**Transcription**

Interviewer: All right, so thanks for taking part. Can you briefly, in your own words, give us a background of your career in democratic innovation, civic technology or public consultation?

Interviewee 1: So maybe Interviewee 2 can elaborate a bit more, if you talk about the career aspect.

Interviewer: It's just for you personally.

Interviewee 1: All right. So since I joined the organization only, I joined in November, but I've been working only with the first and final events in schools. So I was just observing the whole process and I kind of got involved in some qualitative research, like transcription of interviews with school administrations. But Interviewee 2 has way more experience than that, so she may elaborate.

Interviewee 2: Yes, so I've been responsible for participatory budgeting initiatives in schools since the start of autumn, so since September, I guess. And I've been responsible for working with schools since then. However, we do have other people working on PBs in municipalities. So yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. All right. Thank you. So we'll now start with the general interview questions. We're going to... Initially, we planned on doing two separate interviews. So there's two parts and they overlap to some extent, but I try to not make it confusing. So the first question there would be, can you provide a brief overview of the participatory budgeting initiative in Lithuania?

Interviewee 1: Right. So the first PB in Lithuania was implemented in 2018 in the city of Alytus. And the municipality itself was responsible for moderating the initiative. And since then, participatory budgeting started spreading around the country to different regions. And in terms of municipalities, two thirds of them have already tried the initiative at least once. So particularly, that's 38 out of 60 municipalities that we have in Lithuania. Not all, however, continue carrying them. I believe it's like one in 10, if I'm not wrong. One of the colleagues mentioned this number. And the budget also varies in those initiatives. So the range is from, let's say, 7,000 to as much as 150,000 euros. And when it comes to schools, we have over 40 schools throughout Lithuania which have tried the initiative at least once. And budget also varies there. Of course, it's way smaller than in the cities compared to city scale. And the range in schools is between 200 and 3,500 euros. And higher finances are usually used if the municipality provides at least part of the budget. Because usually for schools, it's quite difficult to allocate high sums of money. And if the school enjoys the initiative the first time, and if the process is successful, then they choose to repeat it. So such an example would be Vilnius, the capital and its region. Yeah, and the network of schools which have joined the initiative just keep expanding to other regions.

Interviewer: All right, thank you. And so what were the main objectives and goals of this initiative, like the school-wide initiative?

Interviewee 2: Yeah, so we have this problem in Lithuania that very little percentage of society is involved in decision-making processes. And that's quite an issue in Lithuania, because it's also related to low percentage in voting processes and so on and so forth. So participatory budgeting started in Lithuania as an initiative to involve people in decision-making processes and to create good habits in being involved in your society, in your community. And also it's about financial literacy. When we're talking about schools, it's a lot about financial literacy. So participatory budgeting for us is mostly about that and also about increasing the feeling of ownership of your community and being more capable of doing some changes if it's needed.

Interviewer: So also like kind of encouraging the leadership qualities of students relative from an early age, like exposing them already. All right. Yeah. Okay, yeah, that's great. And so maybe a big question, how was the participatory budgeting process designed and implemented? Like this talks about the process.

Interviewee 1: So maybe you can touch upon the designing phase, Interviewee 2, in terms of how it was born and then I can go on and describe it more in detail about implementation.

Interviewee 2: Yeah, so when we're talking about PBs in municipalities, they started it on their own and we were just like involved in doing consultations or evaluations and something like that. However, in schools, at first it was our initiative and the majority of schools actually started doing PBs because of us. However, later on, a lot of schools started doing it only with their municipalities without our help. And we don't actually know the numbers yet. We're planning to know. But yeah, the design is constantly changing. We've started in 2019 and the design has changed multiple times. However, we are trying to make it as simple as possible for schools to manage it. However, there are some key steps that has to be taken on so that the process would be of a good quality.

Interviewee 1: Right. And when it comes to actually realizing and implementing the initiative, we communicate with administrations of the schools which are interested. So, as Interviewee 2 mentioned, sometimes they reach out to us, but sometimes we take the first step and offer them to consider doing an initiative. We introduce the general idea and then continue guiding the schools throughout the whole process. So some of the key things that schools have to consider is the general purpose or why would they want to do such initiative? What are their objectives? What would they like to achieve with it? For example, they can look at the level of engagement among students and if they feel that there is some lack of engagement and they would benefit strongly from participatory budgeting, that would be one of the objectives of starting doing it. Then schools have to consider the time which will be dedicated for implementing the initiative. So, for example, when will be the general discussions held during the classes or some specific time dedicated after the school time? And then in general, the time frame for how long the initiative should last. Maybe Interviewee 2 can go more in details about the time frames, but essentially creating some deadlines to have orientational framework and ability to work out all of the stages as efficiently as possible are some of the necessary things to consider before starting the initiative. And then on the formal side, we do sign the agreements with schools about our cooperation with them.

Interviewee 2: Yes, so it usually takes around two to four months to implement PB in schools. We have like these four main steps and the first one is ideas. So, we're doing a workshop with students, thinking about ideas that they want to implement in their school and also we're helping them to realize what kind of ideas are possible to implement and what are not. Then we're moving to the next step, which is projects. So, students have to fill the form and to describe their idea in more detail. So, for example, they have to calculate the budget and they have to describe it in detail, what color that bean bag would be and so on and so forth. So, yeah, the third step is voting procedure and fourth is implementing the winning idea.

Interviewer: All right, I mean, I'll pick up more on that in depth in the second part. So, I'm not going to ask follow-up questions just yet. Next question would be, who were the key stakeholders involved in this initiative and what roles did they play?

Interviewee 1: So, from our organization's perspective, our donors, of course, are important stakeholders in all of our activities and initiatives. And from the perspective of those schools, which participate in the process, we would say that municipalities are one group of the stakeholders, as well as us, Transparency International, because we have an interest in helping schools to become good examples and to provide tools for schools to successfully implement the initiative and especially in the future with less engagement of ours, like independently. And what should be highlighted is that we do not interfere in the process. Our role is assistive. And also, there are schools which do not need our involvement at all. Some municipalities provide consultations to them, as well as monitor the process. Hence in some cases, we do not participate at all. I also, when thinking about answering this question, thought about parents as potential stakeholders, because at the end of the day, they are still part of the community, but usually not as present in everyday school's life as teachers are, for example. So, maybe parents as well, but essentially, municipalities and our organization. Maybe Interviewee 2 can add to that.

