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Best Practices and Recommendations for Implementing IT Supported PBs

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List of abbreviations

IT Information Technology
PB Participatory Budgeting

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1 Introduction

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a process of participation in which citizens are directly involved in decision-making about their local government's or district's budget allocations. In this regard, it offers an opportunity to integrate citizens into the democratic process actively¹. PB is concerned with access to information, public deliberation, negotiation, and decision-making on a large scale, activities that can all be supported by information technology (IT).²

From a technical perspective, there are a lot of tools available that support public participatory processes with technology, and there are several ways to integrate these systems. This report targets to capture the lessons learned and opinions of administration officials with experience regarding the implementation and execution of PB IT Tools.

2 Data Collection Methodology

The data was collected in an online workshop with the EmPaci project partners meaning the workshop had participants from six different countries. Further, every country had at least one member familiar with the recently introduced PB initiatives and knowledge of challenges and lessons learned during this process.

The workshop comprised of four sessions, each about 10 minutes long. In each of the sessions, the participants answered questions and were asked to verbalize their underlying thoughts. For the collaboration, we used the online whiteboard software "flinga"³. A picture lay in the background of the whiteboard, and the partners added information in the form of colored stickers autonomously. Each participating country had a distinct color, allowing for tracking the learnings individually. Additionally, we recorded the workshop to enable future analysis.

¹ Sintomer, Y./Herzberg, C./Röcke, A. (2008).

² Rose, J./Rios, J./Lippa, B. (2010).

³ <http://flinga.fi>

Poland	
Russia	
Lithuania	
Finland	
Latvia	
Germany	

Figure 1: Every Country Used a Distinct Color

The presented results are the personal experiences and lessons learned of the project partners. The given statements are not fact-checked and do not represent the authors' opinion of this report but only of the workshop participants.

3 Workshop Results

3.1 RQ 1: What to use IT for? Why?

The first question is concerned with the PB process in general. Taking the reference process for a participatory budget already known from the former project outputs⁴, the participants were asked which parts of the process example shown in the picture were covered online, and which offline, and possible reasons for the underlying decisions. The goal for this first session was to learn why to use IT and which processes are best left offline.

Figure 2 shows the answers of the participants. The first evident learning here is that there is not a clear preference for either online or offline. There are many reasons for either of the channels. However, the German municipality seems to be more focused on offline processes, while the Latvian and Finnish municipalities are more focused on online processes. The Russian and Lithuanian administrations are more or less evenly concerned with both channels.

Informing

The first touchpoint on the process item concerns the information sources of the new participatory budget. It includes first information on the participatory budget in general, as well as how to participate. Here, most of the participants prefer to **get users interested** in PB **using offline communication** methods. Reasons for offline communication were the

⁴ Rostock University (2020).

availability, reliability, and familiarity of offline communication. The familiarity issue is also mirrored by the fact that especially senior residents prefer offline communication and that people generally feel tired of the pandemic restrictions and the resulting online correspondence. Further, the involvement of NGOs and the usage of information events are beneficial factors for the use of offline communication.

However, some arguments favor **online** communication. It is named **faster**, more **flexible**, and **interactive** and was the only choice during the pandemic. As one participant also points out, the **offline** and **online** channels here can be **combined**.

