

Participatory budgeting in the City of Freiburg

<http://www.beteiligungshaushalt.freiburg.de/>

Abstract

The city of Freiburg im Breisgau used the DEMOS approach (<http://www.epractice.eu/cases/demos>) combined with the DEMOS budget planner (www.demos-budget.eu) to conduct a participatory budgeting trial from 7 April to 9 May 2008. The goals were to engage members of the public in participating in planning the city's budget for 2009/10 and to generate ideas and knowledge for savings and efficient spending. In addition, the aspect of gender budgeting was introduced to address gender-specific issues connected to the city's budget.

Policy context and legal framework

The aim of participatory budgeting in Freiburg was to work with members of the public to get an idea of public opinion concerning spending on public services and the impact of that spending on the city's finances.

The public were involved in planning how to use the city's funds: Where is current spending adequate? Where should one economise and where spend more? The answers to these questions have an effect on the living conditions of men and women, of young and old. When one looks more closely at the allocation of funds and at who actually benefits, one can distribute funding in a more target-oriented and sensible fashion.

For this reason a simultaneous discussion about equal opportunities for men and women was stimulated. The inclusion of these issues led the Landesstiftung Baden-Württemberg to allocate funds to the project.

Freiburg's participatory budgeting 2009/2010 was implemented in cooperation with the Landesstiftung Baden-Württemberg as part of the latter's programme "Opportunities=Equality. Equal opportunities for men and women".

Project size

Implementation: €30 000-50 000

Yearly cost: not applicable

Implementation and management approach

The City of Freiburg im Breisgau developed a unique and comprehensive approach to the idea of participatory budgeting. The active phase of the discourse was held from 7 April to 9 May 2008. Three interacting methods for engaging the public in the process of planning the city's budget for 2009/2010 were used to achieve the best possible result:

- DEMOS and the aforementioned budget planner covered the online involvement of the public. The DEMOS platform and the budget planner were designed and tailored to the special needs of Freiburg. The project used the different modules of DEMOS as well as the expert discussion tool . In addition to volunteer participants, 700 people, selected to match the socio-demographic distribution of Freiburg's citizens, were invited directly by the city to participate in the online discourse to provide extra diversity in the discussions and to open up the opportunity of comparing the preferences of the selected group with those of the volunteer participants.
- City and district conferences were used to involve residents in face-to-face discussions. The city of Freiburg committed itself to reaching out to as varied a group of citizens as possible. Consequently the online channel was accompanied by a series of offline events which allowed additional groups of the population to take part in the debate. The conferences used modern approaches to event design that allowed discussions among a large group of people about complicated topics.
- A large-scale representative survey served to provide additional input from those citizens who could not or were unwilling to take part in the more interactive forms of participatory planning.

In addition to the general discussion about Freiburg's budget, the project also included the approach of gender budgeting. When planning a city's budget the importance of including all different points of view cannot be overestimated. Two of the main angles may be those of men and women. This particular issue was addressed by the idea of gender budgeting. Through the inclusion of detailed information about the differing intensity and way of use of various city services in all information material, live discussions with gender experts on the DEMOS online platform, the use of alternative communication channels and the combination of volunteers and selected participants, the gender concept was intrinsic to the whole project . The project was supported by gender experts who contributed their knowledge of gender-specific presentation of information, moderation and the analysis of the process outcome.

As the objective was to anchor the process in the awareness of the general public, several measures for dissemination were implemented. Until May 2008, a tram with the logo of participatory budgeting and an appeal to become involved was running in the city. Posters in the neighbourhoods drew attention to the process as did an Infobus that toured the weekly markets and was staffed by employees of the city administration. The Infobus actively campaigned for participation in the process, and the city employees that staffed it were available to answer questions and to provide detailed information about the budget items. At the beginning of the bus road show, brochures describing the process and the budget items were distributed to all households in the city.

Technology solution

The DEMOS platform is a set of PHP-based web modules to facilitate large-scale eParticipation and online deliberation projects. The system is a server-based web application. The complete program logic runs on the server. The participant only

needs a common web browser. No plug-ins or other proprietary client-side programs are necessary. DEMOS can be used in all safety-enabled areas such as municipal administrations. It is designed as a classical three-tier architecture. The presentation layer uses a high-performance template engine and is able to produce a large variety of formats for web browsers and other devices such as mobile phones. Every aspect of the layout can be customised. DEMOS offers a huge variety of additional software modules, e.g. keyword indexing, GIS-client, webmail, wikis, tagging, surveys, multi-language support. It makes the first real-time online budget planner possible.

The budget planner is an additional application written in PHP (with MySQL as the database backend) which is integrated into DEMOS in a modular fashion. The planner provides an easy-to-use graphical interface which allows users to adjust the discussed budget using sliders. All effects of the changes using the sliders are directly displayed and transparent for the user. The solution can be used independently from the DEMOS online discourse framework.