Interviewee 2: Yeah, when we're talking about parents, it's mostly relevant when we're talking about younger students. That's when they become more involved in the processes. But when we're talking about students from, I don't know, sixth grade, they're not usually involved in the process in a direct way.

Interviewer: So, you would more involve the parents instead of the children, then, if they're very young?

Interviewee 2: No, no, that's not the case. The case is that children, the main target group is children. So, only if they need assistance in, for example, filling the form of the idea, describing, calculating, and so on. Parents can be involved if they ask for help, but it's not implemented in the project, the involvement of parents.

Interviewer: All right. So, the next question would be, how were the citizens engaged? I mean, a very similar question. I don't know if you already answered that to the fullest extent, but how are citizens engaged in the decision-making process? Basically, the students, how they decided on what ideas come forward, etc.

Interviewee 1: So, in short, we have described different stages. So, a couple of aspects are really important. It's the opportunity for students to suggest their ideas emerges when participatory budgeting is being implemented, as well as rights to vote for those ideas themselves. And such a decision-making process is very different from a typical process, which is in schools, that usually either teachers or parents decide what is right for the school. Students are usually less involved. And then the voting procedure itself, which we mentioned, we can go more in detail later, but that is the stage where the final decision is made. Everybody has an equal say, one vote per person, and that's very direct involvement in decision-making. Okay, all right. Yeah.

Interviewer: But yeah, also... No, go ahead.

Interviewee 1: Yeah, then there is a thing about consultancy group, but we should expand on it probably later as well.

Interviewer: So, the next question would be, what challenges did you face during the implementation of these initiatives and how were they addressed?

Interviewee 2: Okay. Interviewee 1, maybe...

Interviewee 1: Oh, yeah. So, this is very broad, actually. Well, the main thing we need to understand is that schools differ a lot. So, we travel through different regions and we really notice how students are different, how the internal communications are different, and motivations and objectives vary. So, this actually impacts a lot of the challenges that may arise. So, first of all, the age of the targeted audience. As Interviewee 2 mentioned, parents may need to be involved more if we work with primary school students. Also, what is important is that clearly explaining the whole process, what is it about, what is the purpose of it, is also more challenging when you work with the younger students. A well-understood language has to be used, so that they feel engaged, involved. The process also may be adapted in various ways so that all children have equal opportunities to participate. Essentially, they have to understand what is going on, why this initiative is needed, and what is actually being asked from them. So, basically, the main challenges were these...

Interviewer: Because every school kind of works differently, you need to have a different approach to some extent with every school, but also with every age group. You need to adapt that. So, this may be challenging.

Interviewee 2: When we just start communicating with school, when we're just at the first stages of implementing PBs, we usually try to understand the approach they're using while communicating with their community and what is the relationship with students. So, we're trying to understand some psychological, like, or community atmosphere things at first, and then we try to evaluate what kind of methods would work best for that. So, for example, if we're talking about a school that is quite small in the region, and there is about 100 students, but their age is from the first grade till 12, well, it can be difficult due to their age differences to understand everything so that the younger ones would understand and the older ones would be interested. So, we're trying, for example, in the first event, we're trying to explain the basics of PBs separately for younger students and for older students, and then when we do the workshop, when we're trying to come up with the ideas, then we join them together so they can understand that they're still deciding on the same budget and that they're still the same community. So, we just try to change our approaches depending on the situation. However, we do have those main stages that we do recommend to have in every school, however, it may differ.

Interviewee 1: Yeah, it's probably, so, yeah, so it's like we try to follow the same guidelines, the general structure, but when it comes to some aspects, like Interviewee 2 mentioned, the age or the context of school, then you try to adapt that general structure to what suits the school the best. Also, what's important to mention is that we work a lot with the linguistic minority schools in Lithuania. It's mostly Russian-speaking and Polish-speaking students.

Interviewer: Like ethnic minorities?

Interviewee 1: Yes, ethnic minorities. So, there can be some language barriers, students may not feel too confident communicating in Lithuanian. So, what we do in such cases is we encourage them, for example, to write down their ideas and then write down the formal projects in any language they prefer. And we then include teachers and administration to help with interpretation processes if there is a need. And then another challenge, as I’ve said, it's quite a broad topic, but some of the main ones that we came up with is also indicators of success, because when you implement any initiative, it's very important, like we said, to agree upon the measures and objectives and goals and how the success will be monitored. So, yeah, sometimes well-defined quantitative measures help to understand how beneficial it was for the school to participate and then improve the whole quality of the process in the future if they decide to continue it.

Interviewer: All right, thank you. Next one would be can you share any success stories or positive outcomes that have resulted from the participatory budgeting initiative?

Interviewee 1: So, based on the survey, sorry, I can still hear my voice, which I think will hide. Yeah, thanks. So, based on the survey that we did some time ago, the number of students who understand the budget of their schools very well increased eight times once the initiative was implemented. There were also twice less students who knew nothing about their school's finances, so essentially this whole financial literacy got increased in general. And we can also see that initiative is positively contributing to the knowledge of how the budgeting process works. Maybe Interviewee 2 can share some specific success stories, but as I know...

Interviewer: I mean, I've already read the impact evaluation, I think, which I saw on Transparency International, which were published. So, there was like a fact sheet about the impact.

Interviewee 1: Yeah, that's the one.

Interviewee 2: Yeah, when we're talking about success stories, it's... Well, some of those stories are due to the quality of student involvement. For example, we do have some schools that have a percentage of 90% of voting, the activeness in voting. But it usually happens when a school chooses the method of voting right, depending on their situation. Also, we do have situations when, for example, students are not only involved in the process, like in those three first steps, but also in implementation of the idea. For example, they're involved in painting the walls or creating chill zones. For example, they're sewing pillows or doing something like that. So, it's really great when you see the example of not only how students learn how to start the project, but also how to finish it. So, it's really nice to see, and we think it's really useful to involve them in every possible step. And we do have a few success stories on that.

