

“Participatory Budgeting: Potentials and Limitations”

Building open governance is a challenge and desire for all communities. Hence the importance of collecting and exchanging experience on how to put the basic principles of good governance into practice. If public governance is to benefit citizens better, some of the principles that need to be given substance are: transparency, efficiency, accountability, respect for the rule of law and high standards of ethical behaviour. Bulgaria did a lot to enhance state and municipal governments' openness and encourage citizen engagement and participation throughout the past two decades.

oOo

Public participation in municipal budget forming is regulated by two enactments. A state law under the terms of which the Mayor of each municipality draws a budget draft, taking into account public suggestions and requests, and presents it for public discussion. A local ordinance, passed by each municipal council, describing the procedures of the public participation.

Shumen municipality, which I represent, have their own ordinance dealing with local participatory budgeting practices, namely “Ordinance on Conditions and Procedures for Establishment, Implementation and Reporting on Municipal Budget”. Such practices include discussion events like public meetings, press conferences, round tables and discussion forums.

Practice has shown us that public discussion of the budget draft go into five sections or panels, as follows:

- > first panel discusses budget framework
- > second panel talks over capital expenditures
- > third, fourth and fifth panels discuss operational expenditures on educational and youth activities, healthcare and social activities and cultural activities respectively.

Each discussion is protocolled and all protocols are presented to the Municipal Council, together with the Mayor's budget draft and the other residents' suggestions and requests made throughout the year.

oOo

The first several cases, which I would like to present to you are examples for participatory budgeting practices about capital expenditures:

1st

To promote citizens' participation the Municipality Council announced a competition for ideas, named "My idea about Shumen", which everyone's proposals were welcome. An idea for installation of a skateboarding equipment, proposed by three 19-year-old boys, prevailed. Their idea was the basis for the construction of a completely new park named "Students' Park" with not just skateboarding equipment, but also with handball and volleyball playgrounds, special place for a mountable stage, a graffiti wall, lawns and gardens and a playground specially designed for the youngest :)

The project, cost 2.5 million leva and was fully funded by the Municipality satisfying the adventurous spirit of the City's youth.

2nd

"Kyoshkovete" forest park, which is within the city limits had its infrastructural renovations after suggestions made by city residents during the public discussion events throughout the year. The Municipality Council launched a project, which met the approval of the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy. Half of the funds were at the expense of the municipality and other half was funded by the Ministry.

3rd:

A residential district community asked for their playground's renovation and the Municipality Council funded the project.

4th:

Following a number of proposals, public discussions and complaints about the state of the central city garden, the Municipality found a solution by launching a project for reconstruction of both the whole city centre and the garden. The project received approval and was co-funded by the European Union. The reconstruction was brought to an end and found favour with the public who consider the project a great success.

5th:

At the request of 166 individuals living in one of the city suburbs, mainly inhabited by Roma population, a playground was built, water and sanitation facilities were constructed and new asphalt was laid on six streets.

6th:

We receive numerous requests for new kindergartens due to lack of capacity, so we managed to acquire a suitable building from the Ministry of Education and Science and converted it into a fully operational kindergarten providing daycare for more than 60 children, which meets the current needs of one neighborhood. The construction of another kindergarten has also been started in another area, which is due to be open by the end of the year.

7th:

By requests of the people residing at the home for elderly people their home is being relocated to other premises, providing more comfortable life. The project is mainly funded by Municipal budget with a small state co-funding.

o operational expenditures o

Next I would like to draw to your attention some examples of participatory budgeting cases about operational expenditures:

o education and youth o

Regarding Educational expenditures there is some state legislation from 2008 providing participatory method for managing public school budgets. The schools are funded on “per student” basis, and the fund management is completely delegated to the school administration, contrary to the old practice of Municipal allocation of the educational budget. The experimental implementation of the legislation was in Shumen 5 years earlier.

Forthcoming is the introduction of similar practices of managing kindergarten budgets.

Citizens of Shumen receive Municipal funding of their own educational initiatives. Examples are the numerous educational activities

conferences, round tables, scientific researches, archeological excavations, school olympiads, ecology related campaigns and activities.

A lot of sports clubs established by mainly young people, find their only financial support in the face of the municipality. A recent example is the paraglider launchpad which is currently being constructed after requests from citizens practicing the sport.

o healthcare and social o

The Municipality is the sole owner of the capital of 5 healthcare facilities and partial owner of another 2 within the city limits. Prioritization for maintenance of the buildings is usually delegated either to the medical society or put on general public discussion where patient organizations participate.

The oncological center has been relocated to a specially reconstructed building, with municipal funding of 4.5 million leva and provision of the building.

The pneumo-phthisiological center has also been relocated to a better and larger building, built specially for the purpose. The project was municipally funded, even though we had to sell 51% of the capital to the state, to raise the funds.

Another aspect of public budgeting is related to social activities. Senior people have requested for appropriate places to organize their social gatherings and currently there are 16 senior clubs, with their own municipally funded budgets. Those senior clubs often receive additional resources for their amateur activities and additional equipment. Half of these clubs were provided with free internet access upon their request.

The disabled fellow citizens have requested from the municipality and have been provided with special premises for gathering and for educational facilities. For example there is a newly created center for people with visual impairments, where they can use a specially adapted for their needs computer, read some braille books or participate in the activity classes under guidance. Such an activity class is this art class in which beautiful handmade souvenir are created.

We have made one more facility for meeting social needs of the physically disabled people.

Unfortunately wheelchair access provision is not as widely available as we would like it to be, due to lack of enough funds. Our municipality has succeeded providing wheelchair access to all public buildings and pedestrian street crossings in the city center, as well in some schools.

o cultural activities o

Shumen Municipality funds a lot of cultural events initiated by different groups of citizens.

An annual theatrical festival “New Bulgarian Drama” initiated by the actors’ society, brings the best theatrical companies to Shumen stage performing contemporary plays. The event is very popular and widely enjoyed.

The international violin and piano contest, named after the great Bulgarian composer “Pancho Vladigerov”, takes place every two years. Initiated by the art society it gives an opportunity to the young musicians to show their talents.

A revival of the Shumen Fortress battle from 1444, initiated by patriotic organizations, reminds us every two years of the great heroes from bulgarian history.

“Biodiversity Day” initiated last year for the first time by the boy scouts of Shumen propagates environment preservation culture among young people. The initiative proved to be very popular and I hope this would become an annual event.

oOo

In the last two decades the challenge for local governances in Bulgaria has been to introduce participatory models of governing to the public. So far Shumen municipality has had a lot of progress in engaging citizens to participate in public decision making. There is still a lot to be done in order to rise citizen awareness of their position as source of power. In future we have intentions to further develop communication through innovative practices such as establishing an online dialogue with people increasing they participation in budget forming.