Impact

Citizens registering for the online platform and participating actively in the online discourse and the budget planner numbered 1861. There were 15 000 visitors counted on the website who viewed 240 000 pages, giving a very high ratio of 16 pages viewed by each visitor. Participants wrote 757 articles in the discussion forums, created 1291 individual budgets for Freiburg (with 914 text-based reasons given) and compiled 22 wikis discussing specific issues to be addressed by Freiburg's public administration. These numbers, in relation to the city's population of only 200 000, show that the participatory budgeting effort succeeded in reaching members of the public and produced valuable results which could be integrated into the political process in Freiburg.

The case was also a test environment for the gender budgeting approach. The relatively high proportion of female participants of 38.5% indicates that the approach was a success. The gender-specific issues concerning the public budget were discussed and the different approaches to them openly stated by the participants. Moderation and cooperation with gender mainstreaming experts helped to achieve this goal. The support of the Landesstiftung Baden-Württemberg and its programme "Opportunities=Equality. Equal opportunities for men and women" were of major importance in this regard. On the other hand, almost no difference could be identified between the budget preferences of female and male participants. The only differences were in the level of changes in budgets, not in their direction.

The whole participatory budgeting effort was firmly integrated in the political and administrative processes of the city. A clear statement of intent was made by the city's officials to integrate the results into the budget planning for 2009/10 and to pick up on the ideas formulated in the online discourse. The DEMOS process and the budget planner provide the ability to aggregate the outcomes of the

process transparently so that they can be fed into the political and administrative processes without causing unnecessary work.

The quantitative results produced by the budget planner had two very promising traits. Firstly there were no radical changes to the budgets even though the participants had the possibility to change every budget in a range from -100% to +100%. The strongest budget change was -23%. This means that the collective results of such a process were very reasonable. Secondly the results of the online budget planner were very similar to those produced by the representative survey mentioned earlier. Therefore using an online tool for participatory budgeting does not lead to unrepresentative results but allows the public to be engaged efficiently in a complex process.

The qualitative results from the online discourse which were compiled by the participants into 22 wikis were further enhanced by the reasons articulated by members of the public through the respective fields of the budget planner. These reasons allow the official representatives of Freiburg to transform the budget planner results into concrete actions, as they contain plans about how exactly to save and spend public money usefully.

Track record of sharing

On 16 May, the case was presented to the eParticipation Workshop in Brussels hosted by the eParticipation study project.

On several occasions the Freiburg effort in participatory budgeting was discussed at eDemocracy-related conferences such as the eDem 08 in Krems or the national participatory budgeting conference in Manchester.

The case was discussed at the participatory budgeting session Netzwerk21 congress in Leipzig on 29-30 September 2008.

It was also briefly a topic at the DIFU workshop on participatory budgeting in Berlin on 10-11 March 2008 while still at the active stage.

TuTech Innovation GmbH used the case in a marketing campaign which targeted all mayors of German cities with more than 15 000 inhabitants.

The case was also shared with different European Commission-funded projects such as the eParticipation study (<http://www.european-e-participation.eu/>) and the Pan-European eParticipation Network (www.pep-net.eu).

Lessons learnt

Online discourses as well as the budget planner as a tool for participatory budgeting exploit the specific communicative potential of the Internet (interactivity, speed and scope) and allow interactive and asynchronous communication between large numbers of participants as well as representatives,

stakeholders or delegates. The threshold for participation is quite low: users can contribute anonymously and spontaneously, as writers or observers, take part in polls, ballots and surveys, or communicate with other users on an equal basis. People can form coalitions effortlessly and discuss certain topics or subtopics of mutual interest. Online discourses can cope with a high level of fluctuation of participants and still achieve concrete results. They can also be regarded as an instrument for interactive public relations, attracting and involving new participants or target groups, raising public awareness and increasing the number of people involved in the decision-making processes.

Several issues had to be addressed in the course of this case and led to the following lessons being learnt:

- 1.) There is a need to aggregate budget data to make it understandable to non-experts. This aggregation attracts criticism from participants who wish for more detailed information, however. This problem was solved by close cooperation with public officials who provided additional data and answered specific questions when required.
- 2.) As in every open discussion, the issue arose of extremely active users consciously or unconsciously trying to dominate the discussion. This problem can only be tackled by moderation and the activities of other participants (e.g. self-moderation).
- 3.) The integration into a larger concept combining online and offline activities helps each of the tools to function more efficiently.
- 4.) Participants demand a clear statement from the public administration that the results of the participatory budgeting process will be integrated into the political process. The fear that the whole process might lead to nothing was articulated frequently by members of the public and has to be taken into account when planning and conducting such a project.