

BOOK REVIEW

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Abstract:

Book review of: De Vries, M. S., Nemeč, J. and Špaček, D. (2022). *International Trends in Participatory Budgeting: Between Trivial Pursuits and Best Practices*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. ISBN 978-3-030-79929-8. *A book review (written by Jozef Gašparík, Comenius University in Bratislava)*

JEL classification: H61

Participatory budgeting has been part of public policy-making since 1989. It has been part of the governance of communities, local governments and other public institutions in various forms worldwide for three decades. In response to the expanding application of this phenomenon, there is a growing need for analytical exploration of it. The book entitled “International Trends in Participatory Budgeting: Between Trivial Pursuits and Best Practices” (2022), edited by experienced and internationally renowned experts (Michiel S. De Vries, Juraj Nemeč and David Špaček), provides a comprehensive researchers' perspective on participatory budgeting in Europe and specifically on its introduction and implementation in the Central and Eastern European countries.

A total of 28 authors (from Belarus, Brazil, Croatia, the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Hungary, Germany, Poland, Romania, Russia, Italy, Slovenia, Slovakia, Serbia, and Sweden), who are experts in the functioning of local democracies and the operation of local governments, have contributed their inputs to the content of this publication. Their previous research has focused, among other things, on innovative elements of democracy, most of them focusing on the CEE region. In the context of their activities to date, it is not surprising that they have chosen to focus on participatory budgeting, an interesting but hitherto under-researched area. Moreover, several of these authors have also worked as consultants in preparing various public policies, which has allowed them to see the topic from several perspectives.

The book consists of 15 separate chapters. The first chapter, authored by De Vries, Špaček, Nemeč and Genro, describes the beginnings of participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre. Tarso Genro, as one of the direct actors in the introduction and further use of this innovation, offers his first-hand perspective on the experience gained, which adds relevance and authenticity to the content presented in the chapter. For the other chapters, which map participatory budgeting initiatives in selected European countries, this first chapter is also a good introduction, allowing readers to more easily understand the reason for and importance of this democratic innovation in the field of budgeting.

The following 13 chapters provide a fairly comprehensive picture of the experience with the introduction and further use of participatory budgeting in different European countries. The authors mainly describe practical experiences in their chapters, but they do not shy away from examples of good and bad practices or from various specific elements and tendencies. At the same time, the authors make use of a broad database (e.g., on the number and development of participatory budgeting initiatives, on public involvement in related processes, on the amounts of funds allocated for participatory budgeting purposes), which helps the readers to form a sufficiently rounded picture of the phenomenon described and analysed.

The last chapter summarises the individual findings and the identification of common and different elements. Its authors (De Vries, Nemeč and Špaček) point in particular to three main findings. First, they note that the first participatory budgeting initiative introduced in Porto Alegre differs significantly from the practice in the countries studied. In other words, this initiative played the role of a political inspiration. Although it retained its original terminology in different circumstances, it was considerably modified in terms of content, not only in terms of the instruments used but also in terms of the objectives. An example is the empowerment of excluded communities, which was one of the central elements of the original Brazilian model, but which played

only a secondary role in the conditions of Central and Eastern Europe countries. Second, participatory budgeting and its diffusion show that the process is not only lengthy and uncertain in countries with a relatively short experience of representative democracy but that several countries that are considered to be established representative democracies offer similar stories. The common denominator here appears to be political will. This may be influenced by various factors or drivers, such as limited resources, the extent of the competencies and autonomy of local governments, a tradition of representative democracy that does not actively call for the introduction of elements of direct democracy, or current societal developments in the country in question. Third, the fear or reluctance of local government leaders to allocate a larger proportion of public budgets and the purpose of participatory budgeting appears to be a vicious circle. The public perceives the small amount of funds so earmarked as demotivating, and public participation in these initiatives is not high. Electoral leaders perceive the low level of public participation as equally demotivating and read it as a message from the public indicating their lack of interest in co-determining the use of public funds. In this context, it will be extremely interesting to see whether the compulsory use of participatory budgeting, which has only recently been introduced in Poland, for example, will help to overcome this vicious circle.

At this point I will summarise the most important contributions of this publication. The first is the breadth of its focus, or rather the number of cases it offers. The publication provides an expert perspective on the practical grasp of participatory budgeting across 13 European countries. The authors of the individual chapters offer insights into the first experiences with participatory budgeting in the countries studied, including information on the first local governments and their institutional foundations necessary to launch the relevant processes. In addition, these chapters also provide information on the further diffusion of this innovation in each country. An interesting element is the variety of terminology used to refer to similar or even identical processes in the countries studied.

In an interesting way, the publication shows that the phases of participatory budgeting can differ even within several examples of the same country. The authors try to take into account a larger number of cases and compare them with each other to reveal both similarities and differences between them. This also makes it possible to identify countries where participatory budgeting processes lean more towards the uniform and countries where participatory budgeting processes differ significantly in different cases. Another important element mentioned by the authors is the role of citizens and the third sector. The publication works with data on the use of participatory budgeting, making it possible to compare the countries studied with each other to some extent. At the same time, it is possible to learn about the roles of civil society in the preparation and implementation of participatory processes.

An interesting part is also the information on the amounts of earmarked funds that citizens can redistribute through this innovative tool. The publication gives readers a better idea of the financial range of the different local governments or institutions that have applied participatory processes in the countries studied. The authors of individual chapters also provide insights into the relevant legislative arrangements for participatory budgeting. On this basis, it is possible to consider whether the inhabitants of a given country have a legal right to this instrument or whether it is rather the will of the political leaders and inhabitants of a given local government that leads to the introduction and further use of participatory budgeting in practice.

Each chapter summarises a number of factors and drivers that have influenced the development and shape of participatory budgeting in a given country. It considers the role of citizens and the legislature in scaling up and implementing the process in practice. This allows readers to answer questions about how participatory budgeting has spread in the countries studied, the legislative anchorage and institutional background of participatory processes in these countries, and the role and power of citizens or the non-governmental sector through participation. Of course, the authors do not shy away from identifying the barriers and limits that local governments have faced in introducing participatory budgeting, which potentially still hinder the further spread of this democratic innovation.

In conclusion, this publication brings new insights and policy implications that can be used both in international comparative research and in practice. I can therefore recommend it not only as a must-read for all those directly interested in participatory budgeting but also as an interesting and inspiring reading for those interested in the quality of local democracy, the functioning of local governments, and the role and participation of citizens in the governance of public affairs.

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Mgr. Jozef Gašparík - PhD. student at Comenius University in Bratislava. He is the author of several publications mainly oriented towards participatory budgeting in Slovakia and Czechia. He also worked as an expert at Trnava self-governing unit where he was introducing participatory budgeting at high schools.