

COLDIGIT

Deliverable 4.2

WP 4 | Participatory budget – Case study in Helsinki, Finland

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Introduction

Purpose of the document

This report is a result from the transdisciplinary research project COLDIGIT, work package 4 (WP4) “Piloting: Experimenting innovative tools for collective intelligence”. The goal of WP4 is to test innovative tools and spaces for collective intelligence, in which the public sector can collaborate with citizens and other organisations. WP4 studies three pilot projects in the cities of Helsinki, Gothenburg and Trondheim.

The Finnish case consists of a study of two rounds of participatory budgeting called OmaStadi (MyCity). Beginning in 2018, the City of Helsinki allocated 4 400 000€ annually for residents to propose projects and vote for their implementation. We have gathered both quantitative and qualitative data from the residents, organisers, decision-makers and urban activists to support our observations and conclusions.

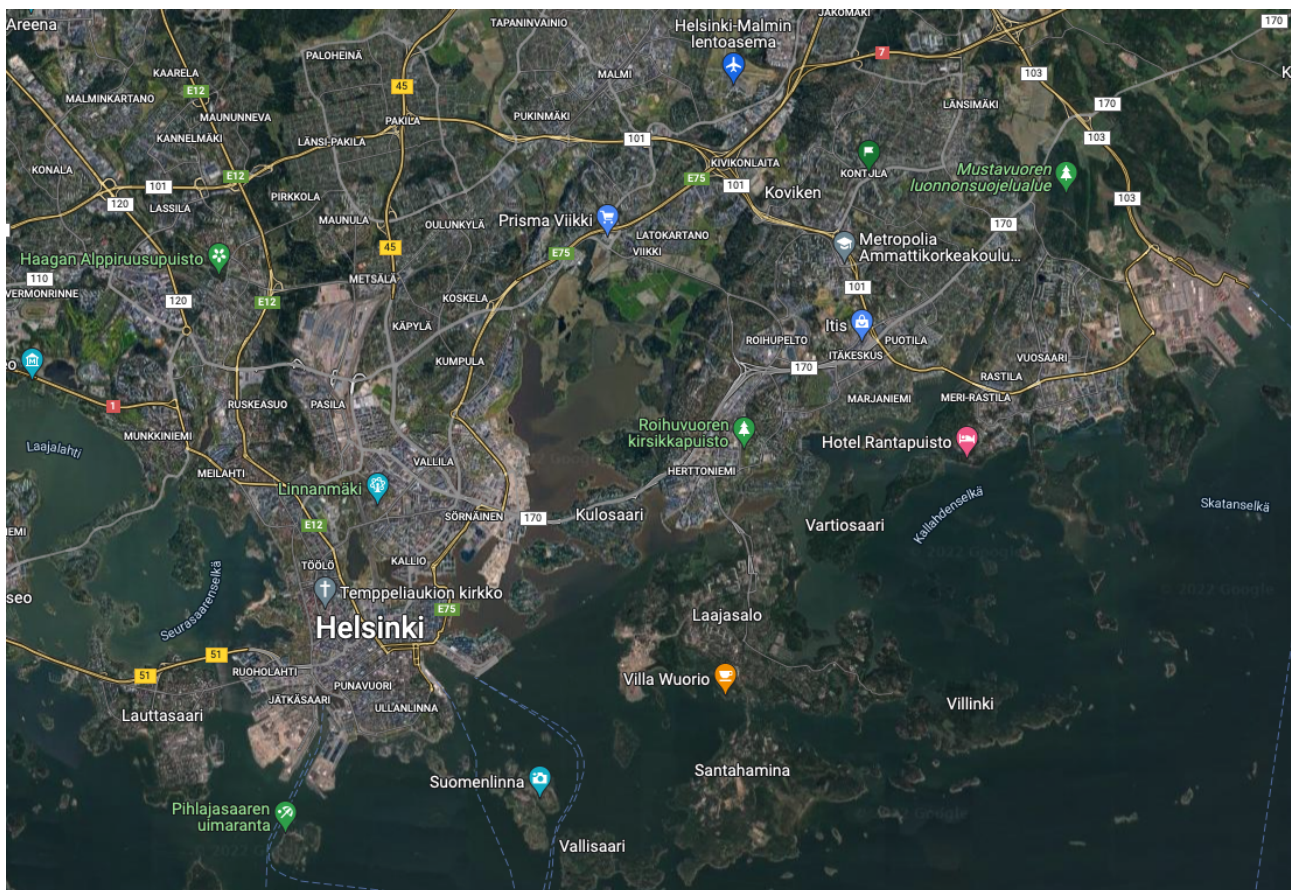
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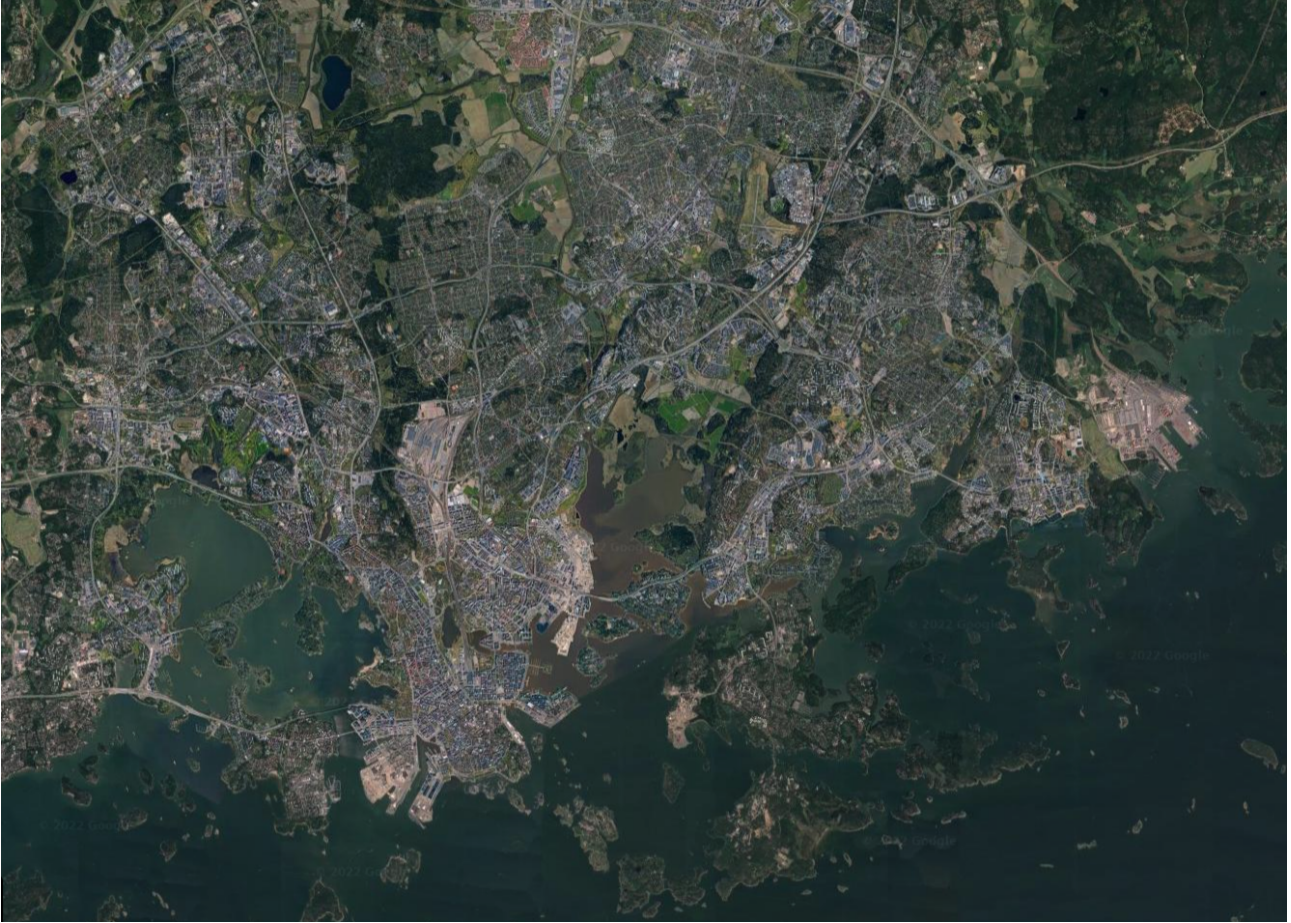
COLDIGIT's approach represents a technological mediation of political engagement, the implementation of which is characterised by Brewer and Dourish's (2008) broader observation: “the technologically mediated world does not stand apart from the physical world within which it is embedded; rather, it provides a new set of ways for that physical world to be understood and appropriated”. This technologically mediated world can be seen as a networked ecology (Eyman, 2015); a contemporary and place-based habitat where the digital and the analogue are intertwined. Its population (the actors) consists of people, organisms, landscapes, institutions, machines, smart robots, animals, data, etc. (Gil-Garcia et al., 2016), and the shape and quality of the network emerge from the way all these actors interact (or not) (Actor Network Theory, e.g. Latour 1993). Such a network model differs fundamentally from linear and hierarchical (governance) models, since flexibility and interdependence between actors are crucial aspects in their constantly changing interaction, transaction patterns and roles. While linear and top-down systems tend to be one-way communication systems that do not mobilize citizens' ideas and brainpower, a networked society makes full use of different types of digital tools (dialogue platforms, social media, Internet of Things, crowdsourced and big data, mixed reality apps, serious games, Artificial Intelligence, etc.). They act as a means for calling on citizens' ideas and brainpower (Brynskov et al., 2014) to attain urban quality and resilience based on adaptive co-management and co-design (Crowe et al., 2016). Here, we need to better understand the involved complexity of interconnected social and technical factors (Nam & Pardo, 2011).