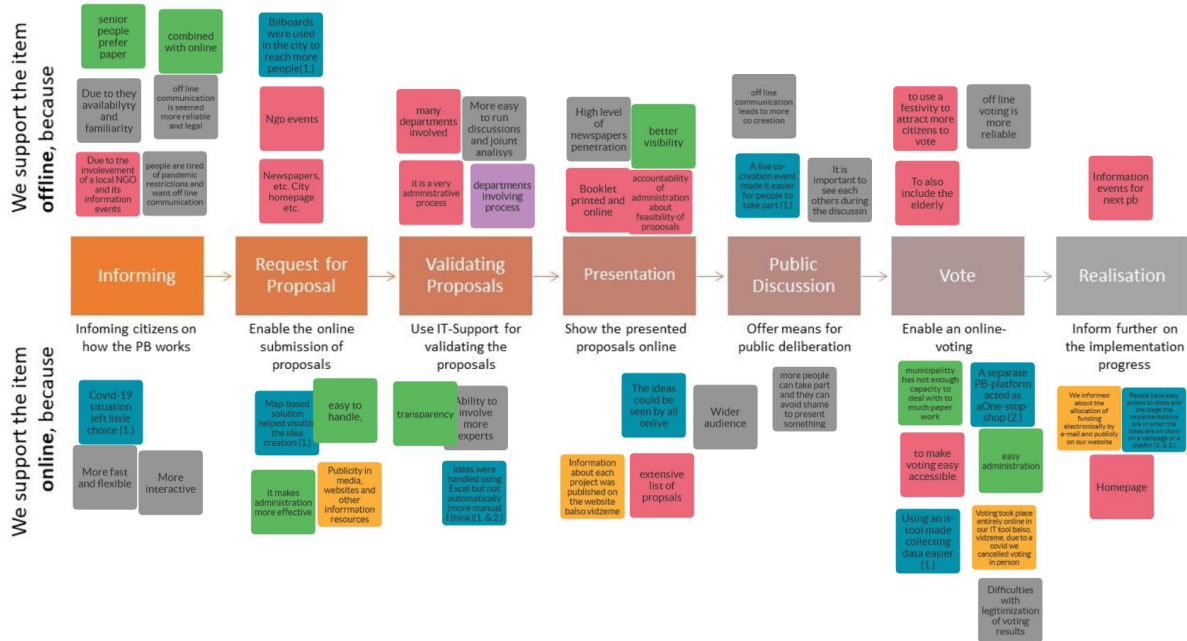


Figure 2: RQ1 – Results of Online-Whiteboard (The Picture is Available Full-Sized in the Attachment)

Request for Proposal

The next step of the process is the collection of proposals from the citizens. Here, the constituents submit ideas on how to spend the available participatory budget. Two partners emphasize the need to still **advertise** the participatory budget, e.g., on Billboards, at Newspapers, or NGO events. Regarding the collection of ideas, most rely on online forms. The workshop participants value the efficient and easy administration, the easy sharing of the

form in other media, and the interactive functions the web can provide, e.g., using maps to visualize where an idea takes place.

Validating Proposals

In our process, a review takes place after a proposal is submitted. Here, eligibility is checked to ensure that the submitted proposal complies with the rules of the participatory budget and that the idea falls into the administration's jurisdiction.

For this administrative stage, most participants prefer to carry out the process offline. Even though the online variant is named to be more transparent and enables the involvement of more experts, the **offline** meetings **enable** a more easy **discussion** and **analysis** with the different involved departments in this highly administrative process.

Presentation

After the list of eligible proposals is finalized, the list is presented to the constituents. Here, all of the workshop's participants agreed to **share** the final list **online**. However, some of them additionally rely on printed booklets and distribution in other offline sources. They say that this ensures a higher visibility. In the case of the **printed** booklet, one partner noted that it further **increased** the **accountability** of the administrations regarding the feasibility of the projects as an offline booklet cannot be altered after printing.

Public Discussion

After the final list of eligible proposals is published and before voting, the citizens are given an opportunity to discuss the PB and its possible outcomes publicly. While it was noted that **online** discussions allow for a **wider audience** and allow people to express themselves without fear of public shaming, the importance of seeing each other face-to-face and the lower entry barrier in face-to-face meetings are also pointed out. Also, the **offline** versions of the public discussions were seen as **more fruitful**, leading to a higher level of co-creation.

Voting

The voting is at the heart of a PB process and allows the citizens to cast their ballot on the proposals they like most. Here, the workshop participants largely agreed on the need to facilitate online voting. The **online** voting was seen as something that made the administration of the participatory budget a lot easier, allowing for **efficient** data collection, **easy**

administration, and reducing the needed capacity for the PB. Further, the online process made voting more **accessible**, especially during the pandemic.

