

# Experiences of the City of Cologne with the measure of participatory budgeting

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## **Abstract**

*Since 2007, the City of Cologne has been asking its citizens for advice on how to organize its budget. This contribution reflects the experiences of the City treasurer with this element of citizen participation. The willingness of citizens to participate in the weighting of expenditures, but also in the shaping of the savings targets, shows the great potential of the measure of participatory budgeting.*

Participatory budgeting is a modern and transparent form of citizen participation. The population is actively involved in the planning of public expenditure and revenue. This participation-oriented approach gives citizens the opportunity to contribute their ideas and to discuss how and for what purpose the city should use its finances. The approaches to the implementation of participatory budgeting can vary greatly. For example, the entire budget of a municipality can be discussed or only certain budgetary areas. Alternatively, you can ask for savings potentials or for new sources of income. Each municipality should consider before establishing a participatory budget, what goals they hope to achieve with the participation of the citizenry. Both the objectives of a participatory budget and the fundamental development of the concept of citizen participation should be reviewed on a continuous basis. Thus, the practice shows that the proximity to the reality of life, to the immediate living environment of the people, plays an important role in mobilization potential.

This means that involvement of citizens exclusively in the course of the annual municipal budget no longer corresponds to the current requirements or demands of the city community. This requires an opening and an expansion. In the future, it will be more important to involve the citizens more deeply and with greater relevance to financial issues, on the other hand, to take the leap to the whole year. This can also mean citizen participation during the entire financial year, thus guaranteeing participatory budgeting, allowing for transparent and continuous insights, and further enhancing the overall visibility of the complex municipal budgets, as opposed to a limited, yet detailed perspective.

In addition, this participation strategy allows focus on the long-term effects of urban investments and increases citizens' sensitivity to the city's multi-year financial planning. This is a very important aspect when one considers that to date the population has tended to have the impression that the urban budget has a one-year effect.

For the first time in 2007, the City of Cologne called on its citizens to participate in the budgets for the years 2008 and 2009. The inclusion has resulted in sensitization to the complex issue of the "urban budget", as well as being kept comprehensively and, above all, understandably informed. Since then, participatory budgeting has been part of the annual Cologne budget.

An important aspect of announcing such a plan is the means of publication, especially when the goal is implementing the new measure as widely as possible. In addition to participation in writing or by telephone, internet-based participatory budgeting is an appropriate means to address and motivate an unorganized, but interested, public audience to engage with one another and with the city administration, and intensify it. Proposals can be submitted, discussed, evaluated and commented on. There is no other procedure to allow a correspondingly large number of citizens to be reached in such a short period of participation. Corresponding internet portals serve as a fast information medium and provide feedback to ideas, as well as administration and policy, on the proposals which have been set up, their acceptance in the rest of the population, as well as the details of the entire participation procedure.

The ratings result in a ranking. The resulting TOP lists are examined by the administration for their legal and factual feasibility and brought to the political consultation procedure. Finally, the Cologne City Council can decide on the implementation of selected proposals on the basis of, for example, 2016 participatory budgeting, the best list of 25 proposals per city district and 25 city-wide proposals (see Appendix 1 "Phases of Participatory Budgeting").

This motivation to act as a citizen in the participatory budgeting of the municipality must, for as long as possible, be encouraged and nurtured. The administration achieves this by ensuring that the proclaimed participatory budgets provide interesting content and discussion topics of urban society. Essential here is that participants are taken seriously with their concerns and suggestions and that, in the further selection process, they are also examined, scrutinized and, in the best-case scenario, implemented. As a result, citizens are promoted to knowledge bearers.

The topics to which the population was invited to creatively participate in are multi-faceted. Example topics are "your city, your money", "education / school" and "environmental protection", as well as "children / youth", "economic development", "culture" and "saving". These changing topics of the first proceeding were based on a rolling system. The intended result was that as many suitable budgetary areas as possible, with particularly high external visibility should be represented, with the prospect that similar proposals from previous years can be successively realized, even if they had not yet made the TOP list.

Due to the increasing tension of the budget situation, the City of Cologne decided to give its participatory budgeting a corresponding motto within the framework of the 2013/2014 double budget: "Ideas - the budget planning of the City of Cologne needs sustainable savings proposals". To this extent, the administrative proposals for consolidation were placed in the foreground, although "free" proposals were still permissible. The core statement for the intended sensitization of the population was to draw attention to the fact that the budget situation of the City of Cologne contains no room for additional expenditure. The proceedings in 2015 and 2016 were once again given a new orientation under the slogan "Cologne needs sustainable ideas for planning the urban budget". Now the suggestion center is concentrated on the respective urban areas in which Cologners live. The work in the city districts is an important part of its high-quality and demanding urban design, as well as its preservation. The population should develop ideas for improving the quality of life on the ground, but also draw attention to its irregularities. Where are there possible public services which can be discontinued in the future?