Material

The participatory process is first briefly described following this structure.

- Name of city and country, neighbourhood if applicable.
Helsinki, Finland (Social inclusion focus on the Kontula district)
- Aerial photo of the city, with the neighbourhood marked if applicable.





- Photo of a typical building which can be said to represent the city, neighbourhood if applicable.



- Description of contextual factors of importance in view of the purpose of the project.

Despite its meagre annual budget of 4 400 000€ – 0.1% of the city budget – OmaStadi participatory budgeting in Helsinki has had a significant political impact. It is widely cited as the spearhead of the participatory policies in Helsinki and holds promises for the future of citizen participation. It has been promoted actively and several innovative elements have been incorporated into the process (gamification using a card game, in-person co-creation sessions, Borough Liaisons as supervisors for participatory activities etc.)

- The total budget for the participatory process.

4 400 000€ annually. The budget for the first round was 4 400 000€ and 8 800 000€ for the second round, after the decision to conduct the OmaStadi cycle on biannual basis.

- Time period when the participatory process took place.

First round: from proposals to voting Nov 2018 – Oct 2019

Second round: from proposals to voting Oct 2020 – Oct 2021

- Number of residents who could take part in the participatory process.

Around 600 000

- Number of submitted proposals

First round: 1273 proposals transformed into 352 plans

Second round: 1456 proposals transformed into 396 plans

- Number of residents who submitted proposals

1,273 proposals on the first round / 1456 on the second, no information on how many residents had worked on them

- Number of residents who voted

First round: 49,705

Second Round: 47,064

- Number of proposals decided to be implemented

First round: 44

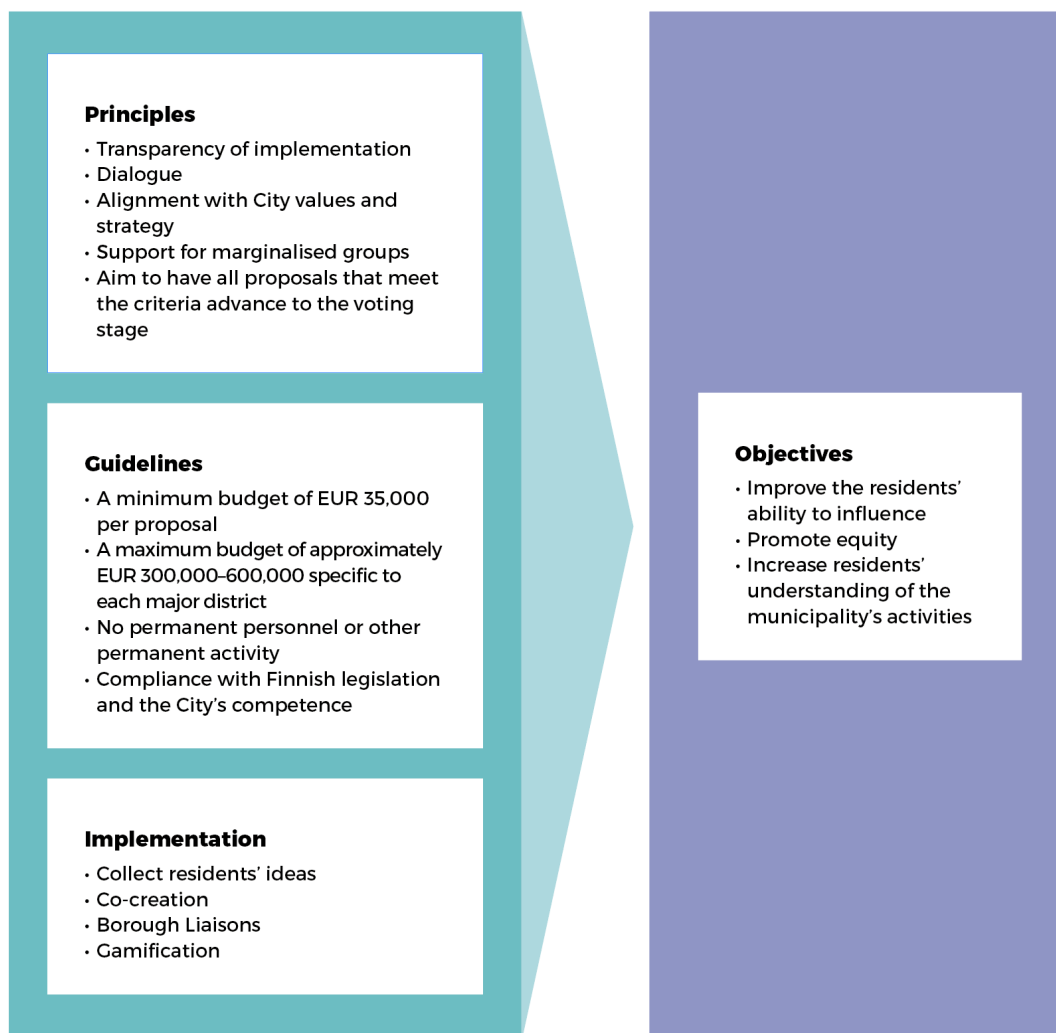
Second round: 75

- Number of proposals which were actually implemented

To the knowledge of the researchers, nearly all of them.

OmaStadi: The City of Helsinki Participatory Budgeting

FIGURE 4.1 **OmaStadi objectives and methods**



The City of Helsinki participatory budgeting is called OmaStadi. The process began in November 2018 with an ideation phase and the organisers are currently preparing for the third round, scheduled to begin in 2022 autumn. A total of 4 400 000€ was allocated

annually for the projects to be selected for implementation. The projects were either specific to one of the seven major districts or concerned the entire city. The minimum budget for a project was 35 000€ and the maximum was between 288 390€ and 653 250€, depending on the number of residents of the major district. The funding could not be used for employing permanent personnel or establishing permanent activities. The goal was that all proposals that meet the criteria would advance to the voting stage, in which each Helsinki resident 12 years of age or older was eligible to vote.

For the second round, OmaStadi began to follow a biannual cycle which meant that the budget for distribution was doubled but most of the process remained the same. The process consists of planning, cost estimation, voting and implementation stages: the most notable differences between first and second round were the increase in interaction and co-creation between the residents and the officials during the cost estimate stage, decision to not let the citizens to alter their vote, and, naturally, the massive shift of the activities to online environments because of the Covid-19 pandemic. The City of Helsinki

FIGURE 2.1 OmaStadi stages

	RESIDENTS	CITY EXECUTIVE OFFICE	DIVISION
Ideas 1 October-14 November 2018	Participate in an ideation event or organise one.	OmaStadi marketing and communications. Fosters resident participation and cooperation with the divisions.	Supports resident participation via local services and uses own communication channels for communicating about OmaStadi. Provides information on the division's plans, related policies and costs.
Proposals 15 November 2018-30 January 2019	Post proposals in the OmaStadi service.	Conducts a preliminary examination of the ideas and groups them based on their target or related service. Interacts with and communicates to the residents.	Contact person records in the Excel sheet the expert that will evaluate the project and notifies the expert about the received proposal.
Plans 7-30 January 2019	Ideas are combined into proposals together with the residents and then entered on the platform.	Prepares local co-creation events and invites residents.	Contact persons direct the proposals to the correct experts. Service personnel support resident participation in co-creation.
(OmaStadi Raksa workshops) 11-28 February 2019	Residents and experts elaborate the plans and draw up initial cost estimates.	Organises the Alueraksa workshops, communicates with the residents and directs the workshops. Forwards the proposals to the divisions.	Division experts participate in the Raksa workshops and produce data and an initial cost estimate as a basis for discussion.
Cost estimates 15 April-14 June 2019		Provides necessary support for residents in drawing up proposals and cost estimates.	Is responsible for drawing up the cost estimates and their grounds as well as any necessary interaction with the residents.
Voting 1-31 October 2019	Market their plans and motivate local residents to vote.	Marketing and communications related to voting, supports resident participation and cooperation with the divisions.	Marketing and communications related to voting. Provides services to support resident voting and participation.
Implementation and follow-up 2020->	Participate in detailed planning and possibly also in implementation.	Coordinates project implementation and communications on the city-level. Supports interaction with residents.	Ensures project implementation and follow-up are up to date in the OmaStadi service. Communicates about the stages of project implementation.