However, the online process was not without problems. **Challenges** were reported in the **legitimization** of the votes – offline voting was seen as more reliable. Further, one partner raised concerns about the inclusion of elderly citizens. At last, one partner used a festivity to attract more voters to vote offline onsite.

Realization

The last step of the depicted process is the medial accompaniment of successful proposals. Here, the public gets information on the implementation progress of the voted proposals. All participants agree on **publishing** results on the **web** pages, and some also include an e-mail **newsletter**. One combines the progress report of the current PB with information events for the next PB.

***Lessons learned:** There are many different functionalities and aspects that a participatory budgeting process needs to consider, and there is not a clear winning argument for either online or offline. The combination of both often seems the most promising, depending on the most pressing challenges.*

3.2 RQ2: Was IT the Main Challenge?

The next session's target lay in the challenges the different partners faced when implementing the PB. The x-axis represents the IT-support level that IT provided. It gathered whether IT worked the way the administration wanted or whether IT support was behind the expectation. The y-axis captures the main challenges the administrations faced – whether the IT handling and setting up was more difficult or the underlying organizational processes and decisions.

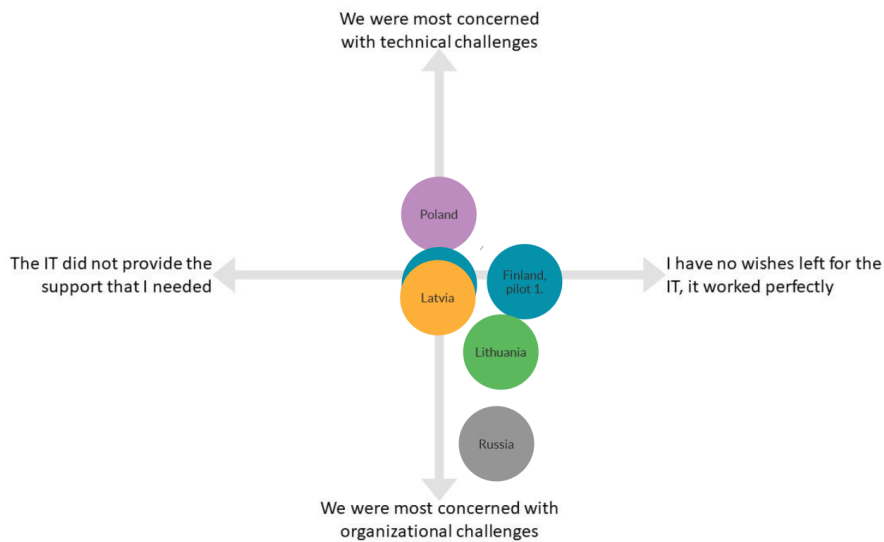


Figure 3: RQ2 – Results of Online-Whiteboard

For this question, the workshop participants agreed that **IT was not a real issue**. Most classified themselves in the middle – the IT worked as expected, but there are still some ideas for future improvements. Major challenges did not occur. The Polish city Bielsko-Biała, the only city with a history in conducting PB, faced some technical challenges with the implementation of new features but no significant obstacles. The Russian partners had mainly legislative issues.

Lessons Learned: *Administrative and organizational aspects outweigh the technical challenges.*

3.3 RQ3: If I Had One Wish...

The third research question is concerned with the unresolved or unexpected circumstances that the partners encountered. It has two open questions: “I wish I could have known...” and “If I could change one thing in relation to IT...”. Both of these questions are explicitly not only targeted at technical insights but also include process-related activities. The idea of this session was to gather lessons learned and help future administrations to circumnavigate the same problems.

I wish I could have known...

Here, a lot of the partners from all different countries agreed that they were surprised over the reluctance of citizens to share data and a **lack of trust** towards the online processing of

personal data. The online voting systems were often seen as a critical part. Ensuring people that it is not possible to manipulate them was agreed on to be demanding.

