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Redistributing Power or Signalling Openness? Youth Participatory Budgeting in Central and Northern Europe. The case of Poland and Finland

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Abstract

Despite the growing popularity of Youth Participatory Budgeting (YPB), its capacity to redistribute decision-making power remains contested. This article examines whether YPB constitutes a meaningful mechanism of power redistribution or primarily functions as a tool signalling institutional openness to youth participation. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in four cities—two in Finland and two in Poland—it explores how relationships between adult stakeholders and young people shape the design, implementation, and outcomes of YPB. The analysis focuses on the roles of adult actors — including politicians, public administrators, NGO representatives, and teachers — as key interpreters and organisers of participatory processes, and assesses how their practices influence the extent to which power is shared with young participants. The study is based on 29 semi-structured interviews conducted between 2022 and 2025 with stakeholders involved in YPB. The findings indicate that while YPB formally expands opportunities for youth engagement, its capacity to redistribute decision-making power remains limited. In practice, participation is strongly mediated by adult actors, whose interpretations, organisational routines, and control over key stages of the process constrain youth influence. As a result, YPB tends to operate less as a mechanism of substantive empowerment and more as an instrument signalling openness and responsiveness within local governance.