Stages reviewed in the intermediary evaluation are marked blue and those reviewed in this final evaluation are marked orange. We have included the planning stage in both evaluations.

had been using a customised version of the Decidim platform, an open-source solution widely used in participatory processes, for the digital deliberation and voting in OmaStadi.

Method

This is a transdisciplinary research project that uses a mixed-methods approach to gather data. The overall aim is to construct a comprehensive picture of the strengths and challenges of OmaStadi that reflects the views of all the participants to the process: residents, organisers, decision makers and urban activists. For the study of the first round of OmaStadi, the research group gathered an extensive dataset using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods. This included interviews with decision-makers, stakeholders and experts (N=12); a survey based on the Co-Creation Radar (N=15) as well as a feedback survey conducted during the voting stage (N=390). In combination, we obtained information regarding all stages of the project. The entire research team has carried out participant observation in the OmaStadi events throughout the project and participated in discussions, recording their observations. The qualitative evaluation made use of the in-depth interviews, participant observation and open-ended feedback provided by the residents in the voting stage feedback survey (N=749 comments). The provided examples are descriptive of the most important themes highlighted in a systematic review of the data. Direct citations from interviews have been selected to exemplify themes, questions, concerns and praise that were salient in the entire dataset (e.g. Duneier, 2011).

Official documents, such as City Board decisions, played an important role in assessing the objectives of the entire project. The implementation was facilitated by the divisions' internal evaluations and analysing the voting data was important in examining the actors (Ahola, 2019, Erjansola, 2022). Finally, analysis conducted by the research team on the contents of the plans (N=352) helped evaluation of the results.

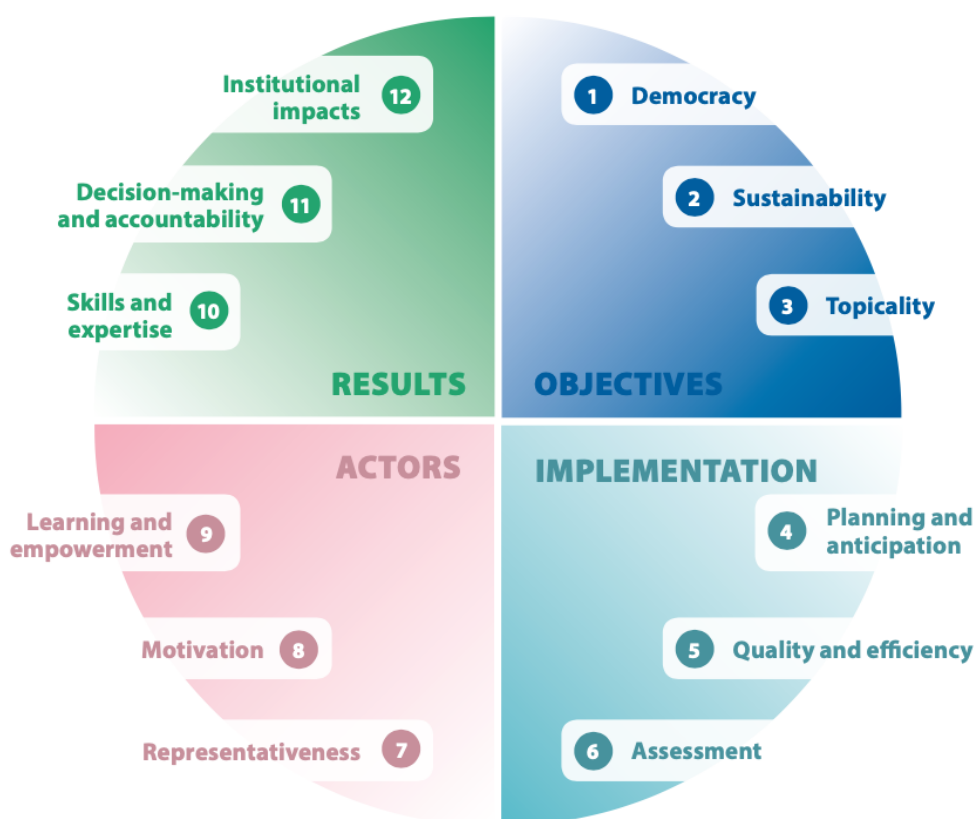
The comprehensive evaluation based on this dataset was published in December 2020 (Rask et al., 2020), soon after the voting stage for the first round of OmaStadi. The research team wanted to publish it fast because of its topicality. This meant that the implementation phase was not covered in the study. In March 2021 Covid-19 pandemic changed the activities completely – for a while practical implementation was almost completely frozen and everyone's plans for the future were uncertain. The research had to move almost entirely online.

For the second round of OmaStadi, the research team followed closely how the organisers adapted to the new challenges. We followed closely and analysed interactions in the co-creation sessions conducted online, developed indicators to examine the interaction on the Decidim platform, followed discussions on social media platforms and had frequent discussions with the decision-makers, city officials and urban activists

involved in OmaStadi. In addition, we participated in the crafting an OmaStadi proposal from ideation stage into the voting on both rounds (these did not succeed in the vote). The facilitation during co-creation was studied by Essi Kiiski in her Master's Thesis (2022) and the data was elaborated by studying PB processes in New York, St. Petersburg and Lisbon. Various groups of participants evaluated the successes and failures of OmaStadi numerically. The mixed method approach, combining qualitative methods with quantitative, gives a broad overview of the OmaStadi process with its future challenges.

Results

This report on OmaStadi uses an evaluation model called co-creation radar (Rask & Ertio, 2019) to assess the strengths and areas for improvement of the two rounds of PB in Helsinki. The co-creation radar model uses a radar chart which comprises a synthesis of hundreds of evaluation criteria and indicators. The co-creation radar contains 12 main indicators which can be divided into four areas: objectives, implementation, actors, and results.



AREA	DESCRIPTION	INDICATOR	QUESTIONS
I Objectives	Participation projects usually aim to promote democratic values, sustainable development and other current objectives.	1 Democracy	Is the primary goal of the project to democratise decision-making? Can the participants themselves influence the implementation of the project? Is the project conducted transparently and openly? Is the operational model seen as legitimate?
		2 Sustainability	Do the objectives of the project take into account ecological, social, and economic sustainability? Is the project linked to relevant sustainable development programmes and goals?
		3 Topicality	Are the objectives of the project carefully justified and based on considered judgement? Are they timely? Have the objectives been open to modification when necessary?
II Implementation	The implementation of a project usually includes three stages: planning, execution, assessment.	4 Planning and anticipation	Have sufficient resources been allocated to the project? How have the project's questions been framed? How has the accessibility of events been taken into consideration? How have the tools and methods used in the project been selected?
		5 Quality and efficiency	How are the quality of the implementation of the project and the efficient use of resources balanced? Is the chosen management method effective? What strategies are used to communicate about the project? How are events facilitated? What are the discussions at the events and on the platform like? What kind of digital support has been arranged?
		6 Assessment	What kind of evaluation activities have been planned for the project? How will the project's indirect effects be assessed? How is data collected, analysed, and to whom is it reported? Has the project been modified following the assessment?

AREA	DESCRIPTION	INDICATOR	QUESTIONS
III Actors	A participation project typically aims to reach diverse groups of participants (participant eco-system) and to gather their knowledge and views, as well as support their learning and empowerment.	7 Representativeness	How heterogeneous was the group of participants? Who took part? How was the representativeness of future generations taken into account?
		8 Motivation	How motivated were the participants? Were they satisfied with the events? Did they manage to network with other stakeholders? Did they receive compensation for their participation? Was low motivation the reason for non-participation? Were people motivated the right way?
		9 Learning and empowerment	What skills did participants learn during the participation process? Do they now have a better understanding about substantive discussions and/or the decision-making process? How did participants collaborate with other stakeholders?
IV Results	The effects of the project on the organisation itself; the impact on decision-making and the wider institutional environment	10 Skills and expertise	How have the organisation's own competences and skills developed? Have outside experts been consulted, e.g. through research cooperation? Did stakeholder groups receive training? Is the organisation supporting learning? Were there sufficient resources allocated and opportunities sought to develop in-house expertise?
		11 Decision-making and accountability	How committed is the organisation to the project? How is participant feedback linked to decision-making? How was the feedback analysed? What feedback have citizens received and how was such feedback communicated?
		12 Institutional impacts	What new collaborations with universities, museums, schools, businesses, and other stakeholders have arisen? Have any new businesses been created? Has the participation project inspired changes in the organisation's entrenched practices? Have decision-makers learned from citizens?

