

# Participatory Budget of Lisbon

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Participatory budgets (PBs) allocate a share of the local public budget to citizen-led initiatives. While aiming to get the most marginalised groups of civil society closer to democratic institutions and representatives, the first PBs were celebrated by movements and parties on the left of the political spectrum for their capacity to foster social justice, transparency, and accountability. In the last few decades, PBs have been endorsed by international agencies and contributed significantly to the development of good governance mechanisms.

participatory budget

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Lisbon

## 1. Introduction

In the last few decades, spreading scepticism towards democratically elected governments and their institutions, along with a shared need to improve democratic decision-making, has convinced public authorities to promote participatory processes in policy making [1][2]. At the end of the 1980s, a particular category of participatory practices came to the fore: Participatory Budgets (PB hereafter). Initiated in Latin America, PBs provided new impetus to participatory processes by allocating a share of the local public budget to citizen-led initiatives. During the 1990s and 2000s, international agencies such as the World Bank, United Nations, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, and European Union endorsed the PB for its potential to recover citizenry trust towards democracy. The magnitude of its dissemination reached the five continents, with higher rates in Latin America and Europe [3]. The disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic, however, has had major impacts over the implementation of participatory processes in general and PBs in particular, as public authorities were required to prioritise immediate responses to the global contagion of the coronavirus, at the expense of PB projects [4].

In 2019, Portugal was the European country with the highest rate of local PBs implemented out of a national legal framework [3]. The enthusiasm around the PB dates to the early 2000s and then grew exponentially after the Lisbon PB in 2008/2009 [5], which marked the first city-wide PB implemented by a European capital and introduced a new model of direct participation. Citizens have since been invited to submit and vote ideas for public funding in all policy domains, including urban sustainability within the thematic area “environment, green structure, and energy”. However, only in 2020 did a more explicit and tangible link emerge between Lisbon’s PB and urban sustainability. As Lisbon received the European Green Capital Award (EGCA hereafter) and subsequently announced the launch of a Green PB, it raised great interest worldwide. This promising turn of events and of policy attention towards more sustainable urban agendas was shaken by the global pandemic (Covid-19), yet, as we will

see, the city council strove to keep its political promise to shift the thematic focus of the PB towards urban sustainability, incorporating the European Green Deal into the 2021 version of the Lisbon PB.

The recent global pandemic has added to the already abundant calls for greater attention to the health of ecosystems and to the negative impacts of rapid urbanisation and of cities on local and global sustainability [6][7]. Two notable trends seem relevant here: first, the growing role of cities in national and international agreements promoting sustainability (see Sustainable Development Goal 11, UN General Assembly 2015) and related agendas for climate mitigation and adaptation, and reducing biodiversity loss [8]; second, the growing demand for nature-based solutions which identifies the participation of citizens and businesses as key [9][10].

## 2. Conceptual Framework: Urban Sustainability and Citizen Participation

Since the origins of the concept of sustainable development based on the balance between ecological sustainability and human needs, the urban dimension has been a significant part of the global debate. Already the Brundtland Report of 1987 referred to “the urban challenge” by addressing extreme forms of urbanisation as associated with growing social and environmental problems [11]. However, whereas initially cities tended to be considered mainly as hotspots of environmental hazards, and still are [12], the idea of urban sustainable development nonetheless gained momentum, as urban governments became increasingly seen as drivers of positive change. In the last few years, local governments have sought to implement policies to reduce their ecological footprint and gained international projection [13] for being considered an appropriate administrative level to enable changes in everyday structures and behaviours in the face of global climate change. Hence, sustainability processes are nowadays often analysed on city level, linking environmental improvements to local economic development [14][15].

While the understanding of urban sustainability can range from approaches focusing mostly on the environmental dimension towards others prioritising social justice and well-being [16], the human dimension has gained a more prevalent role during the 1990s. “Social sustainability” has since been evoked to highlight the interdependence between social, economic, and environmental goals [17][18] with a growing concern towards policies aiming to eradicate poverty and social exclusion [18]. In this regard, the need to mitigate environmental hazards is increasingly being linked to calls for wider citizen participation, in order to provide local communities with new conditions to improve their quality of life [19].

Acknowledging the potential of citizen participation for urban sustainability, Hayward [20] suggests looking at participatory processes through the lenses either a deliberative or participatory approach. The former aims at giving the opportunity to a selected poll of citizens to reflect on socio-ecological and human systems [21]. In this type of settings, citizens are asked to construct a new ecological rationality [22], possibly reliant upon multiple governance arrangements [23]. In some cases, deliberative initiatives also engage experts to foster the public debate with citizens, although this may raise concerns as to the growing distrust towards science and political power in green thinking [24][25]. Participatory approaches are rather concentrated on the sharing of power among

multiple agents and are more frequently open to the participation of all citizens [26]. Along with participatory experiences in the field of urban planning [27], the PB is the most known participatory process that encompasses mechanisms aimed at collecting proposals from citizens and allocate public funding for their implementation [28]. However, while the uptake of PBs worldwide has been significant, little is known about its actual contribution to advance urban sustainability.

