



## POLICY EVALUATION PROPOSAL FOR "OPEN BUDGET" PARTICIPATORY BUDGET INITIATIVE IN UZBEKISTAN

Shokhjakhon Yusupov,

Head of Division, Ministry of Economy and Finance of the Republic of Uzbekistan, PhD

[Shokhjakhon801@gmail.com](mailto:Shokhjakhon801@gmail.com)

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### ANNOTATION

This evaluation proposal is drafted to examine the Open Budget initiative launched in 2021 to strengthen budgetary transparency, community engagement in decision-making, and improve government responsiveness. The program operates nationwide and allows eligible citizens to propose and vote for community development projects, which are then financed from local budget funds. The initiative and the Open Budget online portal are managed by the Ministry of Economy and Finance. The program is expanding quickly across regions, making a structured evaluation plan essential. The evaluation plan consists of implementation and outcome evaluation components, both of which apply mixed methods and primarily non-experimental and quasi-experimental designs. Implementation evaluation focuses on assessing whether the project runs smoothly in terms of proposal submission, project selection, voting, and financing of winning projects. Outcome evaluation assesses the broader impact of the initiative by examining institutional practices, citizens' trust and satisfaction, perceived transparency, and the alignment of winning projects with actual community needs. Evaluation methods include descriptive statistics, regression models, and qualitative analysis of focus group interviews.

### KALIT SO'ZLAR/ КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА/

#### KEYWORDS

participatory budgeting, Open Budget initiative, policy evaluation, budget transparency, citizen participation, local governance, public finance reform, government responsiveness.

**Introduction.** The Open Budget portal was first launched in 2021 and was aimed at improving the transparency and effectiveness of local budgeting processes. The program operates nationwide across 12 regions, the Republic of Karakalpakstan, and Tashkent City. Open Budget projects are financed by state and local budgets of Uzbekistan. The Ministry of Economy and Finance is the main agency responsible for project implementation and monitoring; however, local governments of each region are equally responsible for Open Budget voting rounds and the actual financing process for winning projects.

Since its launch, the initiative has produced measurable results. Zamin.uz reports that during the second season of 2025, the portal received 22,623 new proposals, of which 18,656 were approved for voting. Increased engagement in local budgeting helps ensure that funds are directed toward public infrastructure projects that reflect the actual needs of each neighborhood. The program has quickly gained the trust of local communities, as it allows residents to propose urgent problems and receive funding approval shortly after the voting process (UNDP, 2021).

The main steps of the program according to the Open Budget portal are: the portal announces each quarterly round with selection criteria; citizens submit proposals through local neighborhoods within 30 days; qualifying projects are approved for listing; a 20-day voting period is held; and winning projects are announced and financed in the following quarter.

This paper proposes an evaluation plan for the Open Budget initiative that examines both its implementation and its broader outcomes. The evaluation addresses how well the program has achieved its participation targets, what factors explain regional differences in engagement, and whether the initiative has contributed to greater institutional responsiveness, public trust, and alignment of public spending with community priorities.

**Literature review.** Participatory budgeting (PB) originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil in 1989, when the municipal government invited residents to directly determine how a portion of the city's capital budget would be allocated through a series of neighborhood and regional assemblies. The Porto Alegre model demonstrated that ordinary citizens could engage meaningfully with complex fiscal decisions, and the concept spread rapidly. As of 2024, over 11,500 municipal PB processes have been implemented globally, representing substantial growth from approximately 1,500 municipalities in 2014 (Wikipedia, 2024). PB has been described as a democratic innovation that promotes citizen empowerment, increases transparency, drives equity, and enables civic education (Milosavljević et al., 2023, as cited in Schugurenksy & Mook, 2024). The literature characterizes PB as one

of the most ambitious participatory innovations of recent decades and a practical tool for making democratic decision-making more inclusive and responsive to community needs.

International scholars and institutions have consistently identified four core principles of PB: voice, through active citizen participation; vote, conferring citizens the authority to make real decisions rather than merely consultative ones; social justice, through the reallocation of resources toward marginalized groups; and oversight, through improved transparency of government spending (Wampler, 2012, as cited in Springer, 2025). These principles provide a normative framework against which specific PB implementations, including the Uzbekistan Open Budget initiative, can be evaluated.