Objectives

1. Democracy

Who initiated the process and framed the issue? Is the primary goal of the project to democratise decision-making? Have the participants, residents included, been given the opportunity to influence the primary goal formulation? Can the participants themselves influence the implementation of the project?

In Helsinki, the origins of OmaStadi lie in various small-scale experiments of participatory budgeting. The principles for its regular use were laid in 2017 by the City Board and OmaStadi was launched soon after. The discussion of the aims of OmaStadi has been politically loaded with decision-makers emphasising its different aspects. Officially, the

goal is to increase the functionality, attractiveness, liveliness, safety and community spirit of a neighbourhood. OmaStadi is also specifically aimed at supporting the participation of marginalised groups by developing digital means as well as accessible language and multilingual content.

The understanding of desired forms of democracy varies: there are strong voices calling attention for deliberative aspects, but also those highlighting efficiency and streamlined decision-making process. In general, the deliberative aspects have been emphasised by the political left and the representatives of the parties in the political right have drawn attention to the efficiency. Similar kind of ambivalence also applies to democratisation of the process itself: some citizens have expressed considerable criticism for their lack of possibilities to influence the process but there are also many who approve the straightforwardness of OmaStadi. The criticism of the democratic aspects on the first round was noted by the organisers and improvements were made for the second round. Especially the cost estimate stage received criticism from the participants: on the first round the budgets for the plans were calculated by the experts from the City divisions without interacting with the citizens. On the second round, the budget estimates were in collaboration with the citizen participants.

Despite close attentiveness to these democratic aspects some responses from the citizens portray a powerful image of uneven participation:

*Participatory budgeting is tinkering of the well-off.
– citizen feedback, survey*

OmaStadi aims at openness and transparency but there have been challenges to communicate these principles. The voter turnout is considerably higher in wealthier districts and the proposals have been widely criticised as trivial middle-class initiatives for superficial improvements (e.g. Van Der Wekken, 2018) In the interviews there was strong emphasis of OmaStadi as an ongoing process: not a complete and settled way of acting but a flexible platform that aims at heightened mutual understanding between the occasionally conflicting views of the residents and the civil servants.

2. Sustainability

Do the objectives of the project take into account ecological, social, and economic sustainability? Is the project linked to relevant sustainable development programmes/goals and policies?

OmaStadi is not directly connected to the City's sustainable development programme although it is mentioned in a follow-up report regarding the UN sustainable development goals (Helsinki, 2020) as a measure that promotes peace, justice and good governance.

However, questions of sustainability are present in OmaStadi and demand a thorough analysis in which the potential for sustainability needs to be separated from how the process is conducted in practice. In OmaStadi, there are conditions that potentially hinder sustainability of both the representative process and the range of successful proposals. On the more structural level, the themes highlighted by Yrjö Hakanen, a long-time citizen activist and former city councillor, point closely into the problematic conditions at various stages of the process:

Without a long-term perspective, limited representativeness and lack of an organ or forum to bring the process close to people it is easy for the proposals to remain separate. [...] Participation requires a combination of direct influence of individuals and groups without requiring permanent or long-term commitment. Some forum is needed – not necessarily an elected one – that is in line with an area that residents recognise and consider meaningful. – interview

There are fears that the open, organic and self-organising character of citizen participation will be compromised within the OmaStadi framework. There is a danger that participation is limited to providing suggestions in predefined format and voting on the biennial basis. While there is no specific emphasis for a particular theme (such as ecology, youth and discrimination) in OmaStadi the criteria for proposals can potentially limit the scope of participation: the proposal budget has to be over 35 000€ and the funding cannot be used for employing permanent personnel or establishing permanent activities. Local small-scale proposals are not possible and the rules direct the focus into infrastructural investments, such as park benches, street lights and planting of flowers.

In terms of economic sustainability, the sufficiency of funding is an important issue. It is open to debate whether the annually allocated 4 400 000€ is enough. In global comparison, this sum, equivalent to about one thousandth of the City budget, is small considering that cities such as Paris and Madrid have allocated approximately one per cent of the City budget via participatory budgeting. At the same time, especially for the urban activists, these sums for projects are remarkable. Jaakko Blomberg, a well-known activist elaborates this further:

People don't understand that these urban activists are doing things completely free-of-charge or maybe with a few thousand euros and compared with that this 4.4 million is a ridiculously large sum of money." – interview

In our interviews the overall atmosphere was critical of the size of the OmaStadi budget but sharing larger sums biennially was appreciated. Still, there was a clear opinion that the important decisions are made somewhere else. There was a shared understanding that OmaStadi is principally not a tool for preventing marginalisation but that it promotes social sustainability by increasing the collaboration between the civil servants and the

citizens. OmaStadi budget is not big enough to solve problems that require large-scale interventions.

Concerning broader sense of sustainable development, OmaStadi is not directly connected to the City's sustainable development programme although it is mentioned in a follow-up report regarding the UN sustainable development goals (Helsinki, 2020) as a measure that promotes peace, justice and good governance. In its current form, the connections to larger questions of sustainability are principally dealt at the level of images, not the actual processes.

3. Topicality

*Are the objectives of the project carefully justified and based on considered judgment?
Are they timely?*

The interviews and other data clearly indicate that OmaStadi was considered very topical. The decision-makers and civil servants felt it was important to hear which themes and aspects the residents consider most significant in urban development. Although participatory budgeting is a heavy, slow and expensive way to fund basic services it is important to consider how it could be used to improve allocation of the City budget. It was also seen as fitting tool to gather information of the vital issues on the local level. The benefits should not be limited to the voting within the framework of OmaStadi but the plans and proposals could be utilised on distributing City funding through other channels. There were some indications of this on the second round – for example, the extremely popular workout stairs were received funding also outside the OmaStadi budget.



Photo: https://omastadi.hel.fi/processes/osbu-2020/f/183/ideas/138?locale=sv&order=oldest&page=2&per_page=100

Topicality was also expressed on less tangible level. Questions of citizen participation are at the heart of current municipal strategies and PB is widely held as an innovative way to distribute resources. Rather than in the immediate processes, the view was in the future. Johanna Seppälä, Head of Participation and Citizen Information Unit for the City Executive Office had the following vision:

Within a ten-year cycle we should definitely get to a point where there is no more OmaStadi but rather a percentage-based model with a certain share of the divisions' budgets being spent directly via participatory budgeting.”– interview

It would be exaggeration to say that PB will define the future of municipal democratic practices. However, it is extremely interesting to follow how influential and visible OmaStadi has been despite its modest budget. The form OmaStadi (and PB in general) will take in the future is contested but its importance is acknowledged widely. It is open to modifications but the changes will be negotiated in the competitive political arena involving decision-makers, civil servants and active citizens.

Implementation

4. Planning and anticipation

Have sufficient resources been allocated to the project? How have the participatory process questions been framed?

The sufficiency of 4 400 000€ annually for OmaStadi has been discussed under the sustainability indicator but it is important to note that this sum does not cover the additional costs of the process. The City's strong commitment to carrying out the project and the resources allocated for it are evident in the way OmaStadi has been implemented. The personnel resources are considerable: in addition to the seven Borough Liaisons, hired by the city to aid citizens with participatory initiatives such as OmaStadi, the project has employed people working in participation and communications as well as various expert and supervisory tasks to a significant extent. In addition, the divisions founded internal groups to coordinate the preparation and implementation of OmaStadi. Third-party expertise was procured for service and software design, information security and media monitoring.

