

A CHARTER FOR GOOD PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

*THE OFFICE OF THE PLENIPOTENTIARY OF THE SLOVAK GOVERNMENT
FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY
FACULTY OF ARTS OF COMENIUS UNIVERSITY IN BRATISLAVA
WORKING GROUP "PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING"*

INTRODUCTION

The first attempts at participatory budgeting in Slovakia appeared a decade ago in 2011. Since then, more than sixty-five local governments and half of the self-governing regions have tried it. The diversity of approaches to participatory budgeting is particularly interesting and is related to the lack of legislation or clearer guidance in this area; however, the diversity of approaches should not be necessarily regarded as something undesirable. Participatory budgeting should reflect, at least to some extent, the specific context in which it will be used, and it should take into account the objectives that are crucial for the local government that is implementing it. At the same time, it should be noted that diversity has its limits. Participatory budgeting cannot be reduced to subsidy schemes or other public budgeting instruments. It goes far beyond these steps and requires much more interaction between the involved parties.

Participatory budgeting is far more than just a matter of redistributing and then using allocated public resources. Participatory budgeting leads to both tangible and intangible changes in the quality of life of local communities, in the relationship between citizens and their local government, and in the quality of local democracy. It enriches individuals, communities, and local governments through the sharing of experiences and the acquisition of new skills and knowledge. It transforms local governments from being hard-to-reach and incomprehensible labyrinths of departments delivering public services into real people who listen to the needs of their fellow citizens. Citizens are transformed from passive recipients of public services into active individuals and groups who participate in defining the public interest and the means of achieving it. This results in a better mutual understanding, engagement in public space, the elimination of various prejudices and stereotypes, and an increased level of satisfaction for all participants in the process.

These facts led to the creation of an initiative backed by The Office of the Plenipotentiary of the Slovak Government for the Development of the Civil Society and a research project at the Faculty of Arts of Comenius University in Bratislava entitled “Innovations in Local Government Budgeting in Slovakia”. Thanks to this connection, a working group composed of experts from local governments, elected representatives, academics, and representatives of NGOs and professional associations was formed in late 2020. In order to primarily help local government representatives navigate the topic, the working group took inspiration from examples in Portugal and Scotland and developed a charter containing the principles of good participatory budgeting tailored to local conditions. The content of the charter was consulted with other stakeholders, including project applicants, local government participatory budgeting coordinators, and elected representatives. The experiences and comments that were gathered were then carefully considered and sensitively incorporated into the final text of the charter.

The principles included in this charter are not listed according to their importance. Instead, they are intertwined and complementary. Moreover, the list of principles is not final and does not limit the creativity and diversity of approaches to participatory budgeting. The principles offered here are open to discussion and critical reflection. At the same time, the consideration of other possible principles should not be in conflict with the principles set out in this charter.

The charter is not a binding norm, and there was no such ambition during its preparation. There is no need to look for unquestionable academic terminology in the charter. After all, the charter is the product of those who are most involved and most able to benefit from it. The charter is mostly intended as a tool for inspiration and self-reflection on the employed practices. Rather than providing a list of specific steps leading automatically to a set goal, the charter offers ways to achieve good participatory budgeting. Nonetheless, one should bear in mind the fact that participatory budgeting will only ever be as good as the importance, energy, and understanding given to it by the local governments implementing it, and the trust and interest it can inspire in its participants.

Be inspired.

The background consists of several thick, overlapping brushstrokes in shades of yellow and orange, creating a dynamic and textured effect. The strokes are curved and layered, giving a sense of movement and depth.

*GOOD PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING
SHOULD BE...*

CAREFULLY PLANNED

- **Carefully planned participatory budgeting means thinking carefully about each step over time.**
- The introduction of participatory budgeting is not a goal in itself but rather a means to achieving a stated goal.
- Planning requires the ability to be strategic. Participatory budgeting is just one tool for participation in and the co-creation of the future of local government. It interconnects with past, present, and future activities to collectively form a whole.

How do we know that participatory budgeting is carefully planned?

- It follows a specific and clear goal.
- Alternatives were considered. We took into account the different ways of involving citizens and addressing their needs, and participatory budgeting was appropriately chosen from a wide range of participation tools.
- We do not start from scratch or base things on just one specific experience. We know of various local and international examples of good practices and pitfalls of participatory budgeting. We carefully weigh the possibilities and risks in terms of the local conditions.
- We know the available capacities of the local government in terms of human and financial resources. We have considered the readiness of staff as well as the involvement of external collaborators (local leaders and civic associations).
- We have selected a suitable coordinator who has a respected and stable position within the local government and clearly defined responsibilities, and who works closely with various departments and elected officials.
- Local government employees feel that they are part of the process. They understand their roles in each stage of the process and have ownership of them.
- Elected officials are prepared to respect the public's decision.
- We know who makes up local civil society. We have identified the relevant NGOs and vulnerable groups, and we have a plan to involve them in the process.
- The conditions for submitting a project are clear and comprehensible, and they can be met by any inhabitant.
- Participatory budgeting rules are predictable and fixed over the course of a cycle (*vis maior*).