A central finding across the PB literature is its positive relationship with government transparency and public trust. A systematic review synthesizing findings from 92 peer-reviewed articles and institutional reports published between 2000 and 2024 found that PB strengthens the alignment between public resource allocation and community-defined priorities, reduces corruption through participatory oversight, and fosters institutional trust by enhancing transparency and inclusiveness (ResearchGate, 2025). Quantitative research confirms this direction: one study examining PB projects globally between 2020 and 2024 found a strong positive correlation between citizen participation and transparency improvements, and reported that public trust in government institutions increased from 55% in 2020 to 70% in 2024 across the study's sample (ResearchGate, 2025b).

Transparency in budget allocation dissemination is specifically identified as a mechanism for trust-building. Research using a survey experiment in Buenos Aires found that providing detailed information about citizen involvement and outputs of a PB initiative increased voters' perceptions of government benevolence and honesty (World Development, 2022). Importantly, these effects were largest among individuals with initially more negative views of local government, suggesting that PB can be particularly valuable in contexts where institutional trust needs rebuilding. This finding is directly relevant to Uzbekistan, where earlier social protection programs faced public criticism and where the Open Budget initiative represents a deliberate effort to rebuild confidence in government through visible, citizen-driven decision-making.

Research on digital democratic innovations further emphasizes that transparency, access, and platform design are essential to generating positive outcomes from digital government initiatives, and that when done effectively they increase positive feelings and citizen trust in local government (Leininger, 2015; Kern, 2017; Swaner, 2017, as cited in ResearchGate, 2017). This underscores the importance of

evaluating the Open Budget portal's technical performance not only as an operational question but as a determinant of citizens' long-term trust in the initiative.

The literature documents that PB's effectiveness in aligning public spending with genuine community priorities depends heavily on the quality of institutional design and local government follow-through. A comprehensive review of PB impacts notes that municipalities with well-designed PB processes report enhanced service delivery, improved citizen satisfaction, and increased compliance with civic obligations (ResearchGate, 2025). However, research also consistently identifies risks: earning community trust is non-trivial, and if winning projects are not implemented within a reasonable time, resulting distrust can be difficult to reverse (Schugurenksy & Mook, 2024).

The responsiveness of local government officials is identified as a critical determinant of PB success. Even in contexts with high formal participation rates, outcome evaluation may reveal weak results if local authorities lack the administrative capacity or political commitment to translate citizen proposals into completed projects. This finding highlights why the evaluation of institutional responsiveness must be treated as a distinct evaluation question, separate from measuring participation volumes alone.

A World Bank analysis of PB in Brazil and Porto Alegre also notes that the representation of extremely poor and very young citizens within PB processes is a recurring shortcoming (Wikipedia, 2024). While PB generally fares better than traditional representative democracy in demographic inclusion, the alignment between funded projects and the priorities of the most marginalized groups cannot be assumed and must be assessed directly through qualitative methods.

The digitalization of PB processes offers significant potential to expand participation beyond the limits of in-person formats, but also introduces new exclusion risks. Multi-channel digital PB platforms have been found to improve civic engagement and overcome traditional barriers to participation (ACM Digital Library, 2018). However, the literature on digital participation in developing countries consistently identifies technological, social, and cultural barriers that shape who benefits from digital government platforms and who does not.

Key structural barriers include insufficient and unreliable internet connectivity in rural and remote areas, high costs of internet services, limited digital literacy, and linguistic and cultural factors that constrain engagement by minority groups and older populations (ResearchGate, 2025c). These barriers are particularly relevant to the Uzbekistan context, where the Open Budget initiative operates in regions with highly variable levels of digital infrastructure, internet penetration, and literacy. Areas such as Kashkadarya and Jizzakh present different participation environments than urban centers like Tashkent City, and effective evaluation must account for these structural differences rather than treating regional variation in participation as primarily reflecting differences in citizen motivation.

Strategies identified in the literature to address these barriers include multi-channel participation options (online, offline, and phone-based), universal design principles for digital platforms, multilingual interfaces, and proactive outreach through trusted community intermediaries. The Open Budget initiative's use of makhalla committees as local bridges to communities with low digital access reflects alignment with these evidence-based approaches, and the evaluation of this component is therefore important for understanding the program's equity performance.

The PB evaluation literature recommends mixed-methods approaches that combine quantitative administrative data with qualitative survey and interview data. Quasi-experimental comparative designs using high-participation regions as treatment groups and low-participation regions as comparison groups are commonly used where random assignment is not feasible. Regression analysis of participation determinants, categorical matching of funded projects against community-identified priorities, and thematic decoding of interviews are all documented methodological tools in this literature.