Many of the interviewees from the municipality estimated that cost of allocating the 4 400 000€ was higher than the allocated sum. The Urban Environment and Education divisions of the City of Helsinki provided us with their internal estimates of resource use. They are responsible for most (59%) of the projects selected for implementation: from the beginning of 2018 until the end of September 2020, they had used more than 6,000 hours

of working time, which equals approximately four person-years. This includes the salaries of the full-time coordinators hired specifically for the project. The Education Division, responsible for 11% of the projects selected for implementation, estimated to have spent more than 800 hours, equal to half of one person-year, between the beginning of 2018 and May 2020 – before the voting stage had even begun. The two other divisions did not provide estimates, but if getting 70% of the proposals processed required approximately 7,000 hours it can be estimated that the divisions spent a total of approximately 10,000 hours, or 6 person-years, to process the proposals and plans. When you add to this the two years of work put in by approximately eight people of the OmaStadi working group, the total amount of work time invested is 22 years. One must also add to this number the work hours the four Deputy Mayors used for the project.

During the second round, the Covid-19 pandemic forced the in-person meetings online. This saved the resources used for large-scale workshops but more funds were needed to adapt into the online environment. This consultation was purchased from agencies specialising on digital communications.

Despite the liberal use of resources, based on calculations conducted by the divisions, the current resources seem insufficient. The civil servants claimed that at least the following areas will require more work time in the future: a) familiarisation as some of the projects are hard to conceptualise and comments must be provided justly and equally, b) estimating costs which requires time due to the extensive and demanding nature of implementing the projects as well as c) the implementation stage due to the added workload that participatory budgeting causes for the divisions. The divisions had acquired some expertise on these issues for the second round of OmaStadi but still saw their tasks as very resource-intensive. The tight schedule and insufficient resources were the primary reasons for organising OmaStadi cycles on biennial basis. It gave the organising team and the divisions more time to work through each project cycle.

An important theme throughout the process has been how the conditions and requirements for the plans direct and often limit the scope of participation. Especially the restriction on permanent activities and personnel has influenced the range of topics considerably. Deputy Mayor for Social Services and Health Care, Sanna Vesikansa comments on the rules for the proposals:

Defining at the very start that participatory budgeting could not be used for hiring permanent employees is challenging from the perspective of services. It did clearly exclude some projects and steer towards infrastructure investments. In the future, we should consider whether we only want investments. – interview

The planning process has emphasised learning from the mistakes and developing OmaStadi further on future rounds. The organising team has been careful that the

accessibility requirements are observed at all the stages of the process and have been developing new methods to meet various needs. This work deals partly with the practical details of the process but involves also improvements on the wider sociocultural questions.

5. Quality and efficiency

How are the quality of the implementation of the project and the efficient use of resources balanced? What strategies are used to communicate about the project? How are events facilitated? What are the discussions at the events and on the platform like?

OmaStadi is now in 2022 preparing for its third round after two very different cycles. The first round was a pilot on method that had not been applied in Finland on this scale. The second round was markedly different because of the Covid-19 pandemic. For the third round the organisers have concentrated on increasing the efficiency of the process by using “lean” methods. While there has been criticism, especially from the City divisions, on the insufficiency of the resources, OmaStadi has received substantial support from the City:

I don't think any of our other activities have such good resources, the events had an exceptional amount of personnel. Overall, we had an enormous number of personnel at our disposal for this work.

– Pia Pakarinen, Deputy Mayor, Education – interview

The ample resources and skilful use of them has been reflected on several aspects. The OmaStadi working group has solid competence for participatory projects and project management. The participation, communications, ICT and research skills of the City's organisation were extensively utilised. The division experts participated according to a division of labour between the divisions based on a classification of the projects. The municipal democracy contact network has provided information and opportunities to discuss the development of participatory budgeting. International contacts, such as visits to and messaging with Madrid and New York provided a feel for the international leading edge of development. Third-party expertise was procured to support communications research (media visibility) and service design (resident participation profiles, facilitation, promoting equity), information security and software development. Academic surveys and thesis papers were utilised in designing the process. There has been continuous cooperation between the City and the evaluation team from the University of Helsinki. On the second round the organising team has expanded its networks to collaborate with new research projects, utilise the research conducted about OmaStadi and worked with several service design and ICT companies.

In both interviews and citizen feedback, Raksa workshops and Borough Liaisons received noteworthy praise. The workshops, organised in-person for the first round and online during the second, brought citizens and the city experts together to co-create plans from the proposals. The established network of Borough Liaisons was another successful initiative. The seven Borough Liaisons, responsible for participatory activities in each major district, played a key role in promoting equity by doing grassroot level work in their areas. The principal aims of the workshops were to combine similar proposals into joint plans for the voting stage and to oversee that the plans meet legal requirements and possible to execute. The resources for the workshops were satisfactory and the events provided a rare chance for the citizens to meet civil servants. While the citizens appreciated the Borough Liaisons' work, the arrangement proved to be very resource-intensive: the Borough Liaisons spent approximately 90% of their work time in the OmaStadi project although their job description is connected with the entire participation model. The Raksa workshops took considerable resources from the City experts. Also the quality of the expert-led group discussions varied: while the participants held many sessions highly valuable, some of the feedback accused the experts of influencing the participatory processes in an unjust way. Over the course of the process, different kind of digital support was provided by the City. It was also possible to vote in person in libraries, care homes for the elderly, schools and several other places. There was still a strong sense that those with powerful networks and proficient digital skills were in a privileged position.

I think this showed exactly how we normal people CANNOT influence things. The rich fill social media with bought advertising and get even large sports teams and other organisations to lobby for their projects. Poor taste.

– citizen feedback, survey

6. Assessment

What kind of evaluation activities have been planned for the project? How is data collected, analysed, and to whom is it reported? Has the project been modified following the assessment?

In addition to the comprehensive evaluation conducted by the BIBU research team, various feedback surveys were conducted in the OmaStadi events, two research reviews on voting behaviour were published (Ahola, 2019; Erjansola, 2022) and the internal assessments by the divisions and the City Executive Office produced rich materials on OmaStadi. Another notable factor are the various theses and other research projects concentrating on OmaStadi. However, there has been no fixed budget for the third-party evaluation. With regard to the comprehensive evaluation of the first OmaStadi round, nearly all of the development targets listed in the recommendation have been engaged with, which demonstrates that evaluation does play a role in knowledge-based

development. There has not been similar kind of evaluation of the second round but the City has produced a detailed analysis of its voting stage (Erjansola, 2022).

Actors

7. Representativeness

How heterogeneous was the group of participants? Who took part? Hence, what did the participation look like compared to the demographic picture of the area? How representative are organizers compared to that picture? Are there methods to specially involve groups that have less power (for example special quotas, earmarked resources, collaborations with local community organizations, more outreach etc.)? How was the representativeness of future generations taken into account?

During the early stages of OmaStadi, the most active participants were, on average, over 40 years of age, highly educated Finnish-speaking women (Rask et al., 2019). OmaStadi also has an image of a middle-class venture, shared widely in feedback and commentaries on social media.

In its current form, participatory budgeting polarises different residential areas even further. The goal to achieve a more equal Helsinki – this is not the way to do it. This provides more services and nice things for the well-off residents...

– Jaakko Blomberg, urban activist, interview

In reality, there are problems regarding the heterogeneity of participants but also misconceptions and attempts to correct the bias. In global comparison, the voter turnout was relatively high. On both rounds, over 8% of the eligible population gave their vote (On the first round 49,705 people and on the second round 47,064). Voter turnout was the highest among 11–15-year-olds and was over ten per cent even among 30–50-year-olds. Most votes were cast in the South-eastern and Central major district, most likely due to the intense campaigning and close competition between popular projects. However, representativeness does not concern only the voting behaviour – on the first round, nearly three out of four proposals targeted services that were equally accessible to all.

This critique was also raised by residents. In the voting-stage feedback survey (N=390), 15.8% agreed fully that the voting was equal for all residents of the City and 17.1% agreed partially. Nearly 60% disagreed: 33.3% disagreed fully and 26.6% partially. Of the open-ended feedback in the same survey (N=749) 24% concerned lack of equity. The critique was mostly levelled at accessibility for non-Finnish-speakers or the lack of support for particular groups.

There were special measures to encourage various groups to take part. During the first round, more than 240 events to reach various population groups and encourage them to vote were organised and an estimated total of 3,300 residents were reached in this way. During the proposal stage, 25 events were organised to foster immigrant participation and a total of approximately 150 people participated. During the co-creation and voting stage, a total of 9 events were organised in cooperation with multicultural organisations. Approximately 200 people participated in these. (City Executive Office – Kaupunginkanslia, 2020.) The numbers are low but show determination at the early stages of the process.

On the second round there was an additional effort to reach out for the Russian speakers in Helsinki and encourage their citizen participation, with a focus on OmaStadi. The pilot was evaluated (Rask & Tuominen, 2021) and it was found out that the workshops and other measures to encourage participation were effective and motivated the participants to create OmaStadi proposals and to attend the OmaStadi events. The best ways to acquire results were to use minority languages or simplified Finnish in communications and to familiarise the attendants with the participatory culture in Finland.