Another lesson learned was the possibility of working with software solutions creatively and using existing applications to conduct a participatory budget, even if the tools are not made explicitly for conducting participatory budgets. Also, gathering data in the PB platform was seen as necessary, but the setup tool did not allow the extraction of all the information needed. So one partner wished to have thought about the **evaluation** process and the data export possibilities **before deciding** on a system. Also, one partner wished to have included a broader set of partners like NGOs or persons from different administration departments in the PB organization group.

If I could change one thing in relation to IT...

Here, the answers were rather diverse. The Russian partners, were in contrast to the other partners, involved in more than one PB initiatives, favored a single universal tool for the municipalities and would like to make IT **tools** for participatory budgets **mandatory**. The Lithuanian partners noted that the voting has to work perfectly to prevent people from getting irritated. The Latvian partners would like to have **more** time to **test** the IT tools and a more comprehensive manual for the participating citizens. The Finnish partners noted that it is impossible to outsource PB to a tool – it still has to be integrated into the existing process landscape. However, they would like software that helps them organize and categorize the submitted ideas to check them more efficiently. Also, the partners agreed that the **reach** of the municipalities **website** alone is **limited**, and the information has to come to citizens via their preferred channels. For example, this could mean advertising PB in social media like facebook or TikTok for young people.

***Lessons Learned:** It is necessary to think creatively about how the system can support the administration and not the other way around. Openly communicate with the citizens on the proper channels.*

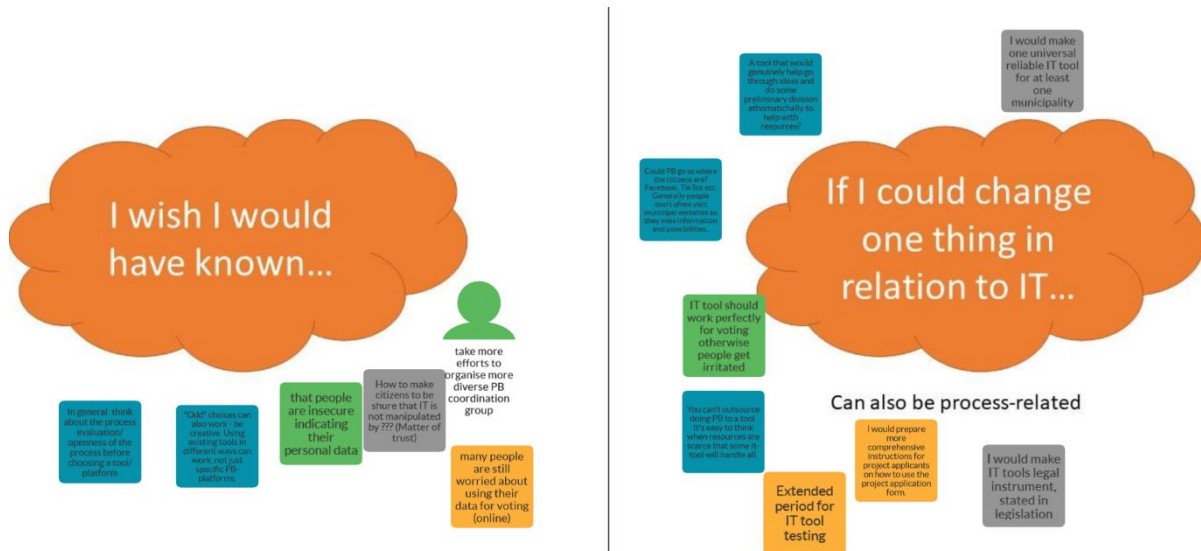


Figure 4: RQ3 - Results of Online-Whiteboard

3.4 RQ4 – Advantages and Disadvantages of PB IT Tools

The last sessions asked for the main disadvantages and advantages of supporting PB with ICT. Here, we asked the workshop participants not only for objective facts, but also perceived benefits and costs are captured.

The disadvantages of PB-IT tools

Regarding the disadvantages, the partners agreed that possibly **excluding** the **elderly** and other groups who lack technical skills is a potential problem. Further, the IT tools do not build **trust** like personal meetings, and some do not want to share their data with the system. The missing sense of community led to less productive discussions due to the lack of emotions and **asynchronous** messages. Some members of the administrations further had an illusion that the ICT technologies could handle everything and put too many expectations into these solutions. At last, the PB tool is one login more that one has to remember.

The advantages of PB-IT tools

The named advantages of the PB support are manifold. While the exclusion of older people was named a disadvantage, IT tools can also include other groups like the disabled or young due to the flexibility to **participate everywhere**. This locational flexibility proved especially useful during the Covid-19 pandemic. This easy access and openness and the possibility to supply the public with large quantities of information also increased the transparency towards the citizens. At last, the PB tools were seen as an **educational** element to make people more digital.

The three largest disadvantages of PB-IT tools

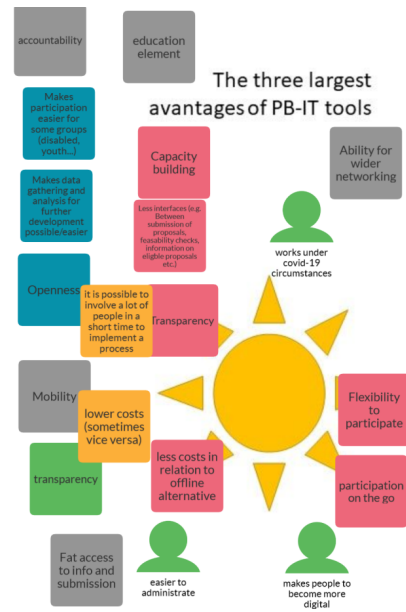


Figure 5: RQ4 - Results of Online-Whiteboard

Furthermore, supporting the PB process with IT tools also offers direct advantages for the municipality. The use of these systems has the potential to **increase** the **efficiency** of the municipal resources vastly. One common interface for handling the proposals allows for an easier administration and a greater capacity in handling the submitted proposals, and more proposals can be checked in the same amount of time. This efficiency, in the end, also lowers the cost in most cases. Further, **collecting data** out of the system is often easier and, thus, enables sophisticated analysis and, thus, can trigger possible future developments.

Lessons Learned: *Manage the expectation on a PB tool. Be aware of the benefits, but also of the downsides.*

4 Closing Remarks

The document captured the lessons learned and best practices of the partners in the EmPaci project. We hope that it inspires other municipalities that plan to introduce a PB themselves.

This output fits into a broader perspective of helping municipalities to develop or integrate PB IT tools. This research output is aligned with the outputs of GoA 4.1. These documents present possible features of existing PB initiatives and a feature and usability catalog, as well as the other outputs of GoA 4.2, which present an analysis of existing software and a reference architecture for PB. These additional resources on IT support for PB and PB overall can be found on the project webpage empaci.eu.

5 References

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6 Appendix

Figure 2: RQ1 – Results of Online-Whiteboard

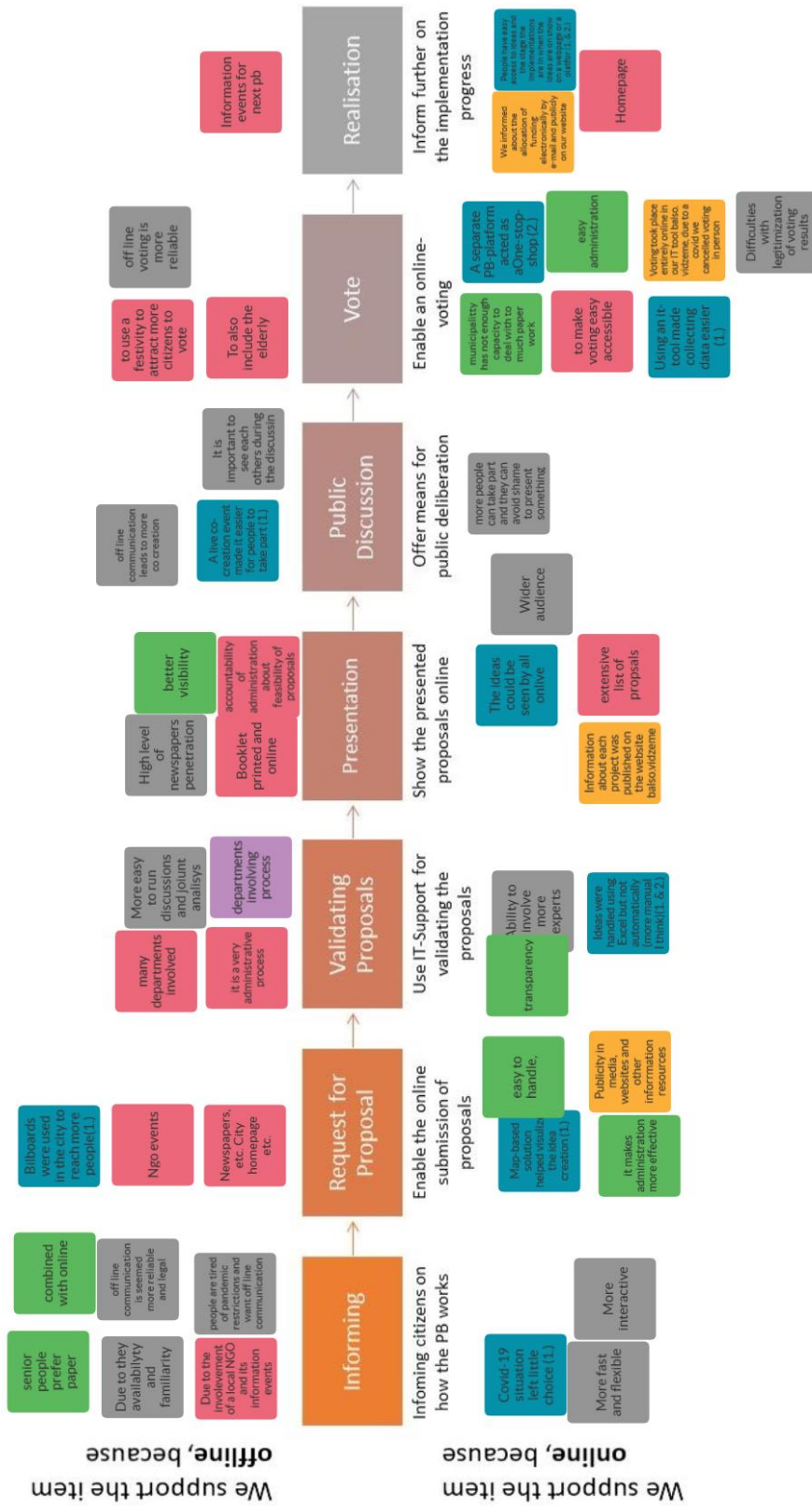


