Electronic Communication Tools in Participatory Budgeting as a Tool for Activating Participation and Deliberation. The Case of Poland

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Abstract: Participatory budgeting is treated as a form of social consultation (with the difference that its results are binding on the government), which is one of the tools of participatory democracy and public co-management. In practice, the institution of participatory budgeting combines, to varying degrees, elements of both direct and deliberative democracy, depending on the country in which it is implemented.

This study aims to analyze electronic communication tools used in participatory budgeting in Poland in terms of activating residents to participate and deliberate in the decision-making process. The following research questions are addressed: 1) What electronic communication tools are used in the participatory budgeting process in Warsaw and Cracow, Poland? 2) At what stages of participatory budgeting are electronic tools used in Warsaw and Cracow (e.g., is it possible for residents to submit projects electronically; is it possible to vote electronically)? 3) What are the residents' opinions on the electronic tools used in participatory budgets in these cities? 4) Do electronic communication tools increase residents' participation in the participatory budgeting process? 5) Do electronic communication tools increase residents' engagement in debates related to the participatory budgeting process? The research hypothesis will be tested, according to which high hopes placed on the use of modern information and communication technologies to increase public participation and citizen deliberation in the decision-making process have encountered various obstacles to their implementation, and their implementation has facilitated participation but not deliberation.

The research process determined that electronic communication tools allow citizens to access information digitally. Such tools can amplify citizens' voices and improve the quality of public services, but only if the technology is properly designed and linked to real, useful institutional and social pathways. The issue of access inequality is highlighted, as these tools can amplify the voices of those with access and digital skills. It should also be emphasized that not every resident has the opportunity to use electronic tools, which leads to digital exclusion, affecting mainly older people. Additionally, the possibility of using specific features of new technologies and the properties of public media to manipulate public opinion was noticed in the research process. For these reasons, electronic communication tools seem to be most effective when they complement existing budgeting procedures; that is, they are one of the elements of a hybrid control and repair system, especially in the field of deliberation. The research showed that modern technologies and traditional ways of communicating in participatory budgeting are not separate from each other.

The research process involved an in-depth analysis of scientific discourse on the interrelationships between the use of electronic tools in participatory budgeting, resident participation, and deliberative processes. Primary source analysis encompassed statistical data, legal acts, reports, and evaluation documents of participatory budgeting in Warsaw, and Cracow. A critical analysis of public discourse proved useful in examining the opinions expressed by the residents of Warsaw and Cracow. These opinions were expressed both during the evaluation process after each edition of the participatory budget in both cities and in the media (journalistic articles and reports on the implementation of winning projects).