While there were numerous proposals initiated by immigrants these were rarely successful. Deputy Mayor Sanna Vesikansa put this shared image of immigrant participation in OmaStadi quite aptly:

The multicultural population of Helsinki is definitely underrepresented in the selected projects. The voting stage included many multilingual projects and ones targeted at immigrants but almost none were selected in the end. The projects selected for implementation do reflect more traditional white and middle-class ideas. But the results can certainly benefit all. – interview

At the same time, it is easy to be led into a biased view that associates proposals by immigrants only concerning issues related to immigration (multiculturalism, multilingual projects etc) – many immigrants will, of course, support the same proposals as the other participants, not just the ones targeting them specifically. In addition, OmaStadi offers young people a significant channel for participating in the City's decision-making. Participation is part of the curriculum throughout education and OmaStadi provides a good way to learn about both democracy and how the city functions.

Representativeness is also distributed unequally in urban space and there are significant variations on voter turnout in different areas. The most active postal code areas were Kaitalahti (23.4%) and Suomenlinna (21.1%) whereas in Kontula and Vesala 2.6% of those eligible to vote did so. The differences between major districts are great but the picture is somewhat distorted because, as mentioned above, four projects in the South-eastern and Central major districts gathered such a great number of votes. However, the

lowest numbers are well below the average on 8%. Many citizens were critical of major districts as units for local proposals:

Small residential areas will never get enough votes in this system. Residents in various areas are at different starting points regarding their level of activity and participation. Proposals concerning large and densely populated areas, such as Arabianranta, do well because people who live there are active, highly educated and motivated to develop the area.

– citizen feedback, survey

At the same time, it is likely that no regional boundaries for local proposals would be satisfactory for everyone. According to the citizen feedback, the voting areas never seem to be truly representative.

OmaStadi has not introduced measures such as positive discrimination to support marginalised communities into its structure. To increase representation, the focus has rather been on facilitating their participation by offering information and education. Especially on the second round, the resources to reach out for increasing representativeness were considerable.

8. Motivation and level of participation

How motivated were the participants? Were they satisfied with the participation? Did they receive compensation for their participation? Were there special reasons why people chose not to participate?

When discussing motivation of the participants, it is often difficult to differentiate how significant they consider their engagement and what is their true level of participation. It is also difficult to tell whether the participation concerns only superficial or cosmetic improvements or reaches to more influential fields. Motivation and level of participation also often drop during the process, especially between different stages, when the levels of interaction are low.

On the first round, most residents have also shown enthusiasm regarding this new democratic project and their motivation has lasted throughout the process, despite occasional confusion. Feedback by residents generally showed patience even when things did not go as expected. However, there were also markedly critical voices, often among well-known urban activists who had large networks and could influence the image of OmaStadi. They made their views repeatedly known in public events of the project that they felt sidelined during the planning stage and that they felt the project was “tokenistic democracy” creating competition over “pocket money”. Nonetheless, in more in-depth

conversations they admitted to seeing the many opportunities the project provides, despite a fear that it would take up space from actually influencing on the structural level.

A few were even more critical and said that it is important to prioritise one's actions: it is better to engage with questions of planning and the municipal budget because that is where the noteworthy decisions are made: not in the OmaStadi process that distributes 0,1% of the budget. This cynicism was supported also by some on the implementation side. Mikko Aho, Executive Director of the Urban Environment Division commented on the OmaStadi budget of the first round:

At this scale, this is certainly tinkering. If we talk about proximity democracy, it comprises entirely different kinds of processes, different kinds of influencing, budgeting and funds at a completely different scale. At this scale, all of this is nothing but lemonade stands and tinkering. – interview

It is unpredictable to what degree the citizens will engage in a process without compensation and certainty that their plans will advance. There have been challenges to keep the participants motivated throughout the process. During the first round there were occasional periods of silence in both online and in-person environments: on the second round the organisers acknowledged these and tried to keep the participants engaged.

Although most of the participants were relatively motivated, over 9 of 10 residents of Helsinki did not vote. In global comparison the voter turnout in Helsinki is satisfactory but still leaves a lot of room for improvement. The steps to promote OmaStadi especially among immigrant communities have been successful but limited to particular groups. The reasons for not participating in OmaStadi have not been studied systematically this far.

9. Learning and empowerment

Did the participatory process empower the participants, especially residents, thus making them feel stronger and giving them power over things they consider important? What did the participants learn during the participation process?

The sense of empowerment in OmaStadi has been very uneven. While there have been instances of radical change of views concerning citizen participation among the residents (Rask & Tuominen, 2021), for many OmaStadi has been limited to a few clicks to support a proposal. The heightened empowerment is most clearly evident among the groups that have not participated in proximity democracy initiatives before.

OmaStadi has attracted new people to the field of citizen participation in Helsinki. This was clearly expressed in the views of the Russian speakers interviewed for our evaluation (Rask & Tuominen, 2021). Many also considered OmaStadi as a fresh new channel to

participate instead of established community organisations. However, this sense of empowerment had also its downside: some of the “usual suspects” felt that their long experience has been neglected and that they have been sidelined from the decision-making.

The greatest challenges in regard to learning and empowerment are related to creating trust-based relationships. There is a lot of long-term competence and silent knowledge available in Helsinki that could offer a considerable advantage in developing the participation process. For example, many experts have long-term connections to various district networks, often dealing with urban planning, cultural events or environmental concerns. It is important that the participants feel like they are building a shared process in all stages of the project instead of being bystanders in a script that goes on with or without them.

Another challenge for empowerment was the competitive aspect of the process. While collaboration between people, often initiators of different plans and proposals, provided positive experiences and new possibilities to work together in the future, there were also bitter rivalries between the people behind some successful proposals. On the first round, the competitiveness led to intense campaigning, growing until the very last few hours of voting. The competitive setting was further exacerbated by the way in which the *omastadi.hel.fi* portal displayed votes in real time. On the second round the votes were displayed in real time but it was no longer possible to change one’s vote tactically at the last hours of the vote. On the other hand, the competition brought attention and visibility to OmaStadi and encouraged the participants to campaign for their proposals.

One remarkable side of the learning process has been the introduction of OmaStadi to schools as a channel of democracy education. Participation is part of the curriculum at all educational levels and OmaStadi fits naturally as part of the curricula. Although the elementary school children’s turnout was again the highest in OmaStadi, their turnout fell by 15% from the first OmaStadi vote, from 34.2% to 19.2% (Erjansola, 2022). The turnout varied considerably between schools – in some nearly 100% of children voted while in the others almost none.

Results

10. Institutional skills and expertise

How has the participant’s organisation developed? Do the organisation support collaborative learning from the participatory processes? Have outside experts been consulted, e.g. through research cooperation? Were there sufficient resources allocated and opportunities sought to develop in-house expertise?

OmaStadi represents a culture of experimentation that is quite lively in Finland and which aims to renew the society and work methods of various sectors using bold experiments (Antikainen et al., 2019). For OmaStadi, the adequate resources and political support have enabled broad networking activities, cross-pollination of ideas and skill transfer.

OmaStadi continues to experiment with various methodologies and seeks expertise from researchers and consultants to develop its practices further. The thesis by Borough Liaisons Belinda Barbato and Antti Sarpo (2020, p. 62) describes how the OmaStadi process has been developed on the fly, learning from previous stages:

In 2019, having learning from the Raksa workshops we had already organised, we decided to abandon excessively methodical approaches, such as externally facilitated discussions. Our aim was to get the experts take on the responsibility for the discussions. Our approach for reaching this goal was to review the events thoroughly and involve the experts in planning the events... This is a considerable departure from the events held in 2019 where the experts did not participate in planning the events and where their role was more like that of a participant than an organiser.

The research co-operation has involved working with experts outside the administration but also the OmaStadi team, especially the Borough Liaisons, have studied the process and examined it in their studies. This has been a way for the organisers to learn of their work but also to spread their knowledge further in both institutional and academic contexts. The city has organized several workshops and other events for those interested to develop their expertise in PB. However, there has been a clear divide between interested parties and those who have been critical of OmaStadi.

The organisers have received various kinds of resources issued several studies on the various stages of OmaStadi. However, this work has not been conducted or evaluated in a systematic manner and it has rested on the research interests of the outside experts. There are no studies on how the OmaStadi process has influenced the views of the residents.

11. Decision-making and accountability

How committed is the organisation to the project? How is participant feedback linked to decision-making? Does the impact (influential conclusions and/or actions) of the participatory process correspond to the mandate it was given? Did the project achieve its general objectives? Was the process considered legitimate?