The literature also warns of specific methodological challenges: self-reporting bias in trust and satisfaction measurements, difficulty attributing observed institutional changes solely to the PB program in contexts with concurrent reform processes, and the complexity of defining and measuring community needs in diverse regional contexts. These challenges are directly addressed in the evaluation design proposed in this paper.

**Methods.** The Open Budget initiative accepts public proposals, conducts detailed technical evaluation and shortlisting of submitted projects, disburses funds to winning projects, and actively monitors ongoing project implementation. The program is expected to raise public awareness of the local budgeting process, engage local residents in decision-making, and ensure that public services match the urgent needs of local communities.

Key stakeholders as described by the Ministry of Economy and Finance include:

1. Citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the general public
2. Ministry of Economy and Finance
3. Local governments (Khokimiyat) and makhalla committees
4. Open Budget portal IT specialists and agencies managing digital infrastructure (Uzinfocom, Egov)
5. Parliament of Uzbekistan (Oliy Majlis), Cabinet of Ministers
6. Local contractors
7. Media representatives and civil society organizations
8. International donor organizations and partners (UNDP, World Bank)

The primary target population is the adult population aged 18 and above in Uzbekistan, approximately 15 million people according to Stat.uz as of 2022. Special emphasis is placed on low-income families, households in remote areas, and regions with low engagement. The secondary target population consists of citizens who actively engage in proposal submission, voting, and project execution advocating for specific community needs. The evaluation is expected to reach at least 14,000 respondents in total across the country.

Recruitment is divided into two categories. Online recruitment occurs through the Open Budget portal, registered Telegram accounts, SMS messages, and other social media platforms, reaching registered citizens whose contact information is available. Offline recruitment takes place through makhalla committees in rural areas, in-person visits, and engagement through regional Open Budget offices. Media campaigns through television, radio, and social media provide an additional channel for broader recruitment.

A major concern in conducting the evaluation is collecting region-specific data that accounts for differences in literacy, internet access, and local specifications. Use of local languages is essential for cultural inclusiveness. For example, large portions of Samarkand region speak Tajik, Karakalpakstan and Khorezm have distinct dialects, and Russian is widely spoken in certain regions. Cultural dynamics can be accessed through makhalla committees, which serve as community-level intermediaries in areas with lower engagement.

Mixed data collection methods — online surveys, in-person interviews, and phone-based outreach — are used to cover participants without stable internet access or adequate digital skills. Oversampling of regions with lower participation such as Kashkadarya and Jizzakh prevents selection bias toward larger and more developed cities. Ethical considerations require protecting respondents from identification when expressing criticism toward local authorities.

Implementation evaluation questions

- To what extent did Open Budget initiatives — including project selection, voting, and funding processes — meet their targets across regions (e.g., share of adults aged 18+ involved in voting)?
- What factors most influenced citizen participation in the Open Budget initiative across regions in Uzbekistan?
- What was the role of digital infrastructure and how did it affect the actual process of selection and voting?

Outcome Evaluation Questions

- How did the Open Budget initiative influence institutional practices and the responsiveness of local authorities to current community needs in Uzbekistan?
- How does citizens' trust in local authorities — measured through indicators such as satisfaction with service delivery and transparency in budget allocation — differ between regions with high and limited participation?
- To what extent has the Open Budget initiative resulted in allocation of funds toward projects that reflect actual and current community needs?

Evaluation Design

Research design for the Open Budget evaluation primarily relies on non-experimental and quasi-experimental approaches, using descriptive analysis, regional comparisons, and correlational analysis of variables including participation barriers, responsiveness of local

authorities, and digital performance metrics. The evaluation design for each question is summarized in Table 1 below.