Interviewer: Do you publish these, or do you have more which you know?

Interviewee 2: Yeah, we do have some guidebooks, but two of them... I know that they're in Lithuanian, but I think we do have one in English too.

Interviewer: I mean, there's always a translation, so I don't mind.

Interviewee 2: No, no, I think we do have an English too. Interviewee 1, we should check on this later. But yeah, we did describe a few moments on impact and so on. So, I think it can be used in this context too.

Interviewer: Yeah, I'm just writing this down so we can follow up on this. So, we're also interested in how this participatory budgeting initiative has impacted local governance and community involvement in Lithuania, if you know about it.

Interviewee 1: Right, so in some cities, there is a better understanding about interconnection between schools' participatory budgeting and municipalities' participatory budgeting, because essentially these are two separate processes with quite different challenges and different ways of procedure. But essentially, they have some similarities. So, there is more attempts to bring these two worlds closer together. Municipalities also learn not only how to issue additional financial, but also methodological resources for schools so that the whole process can be strengthened. We also noticed some changes in the way municipalities make announcements about their activities. More often, they try out new citizen involvement methods. So, that's where the democracy theory comes in. There are more citizen involvement methods, which are then applied in other activities. And I recently talked with one of our colleagues who worked with municipalities. So, she noted that there are no yet practical measures to evaluate what was the impact of the initiative in these aspects. We can only presume based on what we hear from representatives. So, for example, they have stated that the goal of the initiative is not only to help people understand how the decision-making process works or to get people involved into it, but also to reduce that gap between the general population and local politicians. So, I think, correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe that in the context of schools, that gap might also exist sometimes between the teachers, administration, or students. Not necessarily, but from the perspective of students, sometimes that's how it may feel. Just like in general, people may see politicians as bureaucrats who work somewhere and they cannot be reached out to. So, hence, if we talk about schools, once children are involved, they understand better who they should reach out to, who they have to speak about particular issues, who is responsible for what within school’s administration, and so on.

Interviewer: It's more about starting this more involvement at a young age. At a young age, so it's going to more create a positive change in, let's say, five to ten years' time through the more financial literacy and more engagement of the students.

Interviewee 1: Yes, absolutely, because those children, those young individuals who go through such processes are more likely, and of course, we don't have measures, but I think that's quite a common sense that those students who experience something like that when they get involved from early age into these processes, later in the future, they will be more transparency and democracy demanding citizens. They would understand better that they are part of the society, that there is no some huge gap between a common citizen and a decision maker. So, yeah, that's essentially an investment into the future. Did we answer the question? I think you...

Interviewer: So are there are any plans on improving on these lessons you've learned in the future at the school level or even more for the government.

Interviewee 1: So, I mentioned the handbooks that we have. The first one, so we had the one handbook and then it was extended after the pandemic, included more information on how the initiative can be done online. And now we currently have plans to extend it again to have a new version, third updated version, with more attention given to specific guidelines, such as how to integrate the process into formal teaching, like the curriculum, how municipalities, something that we just talked about, can be involved more and how can they strengthen the schools through such initiatives and practice better cooperation. And so, it will be more about detailed methodological tools where case studies will be provided. Yeah, for example, analyzing those schools which have really high voter turnout rates, essentially success stories. How did they manage that? How was the process organised? So, something that other schools could learn. Yeah, so this is in terms of handbooks and maybe Interviewee 2 can elaborate more about some general future plans and visions that we have.

Interviewee 2: Yeah, well, talking more broadly about our plans, we're really focused on sustainability of PB. So, yeah, we do have a lot of schools that rely on us when they're implementing PBs because we do have a lot of consultations, we're helping them in a methodological way, and we visit them on first and the last event. But we're thinking that it might not be the case for the future. Well, it's a question if we're going to have enough resources in the future to go to every school that wants us to come. So, we're thinking about sustainability in a way that, for example, updating that handbook would help schools to do PB by themselves in a way, way better quality. And so that's why we're thinking about expanding it and adding more examples, more specific examples, how to, for example, organize the voting process, how it can be done online, how it can be done in person, and so on and so forth. So, it would be, because we do get a lot of questions when schools are asking about examples, how other schools are implementing some specific steps in PB, so we're planning to make it, to add this to the handbook so that every school in Lithuania could use it and it could be a guide for them. And also, we're really focused on a question of PB's implementation in formal education. So, for example, when you have to calculate the budget, it's obviously connected, related to math, so maybe it can be implemented during math lessons, so it would be way more sustainable in that way that it wouldn't need an extra time, and students would also see the connection between the things that they learn in formal education, so in lessons, and then what they are doing in PB. So, it can be related to mathematics, to economics, to literature even, and so, yeah, we want schools to see that connection, so it would be way more sustainable in the future.

Interviewer: So, it's also making it way more practical for the students, etc. Yeah. Hmm. Is there also, like, plans to encourage the schools to have the initiatives themselves and start the process by themselves?

Interviewee 2: Right now, we're doing a lot of consulting, however, in the future, well, you know, our work is not to encourage schools to do it, we're just helping when they do, and because, well, our philosophy on this is that schools have to want to do this, so we're usually not trying to, like, ask them to do this if they don't want to, and so, in the future, as we've seen so far, the number of schools implementing PB is increasing, and we're hoping that it's going to happen in a few years, that the majority of schools would implement PB, however, it's not our plan to do it actively, so it would become mandatory, for example, we don't think that's the answer.

Interviewer: All right. So, going forward to the next part of the questions, which are more in-depth, so just let me know if there's some overlap, if you've already talked about it. So, in terms of methods and tools, what methods and tools were employed in the PB process, such as public meetings, workshops, or online platforms?

Interviewee 1: Yeah, so maybe Interviewee 2 can talk about one of the major tools that we have, the annual participatory budgeting forum, and then I might add on some additional minor tools that we also use. Mm-hmm. You're muted. Okay, yeah.

