's just that more tangible? I have one playground, and a bike path, but if I could plan a bench or something small next to my house, maybe this involvement would be bigger? (Person 6)

At the same time, however, too large differences in the size of district projects may lead to inequalities and disagreements, and as a result, to the rejection of PB. Representatives of the office emphasised the lack of procedures or guidelines helpful in fairer access to the PB in such a situation.

We've done it. [...] That's why we gave up on the fact that the inhabitants of the smallest district, where you could only afford a bench and a trash can, and in another one there was a skate park, for example, [...] said 'we will never have a chance to do something at home, because you give all your money there, and they already have everything' [...]. We have to accept a reasonable key, we can't give everyone equally, because it won't be fair either. (Person 5)

- low importance of the PB compared to other democratic practices

Discussants compared the PB with the 2023 parliamentary elections in Poland. The high turnout in the latter was the result of the feeling that the vote counts, that this is a “really important election”.

Motivation is the key, if 72% went, it means that they had a very important reason. If it went 6%, it means that there was no such important reason. (Person 2)

Hence, the declining interest in the Wałbrzych PB may have many causes, both related to the concept of PB itself (including its organisational aspects), as well as psychological phenomena, such as low sense of agency or a decrease in excitement in an already known phenomena. The discussion shows the need to “refresh” the idea, to bring it down to more specific projects that are closer to real needs of the citizens, as well as better communication and promotion.

Obstacles and measures to overcome them

Various problems noticed in the Wałbrzych PB during the workshop can be grouped into several categories, reflecting the key aspects of the process (Table 4). According to the participants most of them can be solved when adequate activities are introduced.

In general, the discussion made it possible to outline the main difficulties experienced by the Wałbrzych PB and to search for some potential ways of solving them both at the stage of preparation, promotion, voting and implementation. The core solutions focus on the match between PB projects and citizens' needs, flexibility of funding, media involvement and stronger engagement of the municipality in the communication with potential project initiators.

Table 4. How to deal with particular obstacles in PB process – ideas from Wałbrzych.

OBSTACLES	SOLUTIONS
Democratic attitudes	
▪ small number of citizens involved in preparing and submitting projects ▪ low voter turnout	▪ focusing the scope of the PB on issues that appeal to everyone ▪ showing the positive impact of projects on citizens' everyday lives
Representativeness	
▪ low participation of certain social groups, e.g. young people, the elderly, ▪ unequal access due to the online voting mode ▪ low chance for success of small (neighbourhood) projects ▪ disparities in the number of beneficiaries of particular projects	▪ providing maps of locations where specific projects can be implemented (this would guarantee a more fair spatial distribution of projects) ▪ reducing the competition from strongest stakeholders (e.g. institutions)
Promotion	
▪ lack of attractive, direct promotional activities ▪ insufficient media involvement ▪ limited communication from the municipality (limited resources, uninteresting messages)	▪ intensifying communication from the municipality ▪ introducing a live project confrontation or debate ▪ fostering public activity of project initiators ▪ more 'media hype' around the PB (this would increase public awareness and interest) ▪ promoting the submission of projects rather than voting
Project content	
▪ distant time horizon of projects ▪ similarity of projects (e.g. playgrounds) ▪ additional work of officials related to errors in project statements	▪ encouraging a broader range of projects through promotional campaigns ▪ including short-term projects (like one-time events) ▪ defining a dedicated budget for the management of the PB, followed by a more specific distribution of municipality employees' duties
Implementation	
▪ relatively low number of implemented projects due to the underestimation of project costs ▪ no separate budget for marketing of the winning projects ▪ exceeding project deadlines due to unforeseen pitfalls of the investment process (e.g. pandemic, economic crisis) ▪ rigid budget framework for a given project	▪ greater flexibility of funds allocated for PB enabling co-financing or transferring funds ▪ reducing the available budget for a single project ▪ creating a reserve budget for the winning projects implementation ▪ providing dedicated funds for winning projects' promotion

Source: authors' own research.