OPEN

- **Open participatory budgeting means having an open door policy during the process.**
- It does not create needless barriers (be they physical, information, attitudinal, or otherwise), and it does everything possible to remove them.
- It is open to any opinion – be it positive or negative, relevant or irrelevant, or informed or uninformed. It accepts these opinions while providing insights from a different perspective.

How do we know that participatory budgeting is open?

- We can enter the process at any time, while respecting the rules and timetable.
- We are also considering the involvement of inhabitants who are still children and of visitors.
- Public meetings and activities are carried out at venues providing access for the disabled.
- We provide participants with timely, comprehensible, clear, and user-friendly information on how and when they can participate in participatory budgeting.
- We publish information in plain language and in a user-friendly form. We keep the convenience of the recipients in mind.
- All important records (documents, invitations, meeting minutes, decisions, results, and photographs) are available and easily accessible to different target groups.
- Public feedback shows that the process is clear and understandable. Inhabitants can see the current state of affairs and where things are headed.

INCLUSIVE

- **Inclusive participatory budgeting means adjusting the environment so that no one feels alienated.**
- Everyone is free to express themselves without fear. Every opinion is respected and not ridiculed.
- Inclusive participatory budgeting connects and integrates people and does not divide them.

How do we know that participatory budgeting is inclusive?

- We see difference as something that we can benefit from as a community.
- We identify who is involved in the process, and we know who is missing. We dedicate space, time, and money in recruitment to ensure that participatory budgeting reaches those who would not be reached otherwise.
- We provide help to all who need it.
- We create a safe environment for socially excluded groups and marginalized people, and we help amplify their voices.
- We respect the needs and suggestions presented by the public, and we take them seriously. We do not label them as “unworkable”. Instead, we look for ways to make things happen.
- We create a welcoming, safe, and informal environment for getting to know each other and for discussion and collaboration. We are good hosts, and we value public participation.
- Even though we are all different, everyone feels comfortable being involved in the process because they are respected.

MOTIVATING AND EMPOWERING

- **Motivating and empowering participatory budgeting means that it gets inhabitants interested in participating in change, and it gives them a real say in local government.**
- It empowers inhabitants and gives them the right to help decide on where resources should be allocated.
- It also motivates cooperation with other people and entities, and it strengthens community building and mutual relationships.

How do we know that participatory budgeting is motivating and empowering?

- We can communicate the fact that the issue is not abstract. It affects us all, including the functioning and quality of life in our community.
- We regularly report on what has been already achieved and what more we can achieve.
- If inhabitants do not come to the local government, then the local government shall go to the inhabitants. We proactively visit existing networks, communities, and facilities, and we inform them about what can be done and how and when they can get involved.
- We go to places where people have already gathered (e.g. festivals, fairs, and other local events). Public events can be sites for certain phases of participatory budgeting (introductory presentations, collections of ideas, the launching of voting, and the announcement of results).
- We maintain a pool of ideas throughout the year and address their creators when a new appeal is launched. Even a small idea or an initially unsupported project proposal may prove to be significantly beneficial over time.
- We create space for community and public meetings, and we try to connect similar projects.
- Inhabitants feel that they can sort out their suggestions and proposals.
- Inhabitants can have a better overview of the public resources that are allocated to improving public spaces based on their ideas.

EDUCATIONAL

- **Educational participatory budgeting means that the parties leave the process with more knowledge than they had when they entered it.**
- Education is a two-way street. Inhabitants learn how local governments work, and local governments become more familiar with their needs, requirements, and ideas. Local governments learn to accept that inhabitants may want things done differently, and they recognize the benefits of public involvement.
- Although education is a natural part of the process, sometimes its potential remains untapped. Above all, this should be seen as a great opportunity.

How do we know that participatory budgeting is educational?