Interviewee 2: So, we do have this event, annual event, participatory budgeting forum. It is mostly focused on municipalities’ PBs. However, we do talk about schools’ PBs too. And the forum, the main goal of this forum is to create a community of PB schools and to spread good examples, to share our struggles, and how we can overcome them. So, this event, this year, like in 2022, we've had like, I don't know, over 100 people from different municipalities and schools, and we also talked about the diversity, and how can PBs be more inclusive in that way. So, yeah, this is one of the methods that we use. However, we do have a lot of smaller ones that Interviewee 1 is going to describe right now.

Interviewee 1: Yeah, so in terms of complementary tools, last year, as well as this year, actually less than two months ago, we organized online workshops on four different topics - calculating the budget of your idea, how to overcome anxiety while speaking in front of the audience, how to avoid online scammers when choosing products to buy, and then how to see ordinary school areas in a different angle. So, essentially all of these topics were targeting students, and they were trying to help them to be prepared for such initiatives better. We received a lot of positive feedback from schools. Of course, different topics were relevant to different age groups, but our objective was to provide a free opportunity. These were free workshops for schools to better prepare for such initiatives, so that the students can gain some soft skills, because it's very relevant, not only in this initiative, but in general, how to overcome anxiety, if you speak in front of people, how to plan your finances, etc. And we also have various smaller meetings with schools' representatives. We currently plan on executing so-called “Train the Trainers” sessions, in which we share the lessons that we see, and some similar discussions that we have in annual forums, but on a smaller scale. And that's how we discuss how those processes can be enhanced.

Interviewer: So, a follow-up question to this is, were there any specific tools or technologies utilized to facilitate communication and decision-making among participants, such as voting systems or digital platforms?

Interviewee 1: Yes, in terms of digital tools, some schools use their internal online communication channels, because they usually have some main channels that they communicate within school. And sometimes these channels were also used not only to share information, but to vote. So, from what we heard, this approach was effective, because communities, well, they're of course already familiar with their own main communication platforms, so there is no need to somehow accommodate or get new information for the school from other platforms that are out there. And this approach was also great, because everybody was already part of the system, right? So, all of the information was already shared, and it was easy to communicate with everybody in a very easy way. And it's also more likely to be noticed by a larger number of people, so it's very effective. As I asked one of our colleagues about municipalities and schools, and what kind of tools they employ to communicate with each other, we can only try to presume, because as I mentioned before, those processes are quite separated. So, there are schools and then there are municipalities, and even though we try to strenghten communication between them, there are no very prominent digital platforms or tools used for that.

Interviewer: Okay. So, the next question will be in terms of process interaction and participation. Although you already touched on it, we're interested in more in-depth about outlining the overall process of the PBs project from its inception to its inclusion, let's say participant recruitment or selection, interaction methods and decision-making processes.

Interviewee 1: Yeah, so, we mentioned the formal agreements that we have with schools. So, it is protocol of intentions, which is official and it declares our cooperation, as I mentioned before, and we're also agreeing upon the general plan and we do note that in the document. The plan of the first introductory event is also agreed upon and then we visit the school to have a presentation. So, if we talk about structure and organizing the whole procedure, essentially, it's agreed in these formal documents. And then on a more practical side, we do go and visit schools on their first introductory events. The general plan is, from what I observed as an intern in various schools, is that we ask a principal of the school to give a short speech about the school's budget, so that the people can better understand where the money comes from for their school, how much money school spends on various purposes, like maintaining the school and buying inventory, learning material, etc. So this is a very short introduction to the budgeting procedure, and then it is followed by our presentation. Essentially, it's very general about participatory budgeting in Lithuania, something that we discussed here, how it started, what are the experiences of other schools, why it's important, also what kind of processes the students will go through, so those four main ones - generating ideas, preparing the project, voting, and then implementing, the ones which Interviewee 2 mentioned already. So these introductions usually take one lesson, 45 minutes, and then during the second lesson we have a workshop session, so maybe Interviewee 2 can describe how the whole workshop session looks like.

Interviewee 2: Okay. So the workshop part starts with the question “what is your dream for your school?” You have, for example, 200 Euros, what is your dream? And then students use sticky notes, or we're doing it online, and they just write any idea that comes up to them. So we gather all those sticky notes, usually there are many ideas at that stage, and they're dreaming about having a pool in their school for 200 Euros, or I don't know, creating a chill zone on the roof of their school, which is obviously not very safe. So they do have a lot of dreams, like very different dreams, and when we gather those sticky notes, we try to group them in topics, so the most popular topics are related to relaxation, so beanbags, chill zones, and so on. Then we do talk about it with them. We ask why do they need it, where do they need it, and then we include administration into this discussion, ask them if it's possible to do it, if they're already planning to do something about it, and we also try to help students understand what is possible and what is not possible with the amount of money they have, and also with the possibilities of their school. So, for example, if they want a chill zone, do they have enough space for it, or if they want a coffee machine, we just kindly tell them that it's not possible, because in Lithuania it's banned by the law to sell coffee to students in schools. So we're trying to help them to understand their limitations, however, not blocking them from dreaming. And we end up by having this very huge list of ideas, and then we group these ideas, we write them down on the Word document, and we send it to the school, so it is a little bit more simple for them to understand what are the main ideas and how they can proceed with the PB.

Interviewee 1: What I would also add is that throughout these workshops, often children understand that some of the ideas maybe are already being implemented by the administration, but they didn't know that, or maybe that there are plans for that from the staff’s perspective. Yes, then moving on, another stage is essentially turning vague ideas into very concrete projects. So it's essentially formalizing your idea, describing the purpose of it, various financial aspects, practical realization, so it's preparing and writing the formal, not like a document, but a form of how the whole project will look like.

Interviewer: Is it done in a separate session, the formalization?