Tokenistic participation is a familiar problem for projects like OmaStadi. It is essential that the relationship between the city and the citizens is based on trust and the real capability to impact the urban development. After the first round of OmaStadi, the evaluation of these aspects was quite low, probably based on the challenges of the cost estimation

stage that many of the participants experienced as unfair. There are no further studies how this has changed after the process was improved for the second round.

The need to establish trust and to take the citizens' views seriously has been acknowledged by the civil servants as a necessary component of functioning participation. Otherwise the desired impacts are lost. Mikko Aho, Executive Director, Urban Environment Division, emphasises the need to take even seemingly absurd proposals seriously:

We must learn that residents really do put time and energy into their ideas, even when sometimes they propose that a restaurant is needed 30 metres underground. We must still examine the proposal, respond accordingly and use sufficient time in doing so. – Interview

The human resources allocated for OmaStadi signify that the accountability issues were taken seriously. During the first round, a total of 240 events were organised to allow residents to meet the City's experts (Osallisuus ja neuvonta, 2020). Eight OmaStadi Raksa workshops were organised and 160 City experts and 800 residents participated, meaning one expert was present for every eight residents (Barbato & Sarpo, 2020). For the second round, the activities shifted to online environments but managed to attract citizens to participate.

While the organisers seem extremely committed to executing OmaStadi process there was significant variation among them. Many civil servants saw OmaStadi as an additional burden for their already busy working lives. They would have wanted to take the interaction with the citizens seriously but felt that this was impossible. At the same time, they felt that they were criticised unjustly for not engaging with OmaStadi enough.

There have been ample opportunities for the citizens to leave feedback on different aspects of OmaStadi. The City has processed all the feedback and it has made an impact for the future rounds. In general, OmaStadi has met many of the objectives assigned to it: it has improved the residents' ability to influence the decision-making and distribution of resources in Helsinki; it has promoted equity in participatory democracy and increased residents' understanding of the municipality's activities. However, sustained evaluation of the activities is required to assess whether this continues to be the case in the future.

In its current form, OmaStadi is work-in-progress and there are widely different views among decision-makers of its purpose and the direction it should take. The legitimacy of the process was widely agreed on – the most significant criticism was raised because the funding for OmaStadi was transferred from the Neighbourhood Fund, a municipal organisation conducting anti-segregation work. At the same time, the decision-makers interviewed judged the programme stiff, revolving around public servants rather than citizens and the results poor.

12. Societal impacts

a) Institutional impact: What new collaborations with universities, museums, schools, businesses, and other stakeholders have arisen? Have decision-makers learned from residents? b) Physical impact: Did the participatory process influence the physical environment? c) Wider context: Did the participatory process tend to be helpful or distance the discussion from complex societal problems such as climate change and increasing injustices?

The collaborations with research bodies have been numerous and comprehensive. The organisers have also established relations with schools, care homes for the elderly, libraries, youth centres and other institutions. However, these have been mostly to provide information of OmaStadi or to facilitate voting. The collaborations with the businesses have consisted of purchases, mostly service design or technological solutions. The OmaStadi organisation has organised numerous feedback sessions and adjusted the process on their basis.

Sanna Vesikansa, Deputy Mayor for Social Services and Health Care, highlighted the reciprocal nature of the process:

This has forced and allowed a direct dialogue with the residents about ideas and their impact, financial and otherwise. I believe this has been a positive impulse for the City's public servants to also renew their work methods..., interview

OmaStadi has raised a lot of interest among the stakeholders throughout its two rounds and has potential to influence citizen participation considerably. However, the wider social and structural impacts cannot be meaningfully evaluated due to the short timespan of the project.

In a relatively short time, OmaStadi has influenced the physical environment in visible ways, especially after the second round when the city began to mark the implemented proposals with OmaStadi stickers. However, most of the implemented projects are small-scale improvements: trash cans, flower beds, street lights and exercise facilities. It is hard to estimate their importance conclusively – the overall budget has been modest but many participants have held their projects very important. At the same time, there have been complaints that the cosmetic repairs and renewals direct the attention away from the real societal problems. OmaStadi has significant limitations for tackling complex societal problems and tends to reduce multifaceted issues into fragments to be fixed one at the time.

Quantification of the results

Figure 1. Evaluation / All groups (City experts, Decision-makers, Urban activists, OmaStadi working group)

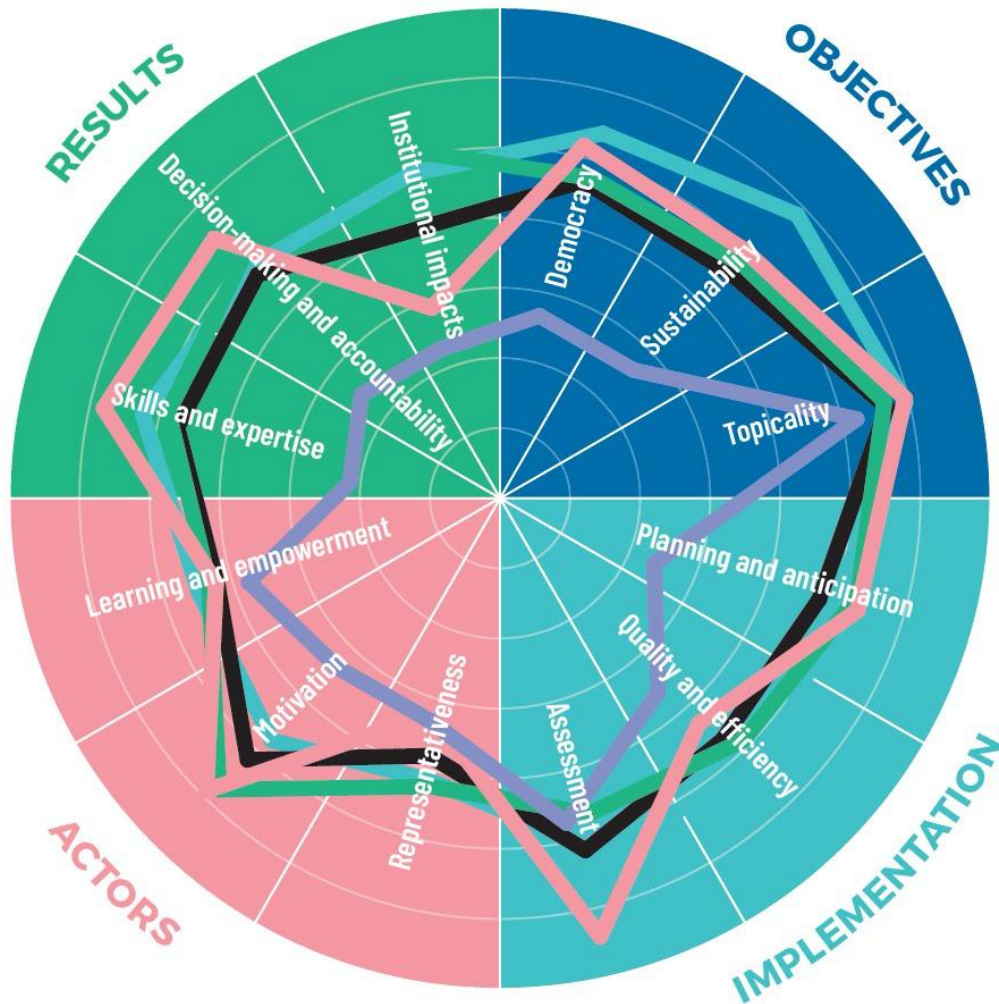
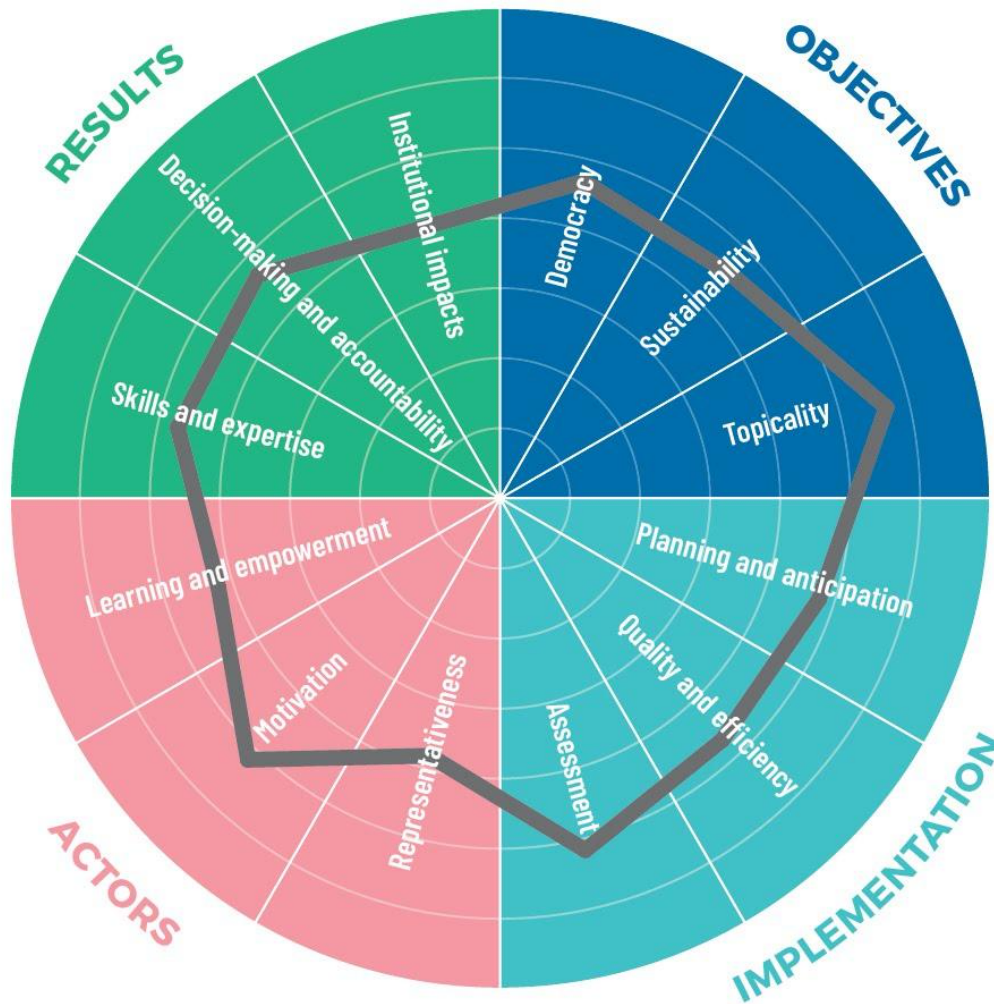