### 3. The Lisbon Participatory Budget

The Lisbon PB was the first PB implemented on a municipal scale by a European capital, having a major impact over the dissemination of PBs in Portugal and reverberation at the international level [5][29].

Available data show that from 2008 to 2018 the PB has received a total number of 2073 proposals from citizens: 139 out of them were funded based on citizen voting, which covered slightly more than a 36-million-euro budget. Today, the Lisbon PB is one of the longest-running PBs in the country and has recently been awarded as the best 2020 participatory practice by the national network of participatory city councils in Portugal (More information at: <https://op.lisboaparticipa.pt/>, accessed on 12 June 2021). Some scholars have pointed out how the Lisbon PB has contributed to advance urban sustainability, as distinguished by van der Jagt and colleagues [30] in their extensive analysis of 20 cities in 14 EU-countries. Buijs and colleagues [31] similarly suggest that the Lisbon PB provided new conditions for citizens to influence the decision-making and improve their understanding of the implications of urban sustainability, based on the many sustainability-oriented projects funded through the PB, such as paths, parks, gardens, and ecological corridors. “The success in Lisbon is that citizen concern for their urban environment was captured by the L-PB [Lisbon PB] process. It may also be the case that the L-PB process increased awareness of the relevance of green to the public” [31] (p. 42).

The Green PB was one of the various actions planned for 2020, together with tree-planting programs, the (re)opening of a (renewed) public green space each month of the year, and the implementation of a reduced-emissions-zone in Lisbon’s downtown. The Green PB was understood as the first PB of its kind, despite other cities having invested in similar programs, as in the case of Lublin (Poland), Brussels (Belgium), Odemira (Portugal), and Matz and Bordeaux (France). However, neither embraced urban sustainability as an exclusive thematic focus or made available full information regarding procedures and outputs.

Given its scope, the PB shows a significant capacity to readapt its design to dramatic contingencies and build on the international debate on sustainability. Despite the ongoing crisis, and going beyond the PB, the city intends to implement significant environmental changes to ensure sustainable land use, green infrastructure, and water management. As enshrined in the 2012 Lisbon master plan and later highlighted by the Lisbon’s Action Plan for Biodiversity published in 2015, the city aims to expand its green infrastructure by over 200 hectares and create linkages between different green areas through so-called green corridors. In the last few years, the city has invested in developing a more sustainable mobility system based on public transport and cycle networks and has become involved in climate change adaptation and mitigation, culminating into the publication of its Strategy for Climate Change Adaptation in 2017 with a strong commitment to reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

## 4. Green(er) Cities and Their Citizens: Insights from the Participatory Budget of Lisbon

First, the Lisbon PB demonstrated considerable achievements in the “environment, green structure and energy” thematic area, corroborating the idea that citizens are indeed interested in promoting urban sustainability. Proposals and projects cover a wide range of topics, some of them showing the potential to go beyond an engineering-based vision of green spaces and infrastructure, as well as one less aligned with international agendas of climate change and biodiversity loss. Second, the achievements heavily depended on public action by the city council in deciding to invest in specific policies, with reverberations over the types of citizen demands to the PB. Finally, the shift towards a thematic PB in 2020 was not driven by social and political awareness of the PB achievements in terms of urban sustainability, but rather by the pursuit of pedagogical and instrumental (efficiency-led) purposes. The implementation of the 2021 sustainability-oriented PB, however, widens its scope and is likely to hold a potential that may be further analysed in the future. We recommend that data collection and analysis should be systematically carried out and disseminated within city council departments, promoting much needed internal awareness of PBs’ potential as drivers of urban sustainability.

The 2021 PB edition is in progress and it is impossible to retrieve significant up-to-date insights from its outcomes that ought to be addressed in future research. However, we may interpret the low participation rate in the 2021 PB as the need to accommodate society to the idea that now the PB only funds citizen proposals in the field of urban sustainability. It might also relate to the reduced capacity of the city council to capitalise knowledge from past editions and raise awareness about the opportunity to reorientate the PB towards urban sustainability. As we enter the third decade of the 21st century, the pressure and hopes around the role of cities to fight climate change and contribute to reduce biodiversity loss is growing. Agendas, including those based on nature-based solutions, are building momentum and expectations. We believe that a better understanding of the PB potential can make an important contribution towards more sustainable futures, promoting greater awareness and commitment of both citizens and local governments.

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