Interviewee 1: So it is not done in a session, it is a long, not like long-term, but a continuous process, and without our.. with us only assisting the school, it's already done after the first introductory event, so it's continuous. Schools work on that for several weeks, let's say, and we only consult them if they have any issues and questions about it, so we do not participate directly in the formalization process. And so maybe Interviewee 2 can explain more, or do you get a clear idea of how it looks like? Well, I mean, this process requires a lot of research, so like finding what kind of products you want to buy, how they will be delivered, who will look after everything, will any additional workforce be required, so there's various questions to answer before you finalize your idea, so that's why this process is continuous. Schools work on it themselves, and we only consult them, it's necessary because that's when you reach the final stage, and then this process also, in terms of competences, teaches children more practical skills while going through it. Yes, so those ideas, their dreams, essentially, which they had in the introductory event, let's say, are then formalized, become very concrete, and then are transferred on paper so that the whole plan is prepared. And then I may add a bit about consultancy groups so you get a better idea of how it looks like, because it's not like a session during the first or final event, this whole process has to be well moderated, there has to be a main person responsible for initiative in school. That's usually the person who reaches out to us or we reach out to them. It's either a teacher or a member of administration, so somebody who is the main figure in school, who is responsible for the whole process, so we communicate with them, and keep in touch throughout the whole procedure, and additionally to that, every school has a consultancy group created, the size of it varies, the people or members also vary in their competences, but usually it consists of a few teachers or members of staff, who can consult students with any questions that arise throughout the process.

Interviewer: So this consultancy group is basically several people, like a board basically, which decide on whether something is viable or not.

Interviewee 2: What is important when we are talking about consultancy groups, they do not only coordinate all of the process, but also they become like a filter to the ideas, they do filter the ideas in the step of projects, so that the ideas that cannot be implemented wouldn't get to the voting process, however it's really important that when they are filtering those ideas, the filter has to work only for those ideas that are not possible to implement, and they cannot just say that we don't like this one, and that's why it's not going to the voting process, but they just have to explain why it cannot be done in their school, so for example there's not enough space for it, there's a law about caffeine or something like that, so their work is really important, however they cannot just decide because they don't like the idea.

Interviewer: So also picking up on that, to what extent is this consultancy decision making transparent to students, how do they find out based on what criteria a certain idea has gotten to the next phase, or why some ideas have not been selected?

Interviewee 2: Yes, so we talk about this in the first event, before implementing PB we do agree with school about the criteria for the ideas, so usually there are no criteria, I mean it's only a few things: you can think about new areas, you can think about renewing old areas, there's a financial thing that you have to keep in mind, and also you don't have to think only about yourself when you're thinking about this idea, you have to think about all members of the community. So other things come up when we're talking about specific examples during our workshops, so for example if schools are talking about coffee, we tell them that, if they're talking about chill zone, administration tells them that, so that they could try and imagine what is possible and what is not, however when they're filtering those ideas and declining some, they have to explain why, and we do encourage them to explain why, so the process would be transparent, and they would understand that it's actually fair for them to refuse an idea at that point.

Interviewer: And also what we're interested in is how are the criteria developed, which criteria are formalized, are they set in the beginning, recommended from Transparency International or according to the school they do it, or is it ad hoc that the consultancy group decides by themselves.

Interviewee 2: Yeah, so there are some criteria that depend only on the possibilities of the school, especially when we're talking about areas, but yeah, we do have standard recommendations on this, so those four main rules are about finances, then about idea being oriented to everyone, not one student, not one class, then about new areas or renewing old areas, but schools can come up with new criteria, that usually becomes the case if they have a specific goal that they want to achieve. I have this one example when school wanted to encourage students to spend their free time actively, like during the breaks, so they asked students to think about ideas that would be related to active time spending ways, so they thought about games, they thought about sports and so on, so that was one of the criteria that they had in mind. So if the school has a very specific goal, they can use it this way, however, the majority of schools do not have one very specific goal, especially when they're implementing PB for the first time.

Interviewer: Okay, so yeah, if schools have an additional evaluation criteria, is it being communicated with the students in the first two workshops?

Interviewee 2: Yeah, we do agree on those before the first event, and then when we're presenting what is PB and how it's going to be implemented in their school, they do hear the information about criteria as well.

Interviewer: All right, then we can move on to what is next after the consultancy group,

Interviewee 1: Maybe just one last thing I would want to add about consultancy group, because it's quite important in some cases, is that some ideas may be very similar, let's say. So a consultancy group helps students to merge them into one bigger project. So if there are like three different projects, like having a football table, then the consultancy group can help them to cooperate and create one such project. So the outreach is bigger and there are no very similar ideas, so there are no votes being split. And yeah, that's one thing about consultancy group. And then if we move further, I think that's where the final event comes in. Once the ideas are finalized and prepared and they are filtered out, there is a final event. Well, some schools choose to connect presentations and voting procedures into one event. Others vote before the final event. In such cases, children present their ideas, votes are calculated and then announced. So it's just how the school prefers to organize it. And essentially they have to decide upon voting methodology, which we also assist them through our consultations. And this is the stage where students do some public speaking and speak in front of their peers and present their ideas. It's very interesting to spectate, to hear what they are offering, how they are basically selling their idea and how they describe its importance. What is the issue in school and how it has to be solved, how their idea will benefit the community. Also talking about finances, how much every necessary product will cost and how the whole implementation will look like. And then there is a short Q&A session if anyone has any questions. So sometimes other candidates who have their ideas being voted on also ask questions. There are some exchange of ideas and some, let's say, brain stimulation. For example, if there is a chill zone, then some students may ask who will look after it, you know, how we will ensure that pillows are not stolen, that nobody is kicking the beanbags or something like that. So yeah, there's a little Q&A session.

Interviewer: Do the students also interact with each other in a deliberation sort or is it more formal like that? They do it in a Q&A session? My question is whether there is also the informal guidelines or structures? So the session itself is like very short usually.

Interviewee 1: It's just a couple of questions for the authors of the idea so that some clarifications can be made. I wouldn't even call it deliberations. It's not like coming to some kind of a consensus. It's essentially - we present our idea and then others may raise some questions which you may have not thought about before. So it's usually very short and just to see how the authors will answer those questions, how I would describe it from what I observed in the past.

Interviewer: Is there also more, have you observed where students interact with each other outside of this formal voting process? That they talk to each other, maybe give more ideas and etc.?

Interviewee 1: Okay, that's a good question. Maybe Interviewee 2 can elaborate. Because I think that the process, you ask about, is when they work with a consultancy group and when they try to formalize the ideas.

