

THE SOCIAL AUDIT AND SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY AMBIGUITIES IN THE CONTEXT OF THE PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING ADOPTION

Giorgia Mattei *, Marco Tutino *, Carlo Regoliosi *,
Caterina Macri *, Valentina Santolamazza *

* Department of Business Studies, Roma Tre University, Rome, Italy



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Abstract

An interesting initiative introduced in the public sector in recent years is participatory budgeting (PB), which has gained popularity, particularly with the advent of the New Public Governance (Touchton et al., 2023; Wampler & Touchton, 2019).

PB aims to develop democratic strategies that allow communities to exercise popular control over decision-making processes (Mattei et al., 2022). While the preparatory side of PB has been extensively investigated in the literature, the user side remains largely unknown (Bartocci et al., 2022). In this light, it is possible to hypothesize that involving citizens in the evaluation and monitoring phases could improve the alignment between policy-making and citizens' expectations (Mattei et al., 2022).

From this perspective, it becomes interesting to focus on social audit, which is a crucial process for an organization's social accountability. It is characterized by openness, transparency, and accountability, involving all stakeholders (Sathiabama, 2018). It serves as a managerial control mechanism that measures intangible and qualitative issues (Cotton, 2000). The purpose of a social audit is to

enable organizations to evaluate and demonstrate their social, ethical, economic, and environmental benefits, as well as aspects related to health, working conditions, human rights, ethical rights, social protection, and transparency (Cotton, 2000; Humphrey & Owen, 2000; Sathiabama, 2018). It provides an assessment of an organization's performance and non-financial objectives by showcasing the achievement of its social goals and monitoring stakeholders' opinions (Sathiabama, 2018).

However, the literature on this topic is still underdeveloped, and uncertainties persist, particularly regarding the terms used (e.g., "social audit", "social accountability", "voice and accountability", or "social control" used as synonyms) and the implied concepts (e.g., social auditing sometimes seen as equivalent to social accountability, while other times seen as a tool for it) (Baltazar & Sepúlveda, 2015).

Therefore, considering the significance of participatory budgeting and the ambiguities surrounding social audit (or accountability), the aim is to understand how previous studies have analyzed the relationships between "social audit" or "social accountability" and "participatory budgeting" to clarify the existing relations between these terms, given the aforementioned ambiguities about social audit and social accountability.

To achieve this aim, a structured review of the literature (Massaro et al., 2016) has been carried out.

In light of the purpose of the study, the keywords '*participatory budget**' and '*social audit**' and '*social account**' were chosen in the string TITLE-ABS-KEY ("*participatory budget**" and ("*social audit**" or "*social account**")). This string was searched on Scopus because it is the most widely used and most available database for multidisciplinary scientific literature (De Moya-Anegón et al., 2007).

The search was done in title, abstract and keywords because these are considered the sections' articles that typically contain keywords (Dal Mas et al., 2019; Natalicchio et al., 2017; Paoloni et al., 2020). The available papers were twelve. Then, the search was restricted to papers written in English to avoid translation problems (Mauro et al., 2017). Finally, two contributions were removed: a book that was a duplicate and a paper that was out of topic. Therefore, the eligible sample includes ten contributions.

This analysis highlights the path of social auditing and its implications in the participatory process, like PB.

The ten manuscripts have different natures; in detail: five are articles, and five are book chapters.

Longitudinal analysis shows that the first publication dates to 2010 and that, thereafter, scientific production on this topic is very patchy. In fact, some years (2017, 2018 and 2021) present a couple of publications per year. In other years (2011, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2020), no articles are published.

Looking at the geographical content considered by the authors of the eligible manuscripts, following the categorisation used by (Broadbent & Guthrie, 2008; Paoloni et al., 2020), it is possible to highlight that two documents have not considered a particular case because are literature review or conceptual paper. Then, four documents analysed the Asia context, followed by three manuscripts from Central and South America and only one document from Africa and the Middle East.

The eligible studies are carried out with various methodologies; in detail: 7 used qualitative methods, only one author used a quantitative method, one used a conceptual, and one used a literature review.

Finally, analysing the papers' content, it is possible to highlight how, over time, the social audit has become a means used not only by private companies to reconcile economic and social objectives (Evans et al., 1998) but also in the public sector, as the participatory budgeting, a participatory governance tool, even if they do it differently.

Based on the literature review, social audit and participatory budgeting are considered tools within the broader concept of social accountability. Some authors (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018) see them as interconnected, while others view participatory budgeting as a means to enhance social accountability without explicitly mentioning social audit (Touchton et al., 2023).

Future research could try to clarify these grey areas that have been highlighted. Further evidence emerges regarding the need to produce contextualised studies in Europe as well as a lack of quantitative studies analysing the above-mentioned phenomena.

This study aims to emphasize the significance of social auditing, despite the persisting ambiguities surrounding the use of terms like social audit or social accountability in the context of PB. Additionally, it contributes by analyzing the present state of social auditing and social accountability in PB, highlighting the public sector reforms implemented during the analyzed period.

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