**Table 1. Evaluation Design Matrix for Open Budget Initiative**

Research Question	Design	Design Type	Design Description	Purpose	Options for Collecting Data	Strengths	Limitations
Q1 Impl. – To what extent did 'Open budget' initiatives meet its targets across regions (share of adults 18+ involved in voting)?	Non-experimental	Descriptive analysis	Assessment of participation across regions at one point of the initiative	Evaluate whether the initiative achieved desired participation level	Portal voting/participation data, reports and statistics	Determines measurable outcomes; enables cross-regional comparison; data easy to collect	May miss qualitative aspects; does not determine causality
Q2 Impl. – What factors mostly influenced citizen participation across regions?	Non-experimental	Descriptive and correlation	Observation of links between factors and participation	Determine main factors and barriers influencing citizens' participation	Surveys, interviews, focus groups, reports	Identifies motivators and barriers; assesses project from citizens' perspective	Relies on self-reported data; difficult to determine causality
Q3 Impl. – What was the role of digital infrastructure and how did it affect selection and voting?	Non-experimental	Descriptive	Observation of how website and software worked during implementation	Determine technical issues or facilitating features during implementation	Portal user analytics, interviews with IT personnel and administrators	Identifies major problems and improvement opportunities; easy to collect data	Internet access and connectivity issues external to portal performance
Q1 Outcome – How did 'Open budget' influence institutional practices and responsiveness of local authorities?	Quasi-experimental	Descriptive comparison	Observation of changes in institutional practices comparing high and low participation regions	Assess responsiveness of local managing authorities as a result of the program	Interviews with local authorities, program reports	Captures regional differences beyond simple descriptive analysis	Difficult to attribute responsiveness solely to program; self-reporting bias
Q2 Outcome – How does citizens' trust differ between high- and low-participation regions?	Quasi-experimental	Comparison	Comparison of participation level and trust revealed by surveys	Determine if higher involvement is linked to increased trust and satisfaction	Focus groups, regional statistics, survey reports	Uses measurable data; links factors to targets; enables regional comparison	Other regional or contextual factors may explain differences; causality difficult to determine
Q3 Outcome – To what extent has 'Open budget' resulted in funds allocated to actual community needs?	Non-experimental	Descriptive	Examination of funds allocated towards community-identified needs	Assess if 'Open budget' prioritizes funding towards community needs	Program reports from portal, focus group interviews	Directly measures initiative results and program effectiveness	Difficult to apply a single criterion across regions; urgency of needs is hard to quantify

Data collection combines quantitative and qualitative methods to address both implementation and outcome evaluation questions. Administrative and statistical data will be collected from the Open Budget portal ([openbudget.uz](http://openbudget.uz)), the Ministry of Economy and Finance,

and its regional offices. Examples include citizens' participation data (number and share of adults aged 18+ per voting round, proposals submitted and approved, completed projects per cycle, demographic profile of voters); portal functionality data (user activity logs, session

durations, login failures, reported errors, page load times during peak voting days); and data on processing times, approval rates, and transparency practices.

Large-scale structured surveys will be developed in Uzbek, Russian, and other local languages to measure trust levels, satisfaction rates, participation behavior, and barriers to participation. Semi-structured interviews and focus groups will assess institutional changes following program launch, implementation challenges, and digital system issues. Document review of official decrees, resolutions, and publications will support analysis of institutional changes.

Survey sampling will be stratified by region based on participation level (high, medium, low) with further sampling by districts and makhallas. A minimum of 1,000 respondents per region is targeted for statistical validity. Focus groups will use purposive sampling to include active participants, non-participants, minority groups, remote area residents, and participants aged 18–24. Specialist interviews will cover 12–15 staff members from the main office, the same number from regional offices, and approximately 10 makhalla leaders.

Quantitative analysis begins with descriptive statistics covering participation levels by region, participant demographics, digital infrastructure performance, and project approval rates, including regional comparisons and frequency distributions. Regression analysis is conducted to identify factors predicting citizens' participation and to test whether participation intensity predicts trust levels across regions. Where pre-initiative data are available, difference-in-differences analysis is used to assess changes in institutional responsiveness.

Qualitative analysis of interviews and focus groups is conducted using NVivo software. Deductive coding applies pre-defined categories including digital and access barriers, trust, voting process challenges, and local authority responsiveness. Inductive coding captures emergent themes not anticipated in the evaluation framework. All quantitative and qualitative results are jointly interpreted to explain regional differences in participation, inconsistencies in budget transparency, and variations in responsiveness mechanisms.

## Results

### Implementation Objectives and Targets

The Open Budget initiative prioritizes public participation and accountable budget allocation. Key measurable implementation objectives are:

Increasing citizen participation by achieving average annual participation rates of 10–15% of adults aged 18 and above in each region, with 5% growth targets for low-engagement regions.

Ensuring that all districts and cities participate in at least one voting cycle per year and reducing barriers such as limited digital access and low public awareness.

Improving portal functionality by reducing system failures and downtime to below 3% during each cycle, with accurate vote reflection for both online and offline votes.

Ensuring all submitted projects are reviewed and eligible proposals are published within 7–10 business days of initial submission.

Maintaining an 85–90% completion rate for winning projects during each fiscal year and reducing delays caused by administrative procedures.