Interviewee 2: Yeah, well students work together when they're thinking about ideas. For example, sometimes school decides that every class has to have at least one idea. Usually not more than one idea. So they have to come up with an agreement on which of their many ideas is the best. Then what is important is that students do work together when the consultancy group asks them to present their ideas to each other as a middle step before going to voting. Or before filtering those ideas. So, as Interviewee 1 mentioned, that consultancy groups usually suggest to merge those ideas that are similar. So before that students work together when they present their ideas to each other, when they're not fully described, formalized yet. And also we do notice that after the voting, students are usually... The majority of students are usually happy even though their idea didn't win. So it's probably connected to the fact that they're still gaining something. Some new product, some new object in their school. So they're usually just happy because something new is going to happen in their school. And they do encourage each other to... They do tell each other that their ideas were good or something like that. So it's nice to see that.

Interviewer: And also then about the voting, I had a question about what voting system you use. So whether it's plurality voting, whether the project with the most single votes wins, even though it might not reach 50%.

Interviewee 1: So I may describe the voting procedure in general and then if you have any... Sure, yeah. So schools also differ in terms of how they choose their voting procedure to be implemented. It's always a plurality vote. It's always about the idea which gains the highest percentage of votes. So if the split is like 30%, 20%, 10% and whatever, then the idea with the highest percentage wins. And in terms of how the process looks like, sometimes it's being done online, as we mentioned, through their internal channels, internal platforms. Sometimes it's done in person, like physical voting, casting a ballot, there is a ballot box. And in such cases, it's very interesting. In such process, if it's done physically, we encourage schools to try to resemble a real election procedure as much as possible. So, for example, confidentiality and transparency is ensured. Children have to show their IDs and sign the form. And what is often the case is that such elections are the first for those students and probably the most important in their lives at that time. Unless we talk about, let's say, older students who can even vote in presidential elections maybe. But usually, it's their first elections ever. And after the votes are collected, administration informs students about the results. So, as I’ve said, some schools choose to vote after the final event, some choose to vote before it. So, the general structure is that administration announces the results and then they inform students when should they expect the project to be implemented. And you probably have more questions about that..

Interviewer: You said the administration is counting the votes?

Interviewee 2: Yeah, I can add on this one. Usually if the event, if they're voting during the event and they're doing it like on paper, then the people who are counting votes are members of staff and representatives of students. And usually one of us because we're still there, so we can use that. And when they're doing it not during the event, so before or after it, and they're doing it on paper, they're usually involving part of the students too in this project to ensure the transparency. And in some schools, the student bodies are even responsible for organizing all of this process. So, it's quite interesting, but it usually happens in schools where older students are involved in PBs, because it would be a little bit difficult with younger ones.

Interviewer: Yeah, more about the implementation, I have questions. Like, how do they... do the ideas when you had the most popular vote, most popular idea, and how is the idea then being implemented? Like, what are the steps which are being taken?

Interviewee 2: Yeah, so, first of all, the administration tells students when they can expect it to be implemented. Then, the process really differs. It really, really depends on the relationship between administration and students. Usually, the responsibility of implementing the idea goes to administration, because they are responsible for finances and for buying stuff. So, students are usually involved if there is something that has to be handmade, so, in DIY projects. But we do have some schools that do involve students in buying products in that procedure as well. But that's usually the case in schools that are implementing PBs for the fourth time or so.

Interviewer: So, if it's like something bigger and the students would need to, let's say, build it, or just a more complex acquiring process, like, who would manage or organize the purchasing process? Is it then usually the staff or the administration?

Interviewee 2: Yeah, it is. Usually. Sometimes, they do involve parents into this project, especially when we're talking about younger students. So, for example, parents help to build something in their school area.

Interviewer: Then, I also have a question, if you can answer it. What were the levels of participation achieved in terms of both quantity, so the numbers of participants, and the level of engagement you saw?

Interviewee 1: Right. So, since schools differ, as we mentioned many times [laughs], the level of engagement is also very diverse. The participation range is approximately between 30 and 97% of all students, so quite a broad range. It may be easier to achieve a higher level of engagement in the smaller schools where there are not a lot of students. Also, some schools already have a strong sense of community established within, so participatory budgeting for them may be just one of several similar engagement initiatives. For example, I remember one school, which right before the PB initiative, implemented a different project called “Letters to the Principal”. So, it was their internal project, and students were encouraged to send letters to the principal with their demands and needs, ideas about the school's environment. And they managed to implement a very similar project to the participatory budgeting. They bought several football tables, as I remember. So, it really differs from, let's say, schools with lower levels of engagement, which only start with participatory budgeting, and then attain those higher levels of engagement in the future. Yeah, so...

Interviewer: All right, so there's not currently statistics on the overall engagement quality and quantity nationwide?

Interviewee 2: Yeah, nationwide, I wouldn't say so. We do have numbers of every school that we've helped, but yeah, as we've mentioned before, there are schools that did it by themselves or only with their municipalities. So, no, we do not have numbers at this point from all of Lithuania. So, this is probably one of the things that we're going to go through in the next year or so.

Interviewer: All right, then moving on to influence, outcome and effects. Although I've mentioned it already, do you have more to add on what impact it had on the whole participatory budgeting project, public spending, public services, etc.? Like, more broadly around, like, maybe government or other PB projects?

Interviewee 1: Right, so participatory budgeting, it not only helps students to understand how they can get involved in decision making, both in terms of methodology and then questions raised. Students have many great ideas about the things that can be improved in schools' environments and how they can be achieved. So, administration, for example, gets a chance to hear real concerns and needs of students, which may be unheard of in different formats or circumstances. The staff is sometimes surprised they didn't know that students have these specific needs and participatory budgeting helped them to realize that throughout the discussions. And within schools, there is also a feeling of trust created from a student's point of view, like we mentioned before, because they better understand how they can get involved. They understand how the budget works and that the administration has to also follow very specific requirements before making any important spending decisions. And not just simply choose to implement whatever they prefer, because students have to go through that process themselves. And they understand how it is from the administration's perspective. So I would say that's some kind of an impact on how both administration understands the problems in school and how students see it. And vice versa, it's how students see the whole process being conducted and what kind of challenges administrations face when they have to work with budgets, etc.

Interviewer: Do you have specific examples to this?

Interviewee 1: I just recall that there were cases when there were discussions going on and some students, but it was not from the point of view of administration. I just remember that there was a discussion about implementing something and some students knew that the idea was already realized. It's like, we do have this, you just didn't know. So that's what I recall. If we talk about even broader scale, like national or local or regional scales, there are no yet any measures to evaluate the impact. Particularly when we talk about the initiative in schools and what influence it had on, let's say, local governance or public decisions. So it's still more about the impact within school, a particular school, because that connection between municipality, politicians and schools are still a bit blurred. We are still, I would say, working on making it better, that cooperation, strengthening it. So it's very hard to evaluate particularly, I would say.

Interviewer: Then next question is on problem issue, but you answered that already pretty much in the beginning, except if you have something more to add, we can skip this one. Basically, what problem or issue led to the implementation of participatory budgeting in this specific case?

Interviewee 1: Yeah, as Interviewee 2 said in the beginning, mentioned the levels of engagement in politics and decision-making in Lithuania. So there is that if we talk about, let's say, a national or broader issue. But I mean, well, I would say that initiative is less about targeting very particular or several particular problems, but it's more about making that change because it's always desirable to have more transparency, to create more democracy, to involve people in decision-making activities, to provide more skills and knowledge for students. So these are just things that are always more desirable and participatory budgeting helps to facilitate them. And so the general idea behind it is to install some new aspects in the country's schools and create some positive change. But again, if we talk about particular schools, well, each school has to define some issues naturally because if you come up with an idea, well, without explanation, it goes that the idea is trying to solve something. Because if everything's perfect, then I mean, what kind of ideas can you come up with? So each school still has to define what has to be changed in school. Maybe there was some outdated sports inventory, basketballs or volleyballs. Maybe the lack of books or other educational material. Maybe the lack of leisure area, old desks, etc. So yeah, if we talk about problems and issues.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's fine. We also covered goals and objectives. So next question would be which organizations or entities were responsible for organizing, implementing and funding the PB process?

Interviewee 1: So I can touch upon a bit about us and EDU Vilnius. And maybe Interviewee 2 can elaborate more about the specifics of the project. So as we’ve said, our main goal is and our role as an organization is to provide methodological guidelines, increase the publicity of success stories, let's say, and strengthen the communities from within. And assisting, helping schools to go through the whole process. But we do not contribute financially, we do not invest, we are not donors of initiatives. So it is up to schools to decide how much money they are capable of allocating. But sometimes, however, municipalities encourage such initiatives by providing some finances from the city's budget. And one example of this is the capital of Vilnius, which allocated 1,500 euros to each participating school. In total, there were 12 schools. And this project was conducted by the municipality's institution called EDU Vilnius. EDU probably stands for education [laughs]. And so such projects really raises the motivation of schools to get involved. But what should be noted is that some monitoring has to be ensured based on the measures of success agreed upon. So, like, if there are some additional entities, they may include some new aspects in the agenda. So what I remember, because the very first experience I had when we went to schools was exactly with EDU Vilnius. So they, for example, highlighted the environmental aspect, the sustainability aspect in the agenda. Of course, we also do that. But what EDU Vilnius was doing, they were encouraging students to come up with such ideas that would be environment friendly. They also had a little discussion about what is sustainability, like asking students to describe how they understand what does sustainability mean. So this can be treated as some additional objective, to teach children about green decision making. So, yeah, there may be some external additional organizations, but Interviewee 2 maybe can elaborate more about this.

Interviewee 2: But yeah, this specific example is only illustrating that some of the municipalities do involve into PB processes in schools way more actively. And they give funding for schools, they give methodological help. So municipalities are always really important stakeholders. However, it's not all of the municipalities or the schools that are implementing PB are so involved. So, yeah, it's more like an opportunity for the future, but not like a rule right now.

Interviewer: Then I would have a question on can you describe the participants in the case study, including demographics, number of participants and selection methods of the schools? You said that it's mainly students or only students. What is this aimed for? But you have numbers on the participants as well and how they were selected, the schools.

Interviewee 1: Yeah, so, well, I would say that we do not target particular schools, but sometimes there is a need to pay additional attention to ethnic minority schools, as we’ve mentioned before. So, in terms of participant recruitment, we actively publish information about the initiative and encourage schools to join the community. And it would be even better to define the target audience as schools or school communities rather than just students, because it's still about working with administrations, teachers, parents, students, everybody's involved in that. So, school communities are more of a target audience rather than just students, I would say. I believe I mentioned this, but yes, some schools who have worked with us recommend us to other schools, for example, if they share some positive experiences. So, that's how the network is expanding. In other instances, the donors bring us together with schools, but yeah, it's still always up to schools themselves to decide whether they want to get involved, whether they see the benefits of the initiative or they do not want it. And yeah, about numbers. So, maybe Interviewee 2 can expand more on the general context about the numbers.

Interviewer: How many schools and students?

Interviewee 2: Yeah, so, we have to look up for the number of students, but there are around 40 schools, over 40 schools, that we've helped to implement PBs. However, as we've mentioned before, there are many more schools that are doing PBs on their own. Yeah, and when we're talking about participants, it's really important that we're trying to, like, expand our target group, because at first we were working mainly with older students from the sixth grade or so. So, now we're trying to work on methodology, on working with younger students, on working with the ethnic minorities, and also the secondary target group is also teachers and administrations. They are very important, too, because they learn how and why they should include students in the decision-making processes. So, usually the first event is very useful not only because of the ideas, but also because administration realizes how many more things students see that administrations don't. And, for example, usually during the first event students say something that there is a lack of toilet paper. It's like the classical idea. And, yeah, the administration is usually looking at us really ashamed and they're saying, like, no, no, no, they do have toilet paper in our school [laughs]. They're just, like, saying these things. And, well, yeah, there are some situations like that, but also the administration realizes that students do have many ideas, like serious ideas and serious issues when we're talking about the infrastructure of school. For example, that students notice that there's a lack of, I don't know, places where they can leave their stuff, or, for example, washing machines or things for sports. So, administration, it is a secondary target group because that relationship that's built during PB can be used in the future when thinking whether they should include students or not in some of the internal decision-making processes.

Interviewer: All right. Then I also have a question on was there any public interaction involved in the PB process outside the parents?

Interviewee 1: Yeah, so can you clarify on what is public interaction? It's like interaction with external actors?

Interviewer: Like outside of the direct participants of it, let's say the students and parents, to some extent, and staff are directly involved in it. Is there also interaction with the public, like media, or is it then more in the later stage when results get published, etc.?

Interviewee 2: Well, usually there's no interaction with media or some other actors, but we're trying to create this bigger connection of PB that is being organized and implemented in schools and that is being implemented in municipalities. That's why we're currently doing a little experiment when we're asking the representative of the municipality to come to the last event and to tell students more about municipalities’ PB. And then we're asking students if they would like to do that, because in some municipalities, people from the age of 16 can join and can suggest ideas and vote. So, especially when we're talking about that type of municipalities, we're trying to create this bond. That's why municipalities are also very important and can be used in implementation of PB.

Interviewer: Yeah, that answers that. So, I also have a question on what influence or outcomes were observed from these PB initiatives on policymaking or other areas within government?

Interviewee 1: So, just before our interview, I talked with one colleague who has more experience with municipalities. So, as we mentioned, it's very hard to evaluate it because only 1 in 10 municipalities actually repeat the initiative themselves. So, there is still not a very strong, let's say, habit created for continuity of participatory budgeting. So, when you speak about schools and municipalities, their relationship, it's very, not like complicated, but very hard to evaluate. And focusing on school scale would give more, I guess, insights. So, yeah, in terms of broader impacts, national or regional scale and decisions within public policies, it's a bit of a complicated thing to answer because there are just simply no measures for that. So, it's only what we can presume.

Interviewer: I understand that it's difficult to measure, especially since there might not be correlation, but I was just more interested whether you know something about the impact it had. But that's fine. Also, have you observed more initiatives or PB initiatives resulting from this?

Interviewee 2: Well, actually, I haven't heard any examples of this, but I do know that there has been some deliberations, some discussions on making PB mandatory to all municipalities in Lithuania. They were discussing this in the parliament. However, our opinion on this was that it shouldn't be mandatory. And right now, they haven't moved forward with this one. But I don't know, maybe in the future we're going to see more discussions. And also, there has been some discussions with the Ministry of the Interior on the platform for PB. At first, it would be probably mostly focused on, oriented to municipalities, but maybe it could be used to schools too, because, well, in municipalities, they do have a challenge with the platforms for voting, for suggesting ideas. So, like, political decisions that are being made are mostly focused on municipal PBs, not the ones that are happening in schools.

Interviewer: So, basically, what I can read from this is that since it's such a new initiative, there hasn't been much observable change yet.

Interviewee 2: Well, we're planning on having some more research and to have a few more surveys on this. However, still, this year was really, really active when we talk about PBs in schools, because a lot of schools have joined us this year. So, it was quite intense. So, we're planning to evaluate the impact and to do it during the next year, while we are going to think about the sustainability as well.

Interviewee 1: Yeah, what I would like to add to this is that it's not necessarily the impact is not easily observable because of how recent the initiative is. As Interviewee 2 mentioned, on a national scale, there are many discussions, which are more about municipal PBs. And also, it's just my presumption, but I believe that municipal PBs might have influenced school PBs more rather than vice versa. It's just when we talk about schools and expanding that network of participatory budgeting among schools, it may be very successful. The network of schools that joined may be growing, but that necessarily is reflected on the regional or national scale or public policy. So, just what I would presume.

Interviewer: Then, also, the last question would be about recommendations you have for future PB initiatives, whether it's similar to PB in schools in other countries, let's say in Europe, or future PB initiatives in Lithuania, which might build on that or increasing the network of the PB initiatives or ideas.

Interviewee 2: Yeah. So, first of all, it is really important to have a strong framework of methodology. However, you have to be agile, adaptive during the process. And it really depends on a personal relationship with the person you're working with in the school. So, you have to build a lot of connections with people so they could trust you enough and to ask you questions when they write. Another thing is that schools and other institutions have to think about the success indicators and what are their goals. So, do they want to increase the number, the percentage of voting, the students voting, or do they want to solve the problem, I don't know, about students not being active during their breaks? So, they have to think about the goal and then about the success indicators because otherwise they are not going to move forward, or at least they are not going to do that systematically. What else is important? I think it's important to build a community. For example, building a community of PB schools. We're going to have this trainer session this month when we're going to ask schools to share their experience, their struggles, their lessons. And that's the way to learn for them how to do it better and maybe to think about some of the struggles they may face in the future. And also, we're going to invite representatives of the municipalities into this meeting. So, thinking about how to connect the world of municipalities' PBs and schools' PBs is really important. However, it comes with time because probably at first you have to focus on methodologies, on building connections, on success indicators and overall quality. And then you can move forward thinking about diversity issues, about connections with the municipalities and so on.

Interviewer: Okay. Then I want to thank you about your time and valuable insights, even when it took two hours. But it helps us really to build a strong case and writing it on Particippedia. We think it should help, like overall PB in Lithuania. So, the next steps would be with our research team is that we're handling the transcription. We'll send you this over for correction and confirmation. And if you're interested, we can send you the study as well. You can look up on what we recommend on doing, etc. as well. I'll also send you my contact information, which I'm required to give you.

Interviewee 1: And also, we might look for the English version of the handbook if there is one.

Interviewer: Yeah, I wrote down this as a follow up. The amount of students would be pretty helpful and the precise count of the schools. And description of the impact. in the beginning of the interview, we talked about something. I don't know if we've already looked at it because Interviewee 1 sent me over a couple, quite a lot of documents. So, I don't know if it's included in that. But yeah, we just basically after what we talked about, we're also going to look at our research team at the impact it had and analyzing it. Basically, on a certain framework, like how it changed democratic values, basically. And yeah, so that's basically what we're going to do in the next week or two. All right. Then, thank you very much for your time. And I'll follow up with you on whether there's any more questions we might have. And about the transcription. Yeah, thank you.

Interviewee 1: Yeah, thank you.

Interviewee 2: Thank you very much.

Interviewer: Bye.