Figure 3: RQ1 – Results of Online-Whiteboard

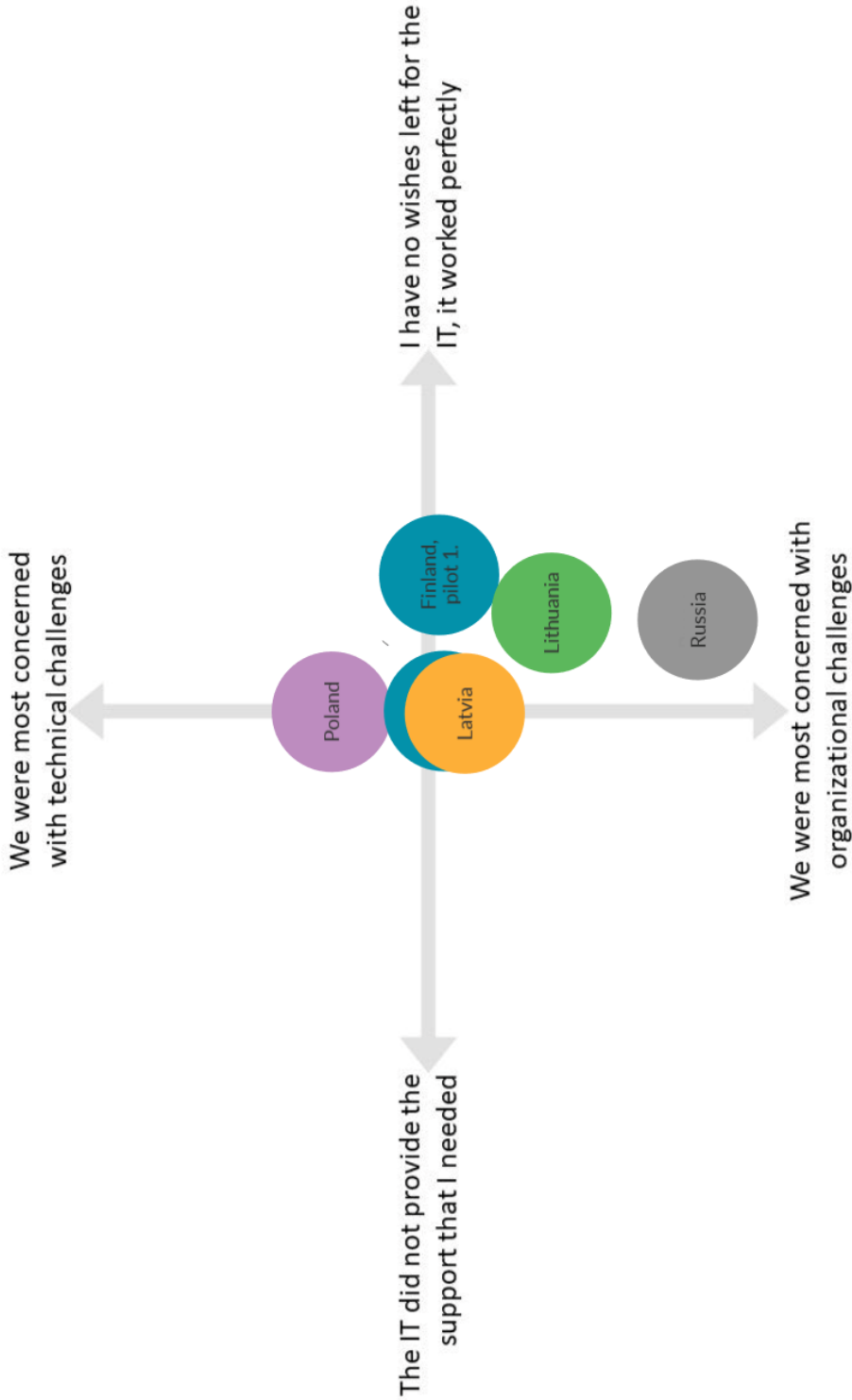


Figure 4: RQ 3 – Results of the Online-Whiteboard