As a rule, however, for the implementation of proposals certain additional financial expenditure is necessary, which the City of Cologne has faced in various ways within the framework of the previous participatory budgeting proceedings. Thus, for the realization of selected projects in 2008/2009, an additional 8.2 million euros was added to the municipal budget, and in 2010/2011 it was still one million euros. In the financial years 2012-2014, measures could only be implemented within the existing budgets, as it was precisely with the previously-mentioned consolidation proposals of the administration that an assessment and evaluation of the savings potential was made.

As in the case of the participatory budget of 2015, in addition to the thematic focus, as of the sixth participation procedure that started in the previous year, citizens could continue to organize the district-specific proposals. In the context of the conceptual development and the increase in attractiveness, the special feature of the procedure in 2016 was the first-time provision of a "real citizens' budget" of €100,000 per city district for the implementation of the submitted proposals. In addition, there was also the possibility to make proposals at the entire town level.

On one side, the Cologne participatory budgeting of recent years has generated given a lot of positive input, which has led to the realization of numerous smaller and larger measures. On the other hand, it was necessary to decide in favor of the general public, especially in the case of small-scale suggestions, within the balancing process between general and resident interest. This can lead to disagreements in parts of the citizenship, such that they may not feel they are being taken seriously. The reason for this is the often inadequate insight into the specialist and budget subjects in large sections of the population.

It would also be helpful to optimize the availability and accessibility of figures, data, and facts of the city administration to citizens, not only with regard to the quality and feasibility of submitted proposals. Here, the administration should open up to residents more than before. The tools that facilitate this are "Open Data" and "Open Budget". In addition to improving communication between the public and the citizen, this creates greater acceptance among the population for urban action. In addition, policy and administration will provide a better view of problems on the ground and result in a more targeted action.

In the future, therefore, it will be important to engage the cooperative participation of the inhabitants more intensely and to establish sensitivity to the financial situation of the municipality and the reasons for its specific focuses. To this extent, the development of future citizen participation models should also take into account the fact that the citizen's view of the tasks of the municipality, such as transport, infrastructure, education, environment and energy, is to be used more intensively than before and the strength of this measure should be used for upcoming prioritization.

Thus, despite all the transparency of the city administration to be advocated against the citizen, as well as their involvement in the context of citizens' budgets, such a measure, in its existing form, cannot displace responsibility or solve domestic problems. Nevertheless, its significance is unquestioned in the context of the involvement of the population in the participation and design process of its city or municipality and will continue to hold its ground in the context of the growing importance of open government. Involving the population in the discussion of structural issues can be a way to reduce deficits. Cooperative involvement requires efficiency of the processes, the effectiveness of measures, the urban practice of outsourcing, the quality of municipal services or new sources of income and their acceptance by the population. This requires not only the willingness to engage in dialogue at eye level, but also comprehensive participation concepts, the definition of the scope for design,

transparent decision-making processes, a high degree of reliability and liability, as well as representativeness of the results of the participation proceedings.

Although participation has been declining with each Cologne participatory budget over the years, interest is still clearly apparent. This is also shown by the participatory and comment statistics, which the City of Cologne has collected from previous participation proceedings. For example, the approximately 3,700 participants in the 4th participatory budget gave nearly as many assessments and comments as the over 10,000 users of the first and second proceedings. Moreover, the lower participation in recent procedures can also be attributed to the fact that citizens are intensively addressing the proposals already made and avoiding duplication, which has a corresponding impact on statistical treatment. Not to be neglected is surely the aspect of the treated or addressed topics. Some areas polarize more than others and generate more concern among the Cologne people. Moreover, with around 6100 participants, a significant increase in participation in the procedure was recorded in 2016 compared to the previous two years, as well as in the increase in the quality and level of concretization of the proposals submitted (see Appendix 2 "Participation in the Participatory Budget Proceeding"). This was almost certainly due to the provision of a separate fixed budget per city district, as well as the credibility of the administration's intention to improve the direct living environment of the population, resulting in a measurably increased motivation in terms of commitment to the process. This is also clear with regard to the areas for which proposals have been submitted. Most of the ideas were focused on "roads, paths, plazas", "building and city planning", "public safety and order", "green areas" and "children and youth" (see Appendix 3 "Distribution of proposals by budget category"). Against the background of these results, the aspects of district characteristics and a fixed budget are also maintained in the implementation of the current 2017 participatory budget.

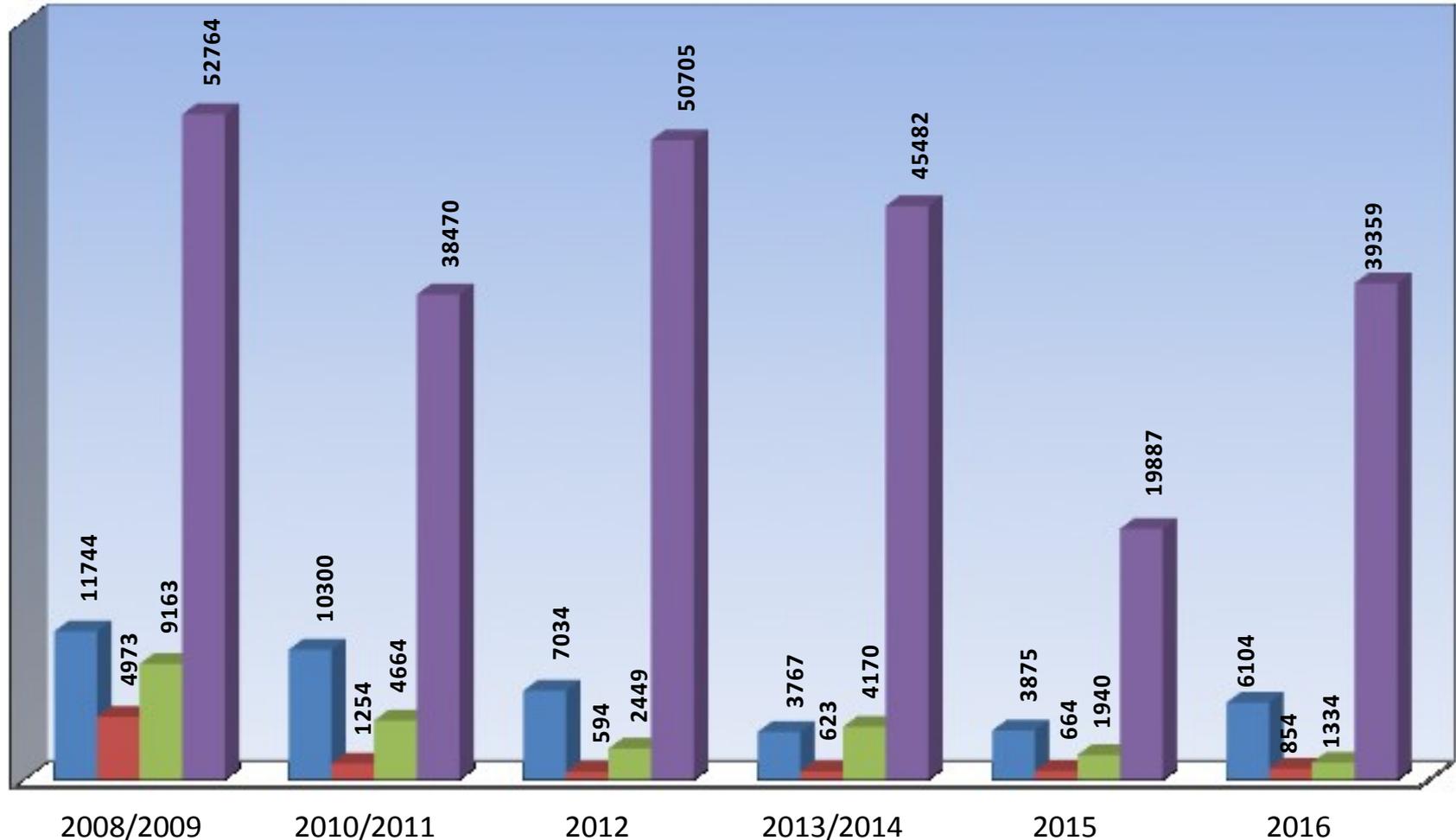
Ultimately, it will be the task of the administration to continue to successfully establish the measure of the participatory budget by continuing to provide exciting, complex themes and to motivate the population with their creative drive and love of their city. On the other hand, it must be a particular matter of concern for the municipality to develop possibilities for participation and, through balanced development of creative margins for citizens, complement the representative democracy and further expand the public confidence in the municipal administration.

## Phases of Participatory Budgeting



# Participation in participatory budgeting

■ Participants   ■ Proposals   ■ Comments   ■ Ratings



# Distribution of proposals by budget categories