Figure 2. Evaluation / All groups (averages)



Discussion

A resourceful democracy initiative to foster participatory democracy throughout the city

OmaStadi, a participatory budgeting initiative in Helsinki, is currently preparing to launch its third round. It can be considered a large-scale pilot with a yearly budget of 4.400,000€ distributed every other year for implementing the residents' ideas but also including even larger sum for the administrative costs. It is a largest PB initiative in Finland and paving

the way for experiments in other municipalities. In sum, the most highly regarded aspects of OmaStadi are:

- OmaStadi is a significant addition to the framework citizen participation, vital part of the municipal strategy. It responds to concerns of developing proximity democracy and engaging citizens to new forms of democracy.
- It has promoted equity in the municipal decision making. There are no fixed quotas or practices of positive discrimination but throughout its existence OmaStadi has been sensitive to questions of equity and developing new practices to promote more inclusive citizen participation.
- Rather than just promoting a straightforward method of voting, OmaStadi process involves face to face encounters with the Borough Liaisons, specialised in co-creating proposals with the residents. In addition, the popular Raksa workshops provided an environment for successful interactions between the residents and the city authorities.
- The OmaStadi organisation has been sensitive to observing its conduct and ready to develop its practices further. It has also successfully adapted to radically changing circumstances, especially concerning the COVID-19 pandemic.
- The city of Helsinki is dedicated to establish participatory budgeting as an on going practice. The promise of continuity gives the process credibility and increases dedication among the participants.

Our assessment of the aims of OmaStadi for the first rounds was cautiously positive and continues to be so. It has met many of its aims but there is significant room for development. The residents have now a noteworthy channel to influence municipal decision-making, the questions of equity have been addressed and several aspects of OmaStadi have been improved. OmaStadi has also concentrated on increasing the residents' understanding of the municipality's activities and decision making.

Mixed messages

While there was tangible excitement among the residents of Helsinki regarding OmaStadi there has also been confusion about the purposes of participatory budgeting. The tension is often revealed in the competing dynamics of deliberation and competition.

When PB was initiated in Helsinki very different models of collaboration, co-creation and democracy had been tested globally and influenced how the OmaStadi process was understood. While the origins of PB lie in the Brazilian attempts to develop radical alternatives for previous democratic practices, most contemporary cases have more modest aims. In sum, the deliberative trajectory emphasises dialogue, flexibility and inclusive practices while another, competition-oriented approach highlights effectiveness, clarity of the process and healthy rivalry between the proposals. OmaStadi is situated

somewhere in between, drawing influences from the both sides. Nevertheless, this tension is recognised by both residents and decision-makers and they would like to alter the process into their preferred direction. The different views of the aims help to establish dialogue of the direction OmaStadi will be taking – however, they also create confusion and sense of disappointment when the process does not meet the expectations of the participants.

Room for improvement

In just two rounds and with a relatively modest budget OmaStadi has become a significant addition to the practices of citizen participation in Helsinki. It has attracted considerable attention in the media and the political decision-making and the work conducted in Helsinki is followed closely in the other cities. The organisers have demonstrated their capability to adapt to changing circumstances and to improve the process on the basis of feedback. At the same time, there are aspects that require further attention:

- The shared goals of OmaStadi need to be formulated in a clear way to the participants. During the first two rounds there were often confused and contradictory understandings of the process among the participants.
- The OmaStadi organisers have launched several initiatives to reach groups that rarely participate in democratic processes. These efforts have been successful but much more work is needed to ensure the equitability of the process.
- The division of the tasks and responsibilities between the residents and the civil servants have become clearer after the first round but are nevertheless fuzzy. Especially the implementation phase needs further clarification to ensure that all the participants remain engaged and satisfied with the process.
- On the second round, the conduct of the process was transferred into digital environments because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The organisers adapted into the system swiftly and provided support for co-creation in the digital sphere. However, deliberation in wholly digital environment was at times difficult, clumsy and inefficient.
- There is a lot of interest in OmaStadi: the City produces studies and reports, many of the organisers have studied the process alongside their work and there are several students theses on the topic. At the same time, the evaluation conducted by this research group is the only comprehensive study to understand OmaStadi holistically. In future, the research and evaluation of OmaStadi needs to be more rigorous and conducted in a more systematic manner.

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Benefits of Participatory Budgeting

Participatory budgeting is not a neutral tool that guarantees straightforward and equitable participation but subject to various choices that have far-reaching consequences. In OmaStadi the approach has been to develop things on the fly, adapt to changing circumstances and to learn from previous experiences. The process has been organic and open to experimentation but, at the same time, harder to comprehend. The goals of OmaStadi go beyond distributing money for voted proposals:

Within a ten-year cycle we should definitely get to a point where there is no more OmaStadi but rather a percentage-based model with a certain share of the divisions' budgets being spent directly via participatory budgeting. – Johanna Seppälä, Head of Participation and Citizen Information Unit for the City Executive Office – interview

It is intriguing to envisage the future of OmaStadi in within the framework of citizen participation in Helsinki. The expectations are high among those who are active but still more than nine out of ten residents have not voted for the proposals. During our research we have come across participants, especially from migrant backgrounds, who have found OmaStadi as introduction to proximity democracy, even introduction for becoming an urban activist. Nonetheless, there are those who consider PB as “candy money”, distribution of resources into superficial developments – many of which the City should take care of anyway – to keep the residents happy. Relatively small changes in the rules and procedures of OmaStadi can have significant consequences, both for the image of OmaStadi and the tangible results of the voted proposals.

Digital Tools

The shifts between digital and in-person environments have been at the heart of the process and the two rounds of OmaStadi have been very different in this sense. During the first round it was possible to experiment to find the balance between digital and in-person interactions but, because of COVID-19, the second round was limited to digital sphere.

Our data, especially participant observation of the events related to OmaStadi, shows that the residents have very different preferences of finding the correct balance. In sum, there are those who would rather log into the Decidim platform from the comfort of their homes and votes for their favourite proposals. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who are dedicated to take part in extensive in-person discussions, not limited to the proposals but extending to the organising principles of OmaStadi. In general, the ones interested in deliberation preferred in-person encounters and interactions. In-person

events are also necessary to engage targeted and often times less resourceful actors in the process.

On both rounds the participants were critical towards the Decidim platform that was customised for the OmaStadi but managed to use it with the support available. Here, the Borough Liaisons were in an important positions, helping those with limited technological skills to participate. On the second round, also the co-creation workshops were moved online. The City devoted considerable resources for their facilitation but the results varied greatly (Kiiski, 2022). For the third round of OmaStadi, beginning in early 2023, a new kind of balance has to be found.

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