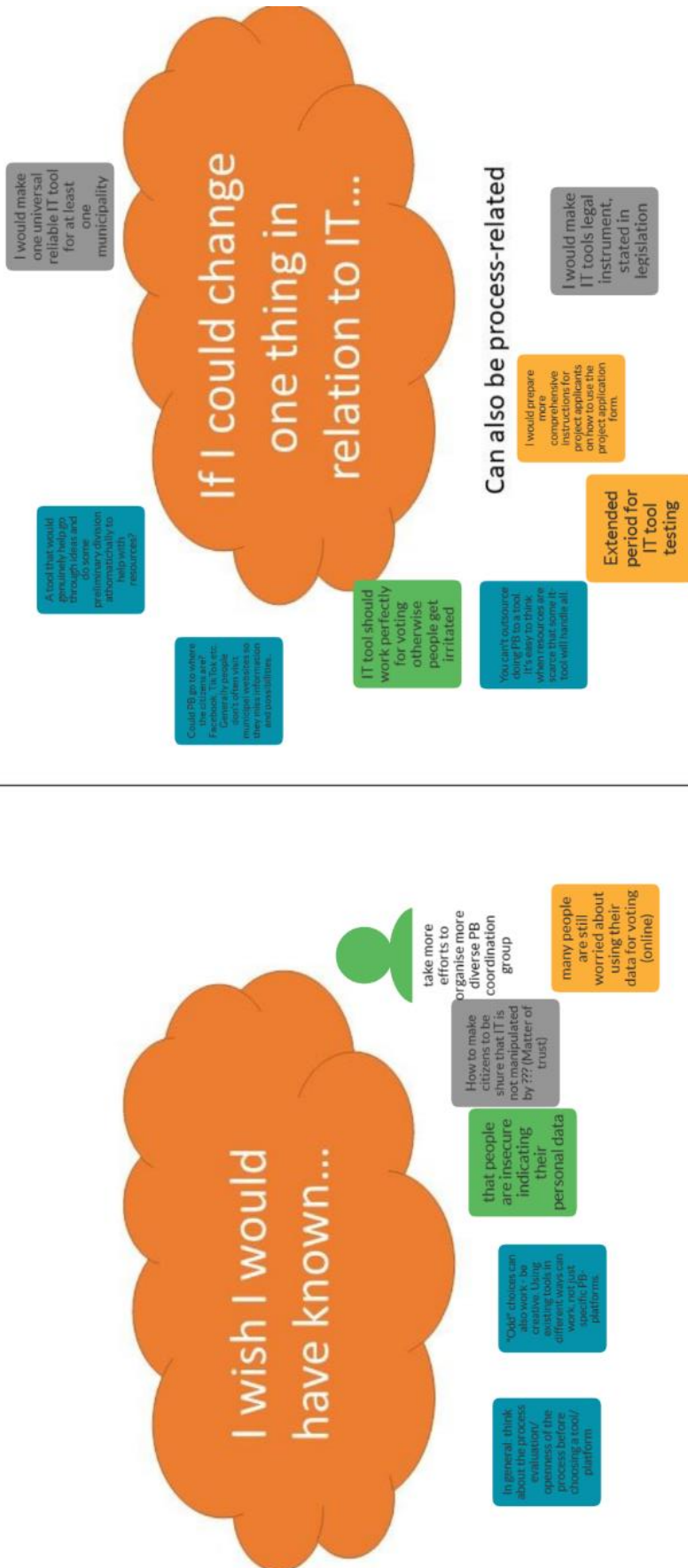
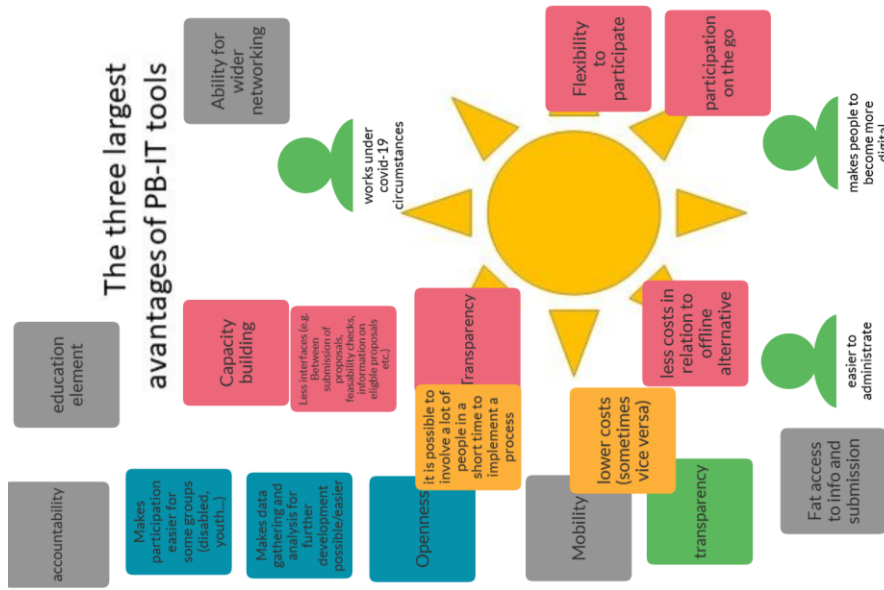


Figure 5: RQ4 – Results of the Online-Whiteboard



The three largest disadvantages of PB-IT tools