Discussion and conclusions

The main hypothesis of this paper was that the international academic knowledge on PB does not match the practitioners' perspective. A systematic literature review conducted at the beginning of the study revealed the key problems related to PB as described in the global academic databases. These were related to limited representativeness of the population involved, insufficient resources, political bias, and lack of training and understanding of the process.

In this paper, a comprehensive overview of the situation in a selected Polish municipality was presented. The example of Wałbrzych, a city with a long experience in implementing PB, turned out to be very productive in defining the core challenges faced by the local authorities. A moderated, interactive workshop with the representatives of the municipality conducted in November 2023 addressed the following issues: the involvement of residents, the turnout, the role of citizens as project initiators, as well as issues related to the role of the municipal office and the media.

The adopted logic of the study enabled the confrontation of synthesised and generalised knowledge with the practical experience of particular people involved in the PB process. In fact, some elements of the academic perspective did not match the practical experience of the real PB in Wałbrzych. The potential risk of political manipulation of the PB process, which is often described in the literature, does not seem to affect the analysed Polish municipality. The PB in Wałbrzych appears to be transparent and does not raise any ethical issues related to political bias.

However, other issues raised in academic writing largely correlate to the Wałbrzych experience. First, in recent years, the participation of residents in the participatory budget in Wałbrzych has declined. Fewer people submit project proposals and fewer people vote. This simple observation reflects a broader trend observed in the global West, referred to as "democratic malaise" (Kupchan 2012), which calls for an in-depth analysis of the reasons and possible solutions.

Declining participation in participatory budgeting may have many causes, including a natural decrease in motivation due to the disappearance of the novelty effect, exhaustion of initiatives that are of interest to residents, disappointment with those implemented so far that do not fully meet citizens' needs, poor communication, or voting limited to the online channel. An important demotivating factor can be the lack of timely completion of winning projects, leading to a sense of lack of agency. Residents may not see the point in voting for new projects if those already selected have not been implemented. It is worth considering the causes of this problem and looking for solutions that will allow projects to be implemented more effectively, e.g. through deliberative selection of the location in space, a more realistic budget, or reducing the size of projects to shorten their time horizon.

An indispensable aspect of participatory budgeting is a systematic diagnosis of residents' needs. The lack of such research makes it difficult to identify areas that could be covered by projects. It is worth considering to conduct a comprehensive diagnosis, which would allow for a better understanding of residents' needs and facilitate the idea generation processes.

It is also important that the Wałbrzych PB projects are properly named and described. Some of the names are unclear and it is difficult to understand what they are about, which

can discourage voting. The example of communication about the brine tower shows that PB education is possible and can be effective.

Communication between the municipality, citizens and the media is crucial for the success of PB. The city's activity at each stage of the consultation is important, and the systematisation of relations with the media and the most active project initiators is also worth considering. It is possible to involve the media for example as a way to motivate residents not only to participate in voting but also in preparing and submitting the project statements.

An underestimated aspect of PB is how its organisation fits into the structure of the municipal office and the distribution of tasks among its employees. In Wałbrzych, the responsibilities related to the PB are divided among several departments, and the PB is one of the many tasks for which they are responsible. The specificity of the PB requires a wide range of skills, including marketing and communication, which can be difficult for civil servants to master, creating particular problems in the implementation of very diverse and demanding tasks. In the absence of a separate budget for the management of the PB, this is a real challenge for the local government, especially when legislation imposes a certain organisational framework and reduces flexibility.

In summary, participatory budgeting in Wałbrzych is currently facing many challenges, most of which reflect the trends observed globally. Declining participation and growing discouragement affect both citizens and municipal officials. It is clear that PB needs more attention and action; it needs to rethink its conceptual structure, diagnose residents' needs, present projects clearly and ensure effective communication between the city, citizens and the media. Further action would benefit from knowledge of good practices that are effective in other cities of a similar size, as well as from the results of other scientific studies that show possible solutions to solve or prevent current problems.

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