### Outcome Objectives

Expected measurable outcome changes resulting from the initiative include:

Increased citizen trust in local government, measured by change in trust and satisfaction ratings among residents in high-participation versus low-participation regions, with the expectation that high-participation regions report higher scores.

Improved government responsiveness, measured by decreased average time for project selection and approval, increased on-time project completion rates, and a rising proportion of financed projects that reflect community-identified priorities.

Improved citizen participation rates over time, measured by changes in voting patterns, project proposal rates, and engagement in community discussions, with a long-term expectation of stable, high participation levels across all regions.

### Evaluation Findings by Question

**Q1 Implementation — Target Achievement:** Non-experimental descriptive analysis compares participation shares across regions against the 10–15% target for adults aged 18+. Portal voting data and participation statistics from the Open Budget portal provide the base

dataset. Regional comparison reveals which areas have reached targets and which remain below thresholds.

**Q2 Implementation — Participation Determinants:** Correlational analysis of survey and interview data identifies the main factors and barriers influencing participation. Variables include internet access, awareness of the program, trust in local authorities, language, mobility, and distance from service centers. Focus group findings add depth to the statistical patterns.

**Q3 Implementation — Digital Infrastructure:** Descriptive analysis of portal analytics including user activity, session duration, login failures, error rates, and page load times during peak voting periods provides a performance profile. Interviews with IT personnel explain the sources of observed issues and the effectiveness of corrective measures.

**Q1 Outcome — Institutional Responsiveness:** Quasi-experimental comparative design uses regions with relatively high participation (e.g., Tashkent City) as treatment groups and lower-participation regions as comparison groups. Pre-post comparison of project timelines, approval rates, and complaint resolution rates, supplemented by interview data from local officials, assesses whether the initiative has produced measurable changes in institutional behavior.

**Q2 Outcome — Citizens' Trust:** Multivariate regression analysis tests whether participants from high-participation areas report higher trust and satisfaction scores after controlling for age, income, education, and internet access. Household surveys targeted at high- and low-participation areas provide the primary data. The analysis assesses whether the trust differential, if observed, can plausibly be attributed to program engagement.

**Q3 Outcome — Community Needs Alignment:** Categorical matching compares the full list of funded projects per region (approximately 15–17 per region) with community-identified priority areas from survey responses. Alignment rates are calculated and examined in relation to participation levels. Qualitative data explains misalignments where high participation does not translate into well-targeted project selection.

**Discussion.** The evaluation of the Open Budget initiative demonstrates that implementation quality and outcome performance are closely linked and must be interpreted together. A complete evaluation requires examining both implementation and outcome results, as they complement each other by revealing different dimensions of the same initiative. Implementation evaluation measures whether the program was delivered as intended and identifies operational barriers, while outcome evaluation measures the resulting changes in trust, responsiveness, and spending alignment.

One important finding from the evaluation framework concerns the relationship between digital infrastructure and trust. Digital access barriers and system errors at the implementation level may be perceived by citizens as a lack of transparency, which can suppress trust and long-term participation even in regions where the program's design is otherwise sound. Addressing technical infrastructure is therefore not only an operational concern but a determinant of the initiative's civic outcomes.

Institutional responsiveness is identified as a critical mediating variable. Even in regions with high formal participation, outcome evaluation may reveal poor project alignment or slow implementation if local authorities lack the administrative capacity to translate citizen decisions into completed projects. The evaluation design's use of quasi-experimental comparison across regions with different participation levels is intended to identify these patterns, but care must be taken not to attribute all observed differences to the program when concurrent governance reforms may also explain variation.

Transparency efforts at the implementation level — such as publishing budget updates, project status reports, and voting results — are likely to contribute to trust outcomes. Research findings on PB globally suggest that citizens who are well-informed about the outputs of the program, even if they did not directly participate in voting, may also experience increased confidence in government institutions (World Development, 2022). This has practical implications for the initiative's communication strategy in low-participation regions.

Limitations of this evaluation include the absence of a true pre-program baseline for outcome variables such as trust and responsiveness, which constrains causal attribution. Regions were not randomly assigned to different levels of program intensity. Self-reported trust and satisfaction data are subject to social desirability

bias, particularly given that respondents may be reluctant to criticize local authorities. The challenge of defining and measuring community needs uniformly across diverse regions with different languages, economic conditions, and institutional contexts also limits the generalizability of findings on project alignment.

**Conclusion.** A comprehensive evaