

Presupuestos participativos digitales en los municipios argentinos: ¿cambio de paradigma o adaptación?

Digital participatory budgeting in Argentine municipalities: paradigm shift or adaptation?

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Resumen

La pandemia de COVID-19 impulsó varios procesos de digitalización de los presupuestos participativos que se desarrollaban antes de modo presencial a nivel municipal. En Argentina, sobresalen los casos de los municipios de Escobar, San Lorenzo y Vicente López. La hipótesis general de este artículo sostiene que la digitalización de los presupuestos participativos argentinos constituyó más bien una adaptación que un cambio de paradigma en la participación, es decir: el modelo de la participación comunitaria y territorial se mantuvo predominante y se trató de sostener por medios digitales. Para recolectar la información la investigación recurrió al análisis documental (del material creado por los mismos municipios para difusión, sus reglamentos, plataformas y proyectos) y a la realización de entrevistas en profundidad en los tres municipios con los equipos responsables.

Palabras clave: presupuesto participativo; participación ciudadana digital; plataformas; municipios; participación comunitaria.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted several digitization processes of the Participatory Budgeting that were previously carried out in person at the municipal level. In Argentina, the cases of Escobar, San Lorenzo and Vicente López stand out. The general hypothesis of this article maintains that

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the digitalization of the Argentine PPs constituted rather an adaptation than a paradigm shift in participation, that is: the model of community and territorial participation remained predominant and it was tried to be sustained by digital means. To collect the information, the research resorted to documentary analysis (of the material created by the municipalities themselves for dissemination, their regulations, platforms, and projects) and to conducting in-depth interviews in the three municipalities with the responsible teams.

Keywords: participatory budgeting; digital citizen participation; platforms; municipalities; community participation.

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the daily life of the entire planet in 2020. It brought about major changes in political activity, and, above all, it affected the type of activities that required the physical presence of several people in the same place, “face-to-face” dialogue, and contact. This was felt strongly at the municipal level, especially in instances of neighborhood meetings such as participatory budgeting. The crisis forced several municipalities (those that were able to) to develop digital versions of these meetings in an improvised manner so as not to interrupt the participation policy.

Although in some cases the critical context served to initiate innovative experiences of participatory budgeting aimed at thinking about the post-pandemic society (Cho, Tiphaine & Maurice (2020), in most cases, the digital shift was a difficult process to implement (Bhusal, 2020; Annunziata, Arena & Basualdo Franchino, 2021).

In Argentina, some municipalities managed to digitize their participatory budgets during the cycle following the year the pandemic began. These cases are especially relevant to the field of study because they provide information on how municipal teams have reacted to an unprecedented context. How did these processes of transition to exclusively digital participatory budgeting formats take place? How did municipalities that did not change their conception of citizen participation but proposed a digital alternative so as not to completely disrupt their processes adapt? What immediate effects were observed in their experiences? Does digitization necessarily imply a paradigm shift in participation? This study seeks to answer these questions by investigating and comparing the experiences of three Argentinean municipalities regarding their digital participatory budgets in 2021: Escobar, San Lorenzo, and Vicente López.

First, we propose a conceptualization of two citizen participation paradigms: “community participation” and “connective participation”; then, we describe the methodology used in this research; next, we present the institutional design of and the steps followed by the digital participatory budgets of the Escobar, San Lorenzo, and Vicente López municipalities during 2021; fourth, we compare the three experiences; lastly, we conclude by highlighting the adaptive nature of the digital shift in the three cases and the comparative advantage for such adaptation of previous experience with digital processes within participatory budgeting.

Background and hypothesis

Since its first implementations in the Latin American region at the end of the 20th century and its expansion around the world in the first decade of the 21st century, participatory budgeting has been a tool or policy associated with the ideals of participatory democracy (Pateman, 2012), in particular with the understanding of the local level as a privileged space for citizen intervention in decision-making. Thus, participatory budgeting, as a tool anchored in the territory and the neighborhood, has been related to community strengthening in a bidirectional way: it was understood as a tool capable of empowering local communities, and its success depended on the prior existence of a robust and autonomous network in civil society (Baiocchi, 2003; Avritzer, 2014; Goldfrank, 2006).

In Argentina, the first experiences of participatory budgeting originated during the political and social crisis of 2001-2002 and have expanded significantly since 2008. The National Participatory Budgeting Program had a significant impact on the implementation of the tool, which reached its peak around 2013, when about 30% of the population lived in a municipality that implemented this policy (Arena, 2018). Argentine participatory budgeting has been mostly framed within the community participation model, with neighborhood reach and support by organizations in the territory (Annunziata, 2011; Signorelli, 2016; Carmona & Martínez, 2018).

In general, the so-called “digital participatory budgets” have been processes that enabled the option of *online* voting to select projects (Wampler, McNulty & Touchton, 2018; Coleman & Cardoso Sampaio, 2016), although without modifying the previous process of “face-to-face” meetings in which ideas are discussed and feasible projects are elaborated. Research on these experiences showed that the introduction of online voting contributes to increasing the number of participants but reproduces inequality when the digital gap strongly impacts its social or capability dimensions (Spada, Mellon, Peixoto & Sjoberg, 2016). Although flexibility and lower costs have been highlighted as advantages of *online* participation, especially because it allows overcoming physical barriers such as geographical distance or time (Strandberg & Grönlun, 2018), suspicions or reticence have always persisted insofar as it may also increase the distance between the poor and the middle class in terms of access to political power (Touchton, Wampler, & Spada, 2019). In this sense, Wampler, McNulty, and Touchton (2018) have pointed out that digital participatory budgeting is increasingly oriented toward the middle classes and urban areas and less toward the poor classes and rural areas. Indeed, even if incentives such as a larger budget are proposed for territories with more vulnerable populations, it is hard to achieve the participation of these sectors in digital participatory budgeting (Annunziata, 2020). Until recently, the difficulties in producing *online* deliberative discussions (Graham, 2010; Coleman & Moss, 2012; Hartz-Karp & Sullivan, 2014; Manosevitch, 2014; Bertone, De Cindio & Stortone, 2015) on projects have also contributed to the fact that, in practice, there have been few experiences of participatory budgeting carried out exclusively through digital means. Furthermore, the loss of face-to-face instances in participatory budgeting has generated concern about the loss of the social capital built in the communities and the weakening of the neighborhood and social identities that were nourished by participation (Signorelli, 2020).

In Argentina, the pandemic resulted in the suspension of most of the participatory budgets that were being carried out until 2019, and in only 22% of the cases a “digital shift” was attempted in order to keep them running (Annunziata, Arena & Basualdo Franchino, 2021). The main reason given by the

municipal teams to affirm the irreplaceable nature of face-to-face interaction in citizen participation was the digital gap or access inequalities, considered in three dimensions: a) material socio-economic (affecting the most vulnerable sectors of any age group in terms of access to devices and internet connection); b) cognitive, in terms of capacity, knowledge, or training (especially affecting older adults who are not used to using technology); and c) territorial (affecting the entire population of certain areas of municipalities where there is no good connectivity) (Annunziata, Arena & Basualdo Franchino, 2021).

On the other hand, in Latin American countries, the open government approach to modernize administration has gained ground in recent years. Inspired by the notion of collective intelligence, this approach fosters the ideas of “co-creation” of public policies, distributed production, and shared knowledge (Subirats, 2017). Although participation is one of the pillars of this approach (Oszlak & Kaufman, 2014), it emphasizes the notions of innovation and its technological aspects (Ramírez-Alujas, 2021). However, analyses of open government experiences at the municipal level in Argentina suggest that it has developed more as an optimization of pre-existing practices than as a radical innovation (Grandinetti & Miller, 2020).

During the last few years and even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the *crowdsourcing* or *citizen sourcing* paradigm, based on how the private sector takes advantage of the knowledge and opinions of users, has been gaining ground (Loukis, 2018). Within the scope of what is understood as *citizen sourcing* (Ferreira and Faria, 2018) or *crowdlaw* (Noveck et al., 2020), novel experiences took place, such as those of Decide Madrid (which involved participatory budgeting, consultations, and citizen initiatives through the CONSUL platform) or that of vTaiwan, which also involved using specific platforms to reach consensus in deliberative situations². As we have just mentioned, since their origins in Porto Alegre (Brazil), Latin American participatory budgets have tended to be framed within a territorial and community perspective, relying on previous decentralization processes (Montecinos, 2014), local civil society organizations (McNulty, 2019), and the empowerment of communities (Wampler, McNulty & Touchton, 2021). That of Belo Horizonte was a pioneering case in implementing an *online* participatory budget parallel to a face-to-face one seeking to attract a broader public but with projects proposed by the government (Coleman & Sampaio, 2016; Touchton, Wampler & Spada, 2019). A few Latin American cities had started to develop digital participatory budgets through platforms such as CONSUL based on the logic of crowdsourcing before the pandemic. In Mexico, San Pedro Garza Garcia had pivoted to digital participatory budgeting with the “Decide San Pedro” program in 2019, resulting in a loss of relevance of traditional intermediaries and leaders of organizations, moving from a model based on neighborhood assemblies to one of individual participation (Garza Herrera, 2020). The “Quito Decide” and “Montevideo Decide” platforms (Suárez Elías, 2022)³ are yet other examples; however, the development of platform-based processes remained exceptional in Latin America. Faced with the pandemic emergency in 2020, several participatory budgeting experiences were left unfinished, such as that of Mexico City (Hernández Trejo, 2020);

2 The growing influence of this paradigm went hand in hand with the vertiginous development of new platforms for digital citizen participation, several of them open source, such as CONSUL, DECIDIM, or DEMOCRACIAOS from Argentina, as well as specific platforms for deliberation, such as DISCOURSE or POL.IS.

3 The case of Montevideo is revealing of the coexistence of two paradigms, as “Montevideo decide” did not interrupt the development of its participatory budget.

and, in other cases, such as in Bogotá, an effort was made to digitize the participatory budgets with an adaptive logic similar to the one we will see in the case of Argentine municipalities (Suárez Ramírez, 2020). Ultimately, the communitarian tendency of Latin American participatory budgets made the digital shift difficult.

The hypothesis of this article holds that the digitalization of Argentine participatory budgeting followed the regional trend and constituted more of an adaptation than a paradigm shift in participation, i.e., the model of community and territorial participation remained predominant while being sustained by digital means.

Therefore, we recognize two different contemporary models or paradigms of citizen participation. The first corresponds to the now traditional forms of participation, which multiplied at the end of the 20th century (commonly called neighborhood councils, thematic consultative councils, security forums, community councils, empty chairs, participatory strategic planning, public policy management councils, local councils, participatory budgets, etc.). With some exceptions, participation is not massive and may be unrepresentative of public opinion (those who participate are generally the most active and interested in public affairs). Participation in this model reinforces collective identities and pre-existing political ties, creates networks, and relies on them. Sharing and being with others is constitutive of the meaning of participation. In this paradigm, technologies can be included to a greater or lesser degree, but they are conceived as one channel of expression among others (and it is sought that, as a channel, it does not affect the content of what is to be expressed). We can call this model “community participation.”

A second model or paradigm based on the logic of *crowdsourcing* or *citizen sourcing* has emerged in recent years and reached a peak shortly before the pandemic. In this paradigm, technology is the structure of the participatory process; participation is thought of from the possibilities and functions that technology allows. Participation must be massive in order to provide more meaningful information to the governments that propose it (and even the results can be massively processed with the help of Artificial Intelligence programs). Participation must be agile and adaptable to people’s daily lives, but the participant is thought of more as a user than as a person inserted in belonging networks. In this sense, participation is an individual process that results in a collaborative product. It could even be argued that trends (big figures, Big Data) matter more than the person with real experiences. We can call this model “connective participation.”⁴ Returning to the hypothesis, we will say that the experiences of digitization in Argentine participatory budgets have not sought to leave the paradigm of community participation. A derived—and comparative—hypothesis holds that the greater the pre-pandemic experience with digital participatory budgeting and the lower the incidence of the digital gap, the greater the likelihood that the adaptation to digitization will be successful: this implies, with respect to the cases analyzed here, that the municipality of Vicente López is probably the most adapted to the digital shift caused by the pandemic, followed by San Lorenzo, and then Escobar.

4 The term is inspired by the conceptualization of new forms of protest and citizen mobilization supported by social networks and digital means proposed by Bennett and Segeberg (2012), who distinguish the logic of “connective action” from the classic logic of “collective action.”

Methodology

The methodology used in this research is qualitative and comparative. Three medium-sized municipalities were selected, which started the implementation of their participatory budgets during the second wave in Argentina, starting in 2013 (Arena, 2018), and were among the few in the country that managed to launch a digital version of this tool as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Annunziata, Arena & Basualdo Franchino, 2021)⁵. As can be seen in Table 1 below, the three municipalities differ in terms of the political position of the governing party: while in Escobar governs the Frente de Todos, a coalition that governs Argentina since 2019, the other two municipalities are opponents of the national government (in Vicente López governs the Cambiemos coalition that brought Mauricio Macri to the presidency and in San Lorenzo the center-left coalition, Frente Progresista Cívico y Social, which, with socialism at the helm, governed the Santa Fe province for several years). The municipalities also differ in terms of their socioeconomic profile, with Vicente López being the richest and having the lowest proportion of households with Unsatisfied Basic Needs (UBN) in its territory (2.43%), followed by San Lorenzo (6.39%)⁶, and then Escobar (11.67%). This relationship is not automatically reflected in the per capita budget that each municipality allocated to participatory budgeting in 2021: Vicente López invested the most in this policy, followed distantly by Escobar, and San Lorenzo in third place. In this research, we consider these variables as control variables.

On the other hand, the central variables of this research are those that correspond to the institutional design and its adaptation to the digital version in 2021, i.e., the stages of the process, the territorial organization, the inclusion of synchronous and asynchronous tools, the platforms used, and the difficulties encountered. To collect information, the research resorted to documentary analysis (of the material created by the municipalities themselves for dissemination, their regulations, platforms, and projects) and to conducting in-depth interviews in the three municipalities with the responsible teams. The interview with the person in charge of Escobar's participatory budgeting was conducted on 06/26/2021 and then shorter interviews were conducted to update the information throughout 2021. The interview with the team in charge of San Lorenzo's participatory budgeting took place on 10/06/2021 and was complemented by an interview with the platform developers on the same day. The interview with the person in charge of Vicente Lopez's participatory budgeting took place on 12/13/2021 and was complemented by a workshop on the experience of this municipality and others on 11/11/2021. In addition to the interviews, a *workshop* entitled "Continuities, lessons learned, and changes resulting from the pandemic" was held with representatives from 30 of the country's municipalities.

5 Another case was that of Rosario (Signorelli, 2020).

6 In the case of San Lorenzo, the UBN figure corresponds to the department of San Lorenzo (which includes San Lorenzo and five other municipalities).

Participatory budgeting in the Escobar, San Lorenzo, and Vicente Lopez municipalities in 2021

Escobar

In the municipality of Escobar (Province of Buenos Aires), the COVID-19 pandemic forced the suspension of the participatory budgeting that had been developed in a face-to-face format in 2020. In 2021, authorities decided to relaunch it, this time in a virtual or digital format, taking advantage of the Escobar 360 platform used for the usual procedures of the municipality⁷. The previous experience that the municipality had with digital participation came from the participatory budget cycle of 2019, an instance in which the submission of projects in a face-to-face format was maintained (using paper forms) but which innovated with an *online* voting stage. As the person in charge of it stated: “The complete transition towards virtuality appears in the face of the pandemic’s progress... and to see how to reactivate the participatory budgeting (...) in 2020, the question was: ‘What do we do? Do we move forward? Do we not move forward?...’”⁸. Faced with the crisis that the pandemic implied for the activities that required the physical gathering of people, the municipality of Escobar found an opportunity to reactivate citizen participation in 2021 in the platform it used for regular procedures: “We had been working on the 360 platform and it was like ‘Well, let’s put the participatory budget in here’, because it was like the most organized thing we had to get out of the problem, let’s say, to get back to work.”⁹

In 2021, Escobar allocated approximately 1.5% of the general budget of the municipality to participatory budgeting, which amounted to more than 90,000,000 Argentine pesos distributed among the 26 Community Management Units (UGC for its acronym in Spanish, Unidades de Gestión Comunitaria) into which the territory is organized, as follows: 3,000,000 pesos for each UGC and the rest of the budget separated for “complementary works” that are sometimes done in the most vulnerable neighborhoods of the municipality.

The methodology remained unchanged with respect to the pre-pandemic practice and the forced digital shift in 2021. First of all, it should be noted that the decentralized units of the municipality of Escobar (UGC)¹⁰ are the foundation of the whole process, i.e., of the submission of ideas and projects, and of the voting, as has always been customary in Argentine participatory budgets¹¹. Participants propose and vote for their neighborhoods and not the whole municipality; this did not change with the digitalization of participation. Secondly, the stages remained similar to those of previous versions, but with the difference that the meetings that were previously face-to-face were now held via Zoom.

7 <https://escobar360.escobar.gob.ar/login.aspx>

8 Interview with Soledad Giménez, responsible for Escobar’s participatory budgeting, 06/26/2021.

9 Idem.

10 There are 26 UGC and one that groups private neighborhoods. Each locality consists of several UGC: Belén de Escobar (UGC1 to UGC7 (inclusive) and UGC25); Loma Verde (UGC8, UGC26); Matheu (UGC9 to UGC11); Ingeniero Maschwitz (UGC12 to UGC14); Maquinista Savio (UGC15 to UGC17); Garín (UGC18 to UGC22 y UGC24); 24 de Febrero (UGC23).

11 As well as in other Southern Cone countries, such as Chile or Uruguay (Montecinos, 2014).

The cycle of participation prior to project implementation usually takes place between the months of March and August of each year. The first stage of the process corresponds to informative meetings. Generally, at this stage, the methodology of the cycle is presented, and the neighbors mention their concerns and ask if their ideas could become feasible projects. These “first assemblies,” which were usually held in each UGC, continued to be held via Zoom in 2021.

The second stage corresponds to the submission of projects. In it, the ideas that had been shared or discussed in the informative meetings stage are transformed into concrete proposals that must contain certain information and are presented in a form; each participant can submit projects for the CGU where he/she resides or participates in a social activity. This stage, which was previously carried out in person, began to be carried out through the Escobar 360 platform in 2021 in an asynchronous digital format and in writing. Participants could simply register on the platform and submit a project even if they had not participated in any of the previous Zoom meetings. According to the person in charge of Escobar’s participatory budgeting, it was attempted that the presentation of proposals was not very different from what it used to be: “We tried to make it as similar to the physical format as possible”¹². Participants were able to send proposals for different thematic categories that contained examples of projects that had already been carried out previously within the framework of the participatory budgeting program in their descriptions; this was intended to make the submission of projects easier for participants used to the face-to-face dynamic and to prevent a large number of projects that were not feasible due to formulation problems from being submitted to the municipality. As the public official in charge stated: “The axes contain projects that at some point were submitted through the participatory budgeting program and were made [...] options that were presented and voted throughout these four years and that we know are viable thanks to the participatory budgeting process”¹³.

The third stage, for its part, corresponds to the “feasibility analysis,” in which different departments of the municipal team analyze the neighbors’ proposals according to technical, legal, budgetary, or competence criteria and then elaborate “modules” combining different feasible projects that add up to the total budget allocated to the UGC. The modules are proposed by the team in charge, ensuring thematic diversity and representativeness of the problems specific to each neighborhood of the UGC. The number of projects included in a module varies, generally between three and five, because as many projects can be combined as the allocated budget allows.

After the elaboration of the modules, there is a fourth stage in which the municipal team presents the feasible “project combinations” to the participants, giving feedback with the pertinent justifications and allowing for modifications arising from the exchange. These are the “second assemblies”. In 2021, this feedback took place at meetings held via Zoom.

The fifth step is voting: participants can choose between the different modules available for their UGC (they only vote for one module, which covers the total budget¹⁴); in 2021, the voting was carried out through the Escobar 360 platform, where the projects had been submitted. Finally, implementation

12 Interview with Soledad Giménez, responsible for Escobar’s participatory budgeting, 06/26/2021.

13 Idem.

14 The elaboration of modules is specific to Escobar’s experience and not usual in other participatory budgets.

is the sixth and last stage; the municipality attempts to start the projects immediately after the vote to implement 80% of the projects during the same year.

In short, the municipality's web platform was used for two actions: submitting projects and voting for one of the modules available for the UGC. There were no exchanges or deliberation on the same platform, and the moments when participants needed to talk to each other were transformed into Zoom meetings. In this way, the 2021 Escobar's participatory budgeting process combined the digital asynchronous with the synchronous.

At the launch of the 2021 experience, there was a significant number of participants (more than 1,000 people connected), something unusual for participatory budgets in Argentina. However, the synchronous meetings for the exchange of ideas had a decrease in participation compared to previous editions: there were between 100 and 120 people at each meeting, whereas when the meetings were held in person at the UGC, up to 150 people attended. Digitalization implied several challenges and difficulties that influenced the decrease in the number of participants. On the one hand, many neighbors did not have a personal email address to create a user on the Escobar 360 platform. Activists of the ruling party's political space had to go and help people register an e-mail address to validate their account on the platform. On the other hand, there are areas with poor connectivity in the municipality's territory. For example, while in the city center there is free Wi-Fi in public squares, in the suburbs there is none, and even the official buildings of the UGC have connectivity problems in those areas where fiber optic cable networks are not available. This type of situation resulted in a change in the profile of participants: the participation of people from the downtown area, with a higher socioeconomic level, increased, while that of people from neighborhoods far from the center and from more vulnerable sectors decreased. The person in charge of Escobar's participatory budgeting reflected: "Now we are going

to be more connected to the city centers and lose reach at the edges, in the interior... and, for me, participatory budgeting has the greatest impact precisely on the inside of neighborhoods because the city centers usually have access to almost everything..."¹⁵.

San Lorenzo

In the municipality of San Lorenzo (Santa Fe), participatory budgeting started to be implemented in 2013, and youth participatory budgeting in 2016. Similar to Escobar, the municipality had already used digital platforms prior to the pandemic; in their case, they had been working with Virtuágora¹⁶ since 2015 and Ingenia¹⁷ since 2017.

In 2018, San Lorenzo's participatory budget began featuring the option of *online* voting as well as having itinerant ballot boxes (the submission of projects was done in writing, but the platform was used

15 Interview with Soledad Giménez, responsible for Escobar's participatory budgeting, 06/26/2021.

16 Open source platform created by Santa Fe UTN students: <https://github.com/virtuagora>.

17 Participatory program developed by the provincial government's youth cabinet within the framework of the SantaLab innovation laboratory, in collaboration with Virtuágora.

to process the data), which was replicated in 2019. However, with the onset of COVID-19 in 2020, all participatory budgets went digital, with a mostly asynchronous format, and remained like that in 2021.

In 2021, San Lorenzo's participatory budget had a budget line item of 8,000,000 Argentine pesos and 800,000 for the youth participatory budget¹⁸. This budget is distributed equally among the three districts that make up the municipality (North, Center, and South)¹⁹ and, at the same time, since 2018, is divided into 60 % for community projects (submitted by neighbors) and 40% for institutional projects (submitted by organizations that provide a service to the community and have legal status).

As in the case of Escobar, San Lorenzo's participatory budget maintained the same territorialized logic in its digital version (i.e., projects are presented and voted for each district or neighborhood and not for the territory of the municipality as a whole), as well as the stages that structured its institutional design before the pandemic.

The participatory budget cycle usually takes place between March and September of each year. The first stage is the so-called "Diagnostic Day." Before the pandemic, it was divided into two face-to-face meetings: one that brought together the three districts of San Lorenzo and a second meeting held, respectively, in each district to design projects using paper forms. However, since 2020, the Diagnostic Day took place in a single synchronous initial meeting for the entire municipality for information purposes.

Participants then submit projects in the second stage of the cycle. In 2021, this activity took place online through the platform specifically developed for this purpose by the municipality with Virtúagora.

The third stage consists of feasibility analyses carried out by the competent departments of the municipal government based on technical, legal, budgetary, or action plan overlap criteria.

The fourth stage consists of presenting the feasibility reports of the projects to the participants. Before the pandemic, it was called "Feasibility Day" and was a face-to-face meeting in which public officials explained the reasons for considering projects feasible or not feasible, and projects could be modified as a result of the exchange; however, since 2020, it consisted simply of the uploading of feasibility reports of each project to the platform²⁰.

18 San Lorenzo is the only one of the three municipalities studied that develops a youth participatory budget in addition to the general or adult one. In the present study, we concentrate exclusively on the experiences of general participatory budgets, which are comparable. The San Lorenzo's youth participatory budget considers the municipality a single district since the local schools are concentrated in the center. Before 2020, dissemination took place in school environments, as well as participation (high school classes from the third year onwards selected delegates). In the case of the youth participatory policy, the impact of the pandemic in 2020 was extraordinary, as schools were closed.

19 San Lorenzo has 26 neighborhoods (Norte, Díaz Vélez, el Pino, 3 de Febrero, Cap. Bermúdez, Islas Malvinas, Nicasio Oroño, Leandro N. Alem, Supe, del Combate, R. de Escalada de San Martín, Mitre, Sargento Cabral, Mariano Moreno, 1° de Julio, San Martín, José Hernández, Felisa, Rivada- via, Bouchard, 2 de Abril, Las Quintas, San Eduardo, Morando, FO. NA. VI. Oeste, 17 de Agosto) grouped into the three districts that serve as the basis for the participatory budget and are similar in terms of population and number of neighborhoods (Interview with Iris Moreyra, responsible for this participatory policy in San Lorenzo, and Matías Guzmán, from the youth participatory budget's technical team, 06/10/2021).

20 The following is an example of the arguments used to justify non-feasibility in response to the "Garitas para colectivos en Zona Norte" project, which sought to install shelters for public transportation in a section of San Martín Ave.: "The project is not feasible because there is no physical, regulatory space to place the sentry boxes in the requested locations."

The fifth stage is the *online* voting of the feasible projects through the platform. Each registered participant can vote for up to three “community” projects and up to three “institutional” projects per district. The projects are then ranked by the number of votes received until the budget available for the district is reached. Finally, the sixth stage is the implementation of the winning projects.

In the institutional design of the San Lorenzo’s participatory budget, there was no provision for synchronous discussion of the projects prior to their submission, nor was there any possibility to support projects submitted on the platform or to make comments on them. Since there was no discussion before the submission, the projects arrived already assembled and closed, many of them similar to each other, unclear, or missing information. Previously, in the face-to-face format, the projects arrived at the submission stage with improvements, and similar projects could be grouped, thus reducing dispersion. Digitization meant that the municipal team had to contact the proponents several times to understand “what they meant” by the proposal uploaded on the platform. As the person in charge of the participatory budget in this municipality said: “When working in person, it is easy for people who have a similar idea to agree... a single project was put together with those people, with those submitters... when we worked on it in assemblies, in person. In this opportunity,

which was the first time we did it completely *online*, it was the first experience and, well... the projects were submitted even if they were similar [...] there was no space for that interaction of telling the neighbor ‘look, work it out with this person because he is thinking the same thing’ because the project was already assembled”²¹.

As in the case of Escobar, the platform was used to present projects and then vote for them; it was not intended to promote deliberative or discussion instances on the platform. However, there were no synchronous meetings to hold discussions, except for the initial Diagnostic Day, which was mainly informative. The institutional design of the digital participatory budget tended to make the asynchronous format prevail.

According to the team responsible for the administration, participation did not drop drastically due to digitization²², to some extent, because digital voting had already been in place since previous editions. Indeed, in 2019, 1,248 people had voted in the participatory budget, but only 57 via physical ballot boxes; thus, there had already been successful experiences with *online* voting. In 2020, 849 people voted via different digital means (WhatsApp link, website, *tablet*), and in 2021, 778 people voted via the same means. The decrease in participants was mainly due to the digital gap, as there are neighborhoods in San Lorenzo where Internet service is not available yet. The highest number of votes cast via digital means was in the neighborhoods of the Downtown District, where there is better quality and coverage in connectivity.

21 Interview with Iris Moreyra, responsible for the San Lorenzo’s participatory budget, and Matías Guzmán, from the youth participatory budget’s technical team, 10/06/2021.

22 It did in the case of the youth participatory budget.

Vicente López

In the municipality of Vicente López (Province of Buenos Aires), participatory budgeting is a long-standing policy: its implementation began in 2012 with a pilot plan named “Neighborhood Civic Forums” (Foros Cívicos Barriales), and, in 2017, the experience of presenting projects *online* using the DemocraciaOS²³ platform of Democracia en Red²⁴ began. Contrary to what usually happens with participatory budgets that digitize the voting stage first, Vicente Lopez resorted to face-to-face voting before the pandemic but had already experimented with the digital submission of projects. In 2020, the participatory budget cycle was suspended, and the municipality focused on implementing projects pending from previous cycles. The participatory tool was implemented again in 2021, combining Zoom meetings with digital voting.

In 2021, Vicente López allocated 200,000,000 Argentine pesos to participatory budgeting, which was distributed as follows: half was allocated in equal parts to each of the nine neighborhoods that make up the municipality²⁵, and the other half was allocated according to population size, so three neighborhoods, Olivos, Munro, and Florida Oeste, had the largest budgets available.

The participatory budget methodology remained unchanged despite the digitization of the process in the two factors in which we also found continuities for Escobar and San Lorenzo: the territorialized structure and the stages of the cycle. The person in charge of the process stated that this definition did not change with the *online* dynamics and that participants thought, proposed, and voted on projects for their neighborhoods and not for the municipality as a whole: “This participatory budget has a territorial logic by locality”²⁶.

The cycle usually takes place, as in the other cases, between the months of March and August/September of each year. The first stage consists of informative and diagnostic meetings: before the pandemic, these were held in person in each of the neighborhoods of the municipality; in 2021, they were carried out through Zoom following a synchronous meeting format. In these meetings, a plenary session was held and then the participants moved on to thematic discussion rooms according to their interests (a. safety and public space; b. culture, education, sports, and health). These meetings served to explain the methodology and stages of participatory budgeting and to allow neighbors to begin to put forward their first ideas before submitting proposals.

The second stage corresponds to the submission of proposals. Anyone over 16 years of age who lives or works in one of the neighborhoods of Vicente López can participate. The proposals were submitted in 2021 via the platform specially designed for this purpose, which the municipality had already used²⁷. Each participant can submit an initiative for one of the nine neighborhoods of the municipality, but not for the entire territory as a whole. Participants may submit proposals for building works or equipment for public spaces, health centers, schools, civil society organizations,

23 Open source platform: <https://github.com/DemocracyOS/democracyos>

24 <https://democraciaenred.org/>

25 Vicente López, Olivos, Florida, La Lucila, Villa Martelli, Florida Oeste, Munro, Carapachay, Villa Adelina.

26 Interview with Pamela Nilus, responsible for the Vicente López's participatory budget, 12/13/2021.

27 <https://presupuestoparticipativo.vicentelopez.gob.ar>

and non-profit entities, or campaigns or workshops on a theme limited to the year of execution (because it is not possible to hire stable staff through this participatory tool). Vicente López's participatory budgeting regulations specify the existence of a maximum amount per proposal (it cannot exceed 5,000,000 pesos). This is something that happens often, i.e., favoring the selection of more projects of smaller scope or avoiding that one or a few projects take the entire budget (Annunziata, 2011); however, in this case, participants know in advance the limitation defined by the municipality. In 2021, there was the possibility, through the platform, of being an "associated author" to a project submitted by another participant as a way of combining very similar proposals.

The third stage consists of feasibility analyses carried out by the competent departments of the municipal government. The criteria for evaluating projects are legal, technical, and economic, and the decision on each project is informed through the web platform.

The fourth stage corresponds to voting on the list of projects the municipality has deemed feasible. In 2021, this stage had to be digitized: first, workshops were held via Zoom to advise participants on how to communicate on the projects and to explain the voting; then, the actual voting took place in an asynchronous format via the platform (throughout 14 days of October 2021). Each participant could choose up to three projects from the list of projects from the neighborhood(s) in which he/she was eligible to vote according to his/her registration in the platform. For the municipality, the digitization of voting was the biggest novelty brought about by the pandemic: "The truth is that we had more meetings than last year in person, because we were also introducing *online* voting, which was something new..."²⁸. In the Vicente Lopez experience, digitization, particularly of voting, led to a significant drop in the number of participants (from 76,000 in the last pre-pandemic edition to 13,000 people). The team in charge attributes this to a large extent to the identity verification process required to create the electoral roll; neighbors had to share their National Identity Card (ID) or a document that proved that they lived, worked, or attended school in the territory, which discouraged them from registering as users. The profile of the participants also changed in terms of age: those over 55 years old, who before the pandemic were the ones who participated the most, were less present in 2021, and, instead, those who participated the most were between 30 and 40 years old²⁹. Something in common with the San Lorenzo and Escobar cases is the effect of the digital gap. In vulnerable neighborhoods of the municipality and when it came to older people, those interested in participating did not even have an email address to register on the platform. In Vicente Lopez, being a municipality with a higher general socioeconomic level than the other two³⁰, this was particularly noticeable in generational terms; for this reason, the team responsible for the participatory budget organized meetings in senior citizen centers to help participants open a personal mailbox: "... we went and held face-to-face meetings, especially at the retirement centers, where 14 or 16 people participated... we did something quite personalized with them..."³¹. Nevertheless, participation in the meetings for the presentation of ideas via Zoom increased by about 12-13% compared to the previous face-to-face version, which corresponds to about 350 people. Between 30 and 60 people participated in each meeting and an average of 15 participants spoke at each meeting.

28 Interview with Pamela Niilus, responsible for the Vicente López's participatory budget, 12/13/2021.

29 The participation of people under 30 years of age was very low, as was the case in San Lorenzo with the youth participatory budget.

30 Only 5% of its population lives in vulnerable or precarious neighborhoods.

31 Interview with Pamela Niilus, responsible for the Vicente López's participatory budget, 12/13/2021.

Comparative impact of digitization

As we can see in Table 1, Vicente López is the municipality with the largest population and also the one that allocated the highest amount per inhabitant to participatory budgeting in 2021; it is followed by Escobar, with a similar population but slightly more than half the budget allocated by Vicente López; lastly, San Lorenzo is the municipality with the smallest population and the one that allocated the smallest budget per inhabitant in 2021 (20% of what Vicente López allocated). However, the different population sizes of the municipalities or the different amounts allocated to participatory budgeting in the three cases did not imply evident variations in terms of the digitization process and its impacts.

Table 1:

Information on the 2021 participatory budgets of the Escobar, San Lorenzo, and Vicente López municipalities.

Municipality	Escobar	San Lorenzo	Vicente López
Province	Buenos Aires	Santa Fe	Buenos Aires
Inhabitants	213,619	46,239	270,929
Intendant in 2021	Ariel Sujarchuk	Leonardo Raimundo	Jorge Macri
Intendant's Political Party	Frente de Todos (governing party)	Frente Progresista Cívico y Social (national opposition)	Juntos x el Cambio (national opposition)
Total amount allocated (ARS \$)	90,000,000	7,200,000	200,000,000
Amount allocated per inhabitant (ARS \$)	421	156	738
Format	Synchronous and asynchronous	Asynchronous	Synchronous and asynchronous
Proposals	1 500	113	571
Feasible	No information available	86	217
Winner	26 modules	30	76
Participants	No information available	778	14 149
Porcentaje de participantes sobre población	No information available	1,69	5,22

Source: own elaboration based on interviews and documentary analysis of the web pages of the three municipalities

First, as we have already mentioned, the territorial basis of the participatory policy was maintained in all three cases, that is, the fact of devising, elaborating projects, and voting on projects for a neighborhood,

district, or UGC, which has a fraction of the total budget allocated to participatory budgeting. Although digitization could make combining scales and thinking about projects for the entire city easier (Annunziata, 2020), the three municipalities studied chose to maintain a logic of the tool similar to that used in its in-person implementation, associated with the territorial experiences of the immediate environment.

On the other hand, a significant fact in the three cases analyzed is the discrimination between projects presented by neighbors and projects presented by civil society organizations, foundations, or institutions of the territory. In the three experiences, the possibility for organized groups with collective belongings to present projects in the participatory budgeting was positively valued before the pandemic, which did not change after the digitization of the process. In 2021, the three municipalities maintained the logic of community participation despite the fact that online participation tends to favor the logic of individual participation. In Escobar, participants could not register on the platform as organizations but only as neighbors; however, in the description of the project proposals they submitted, they mentioned their belonging to specific organizations (whose municipal recognition or legal status was then verified by the team in charge). In San Lorenzo, the so-called “institutional” projects even had a differentiated budget. In Vicente López, public welfare institutions registered in the municipality and state-run educational institutions of the Province of Buenos Aires with facilities in the territory were eligible to submit proposals, and the team in charge had to develop a specific strategy to prepare “special rolls” for the *online* voters from these institutions (possibly people linked to these institutions with facilities in the territory but not necessarily inhabitants of Vicente López). In 2021, of the 571 proposals submitted, 158 were institutional (and 413 from neighbors).

Third, none of the three cases enabled asynchronous deliberation processes through digital platforms designed for that purpose. While Escobar used the same platform employed for regular procedures, with restricted functionalities, both Vicente López and San Lorenzo worked on the digital version of the participatory budget with platforms designed specifically for participation that could have been used to allow exchanges between participants. However, San Lorenzo chose not to have a deliberative moment and to simplify the process into the submission of proposals and asynchronous voting, while Vicente López chose to replace the “face-to-face” exchange meetings with synchronous Zoom meetings that were, in practice, informative rather than deliberative.

It is worth mentioning that, during the Zoom exchanges, those responsible for the participatory process were positively surprised by various aspects of the deliberative quality. In Escobar: “Spontaneity also appeared when using Zoom... something I considered positive... I thought it was going to be like talking to 100 people, all muted, but no, the need to speak up, to ask questions, appeared”. In Vicente López, the team in charge was impressed by the success in terms of the deliberative functioning of these meetings, partly because several of the people present already knew each other since they had participated in previous cycles: “Many participate every year... sometimes I don’t remember the exact names of all of them, but after seeing their faces, I thought: ‘these are the core members’”³². In the Zoom meetings, participants had the camera on and their names were displayed, which made it easier for them to refer to each other during their interventions; and, above all, the prevailing climate

32 Interview with Pamela Niilus, responsible for the Vicente López’s participatory budget, 12/13/2021.

in these meetings was one of respectful debate. As the person in charge of the tool observed: “When they are in person, people go with more complaints, and more individual complaints too... they tell you their problems, what happened to them, that this or that happens at their doorstep... here [at Zoom meetings], I was struck by the fact that people listened to what the others said, and when they spoke they commented, they made comments to each other... they talked to each other many times... and there was not a single complaint that was... intense, nobody got angry or upset...”³³. In any case, it is necessary to qualify the deliberative success of the synchronous meetings as in no case were they instances for the discussion of projects, but rather informative meetings in which neighbors took the floor to ask about the pertinence of their ideas or, in Vicente López, also meetings to advise participants on communication campaigns to promote their projects before the vote.

All in all, what we observed is that the three experiences sought to go through the digitization process trying to maintain the same spirit of face-to-face participation (territorialized and community-based), that is, trying to adapt to the new (forced) context of the digital shift but without promoting a paradigm shift.

Digitization had similar effects in the three municipalities, although with slight variations that are worth mentioning. On the one hand, as we just pointed out, the deliberative component of the participatory processes was weakened. On the other hand, digitization had an exclusionary effect due to the digital gap, though, in Vicente López, the generational gap was more important than the socioeconomic gap because, in general, it is a municipality with better income and infrastructure than the other two. In Escobar, the case with the highest number of vulnerable population areas, the person in charge noted a significant drop in the number of participants: “For example, in Savio, which is where there are areas with greater vulnerability, [before the pandemic] some meetings were held in the street... we had a screen and 100 people standing or sitting there... and perhaps that is where I see the limitation [of digitization]... Participation ends up being a bit biased by those who have access”³⁴. Probably influenced by the limitations imposed by the digital gap, the conception of participation conveyed by the implementers in the three cases corresponds to a model of community participation, which emphasizes contact between people, collective dynamics, and the strengthening of pre-existing networks. Therefore, the digital is interpreted as a tool for adaptation to a critical context, but not as the very structure of participation. For example, the person responsible for this policy in Escobar stated: “It is still hard for me to feel that virtuality solves or paves the way for us in terms of participation... I am still a bit skeptical”³⁵. Even the creators of the platform used in San Lorenzo stated: “Our motto is to complement citizen participation; citizen participation is face-to-face and is complemented by something digital... we never said, ‘this is going to change the whole system and everything is going to be digital’”³⁶.

33 Idem.

34 Interview with Soledad Giménez, responsible for Escobar's participatory budget, 06/26/2021.

35 Idem.

36 Interview with Guillermo Croppi and Augusto Mathurín, Virtuágora, 10/06/2021.

Conclusion: forced digitization and adaptation

The analysis of the experience of developing digital participatory budgets in the Escobar, San Lorenzo, and Vicente López Argentine municipalities during 2021 allows us to conclude that the digital shift forced by the pandemic occurred within the framework of an adaptive strategy and did not represent a paradigm shift, i.e., it did not seek to move away from the paradigm of “community participation” towards what we have called “connective participation.” This is based on different aspects of the described experiences: the methodology based on territorial decentralization was maintained; the same stages as in the face-to-face version of participatory budgeting were maintained; the possibility of participating individually or as a member of an organization belonging to the territory was maintained; an attempt was made to make online activities similar to those carried out face-to-face (such as the project submission form in Escobar, which tried to resemble the paper form); projects that had already been carried out in previous cycles were suggested to guide the participants; the municipal teams maintained their perspective of participation as inherently face-to-face and subsidiarily digital.

By remaining within the paradigm of community participation, the effects of digitization were more negative than positive for the municipal teams: the number of participants dropped, particularly those from the most vulnerable areas due to the digital gap; the age profile changed; and the deliberative dimension of participatory budgeting was affected (since, although synchronous digital meetings were held to allow participants to exchange ideas, they were not meetings aimed at collectively elaborating the projects to be submitted).

On the other hand, the adaptation was more successful where previous digitization experiences had been more intense: in the municipality of Vicente López in the first place, followed by San Lorenzo in the second place. While San Lorenzo and Escobar had previously experimented with the digitization of the voting stage, only Vicente López had already tested the project submission stage through the platform. The correlation of this information with the inequalities of each territory (let's remember that Escobar is the municipality with the most vulnerable population based on the UBN index) is significant because it demonstrates the negative effect of the material digital gap.

At the time of concluding this article, the 2022 participatory budgeting cycles have begun in the three cases; future research will have to investigate how participatory budgets have been modified more permanently in the post-pandemic context and what the predominant forms of *offline-online* hybridization will be. A question to be explored concerns the relationship between adaptation and hybridization (No, Mook & Schugurensky, 2016) of participatory practices: To what extent will hybrid participatory budgets be the product of adaptation, and to what extent will they emerge from a deliberate design that seeks to combine the advantages of face-to-face and digital dynamics? Another line of research that opens up as a result of this study is the comparison between experiences that can be framed within the community participation paradigm and experiences more akin to the connective participation paradigm: Which will ultimately prove to be more capable of influencing decisions? Which will be the most inclusive approach?

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