- Inhabitants become familiar with the functioning of their local government. They learn to understand its processes, what its competences are, what documents it is governed by, how the budget is made, and what parties need to be invited to the decision making. They learn about their own room for manoeuvre.
- Inhabitants learn to express their own opinions, present them, defend them, and take responsibility for them.
- Inhabitants learn about project thinking and acquire the skills to apply for additional grant resources beyond the participatory budget.
- Inhabitants better understand their place in the community and in their local government. They understand why it is important for them and where it can be beneficial.
- Local governments best know their own residents and communities alongside their needs and specific characteristics. They are also aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in their functioning.
- Local governments begin to see inhabitants as being competent in collective decision making. Inhabitants are less critical and are more actively involved in bringing about change.
- There is a mutual respect that comes with self-knowledge and personal experience.
- Participatory budgeting is a common part of the functioning of schools and other local government institutions (e.g. retirement homes and libraries).

DELIBERATIVE

- **Deliberative participatory budgeting is about listening, being heard, and making responsible decisions.**
- Deliberation is an independently facilitated discussion, which allows for the expression and argumentation of any opinion as well as the hearing and consideration of the views of others. This forms the basis (filter) for good and proper decisions.
- It is the counterpoint that balances the voting. This is not a popularity contest for projects but rather a perception of responsibility in collective decision making. This is why we want to hear about the benefits and drawbacks.
- It is an important moment of interconnectedness, community cohesion, and resilience. It is an important moment for building trust between inhabitants, local government, and the outcomes of public policy.
- Deliberation results in an agreement on a generally beneficial solution which may take the form of a recommendation or a binding decision.

How do we know that participatory budgeting is deliberative?

- We use methods and techniques that allow people to formulate their views and encourage debate.
- We have invested resources and created an environment for people to learn and share ideas, give feedback, and help improve, enhance, and connect projects, or even cancel them if need be.
- Ideas and opinions can change during the process. We are able to step back from our assertions in favour of someone else's ideas, and we can recognize that other projects may have a higher priority.
- The feasibility and quality of projects increases during the process. The “castles in the air” are coming down to earth.
- Participants are more aware of local needs and opportunities. They show a greater openness and willingness to discuss sensitive issues and accept change.
- Participatory budgeting is not a competition but rather a form of cooperation.

CREDIBLE

- **Credible participatory budgeting means that it shall not be abused for personal or political gain and that inhabitants will have faith in the fact that everything we do is for the common good.**
- It is closely intertwined with openness, which is a prerequisite for achieving credibility.

How do we know that participatory budgeting is credible?

- It has a civic dimension rather than a political one. We do not associate it with specific political figures but rather with the identity of the local government. It is an idea that supports the activities and the will of the inhabitants.
- We have chosen a coordinator who is acceptable for everyone. This is a person who is pleasant, non-confrontational, communicative, and respected. They are someone who is fair to any individual or group.
- We involve inhabitants in the preparation of the rules of the participatory budget and especially in the discussion on who will decide on the projects to be supported and how this will be done (if necessary, by determining the basis of the criteria).
- The decision-making rules are clear, and everyone understands how the decision was reached.
- We manage public resources fairly. We trust that funding will be used efficiently and will not be wasted. We seek consultation on the implementation of projects so that applicants and inhabitants get exactly what they want.
- Inhabitants feel that the local government is listening to them.

SUSTAINABLE

- **Sustainable participatory budgeting means that this is a process which makes sense if it is repeated over time.**
- The process can be exhausted. If it achieves its goal, it can be replaced by other forms of participation. A meaningful end to the process is not contrary to sustainability, but it must not be based on arbitrariness.

How do we know that participatory budgeting is sustainable?

- It is not a one-off matter but rather part of a long-term strategy.
- It is not subject to political influence or a change of leadership. It can exceed the length of an electoral cycle.
- We will anchor the rules that have worked well into binding local government documents.
- We have secured resources in the budget and are creating the conditions for its development.
- A team of people is built around the coordinator, and they regularly talk and move the process forward.
- We support the training and skills development of the organizing team (e.g. facilitation, communication and social networks, civic technologies, deliberation methods, and group work techniques).
- We provide the documentation of processes and an initiation into the key matters to be dealt with when key employees are replaced.
- It is ingrained in the life of local governments, and it is perceived by inhabitants as a natural part of them.

CREATIVE AND FLEXIBLE

- **Participatory budgeting is creative and flexible when it responds to situations that have arisen, and it is not afraid to experiment.**

How do we know that participatory budgeting is creative and flexible?

- Participatory budgeting is attractive for its participants.
- We do not get discouraged if something is not working. We are willing to look for solutions.
- We communicate and meet with the public at a time and in a manner that is convenient for the participants.
- We ask for feedback. We acknowledge participants' needs and requests, and we respond to them.
- We review the rules on an annual basis. The ability for redesigning is a precondition within the rules.
- We adapt the process to what is happening in local governments (e.g. if we are aware of underrepresented groups or burning issues, we can focus projects on them in a given year).
- We exchange experiences, follow trends, and keep up with local and international developments.



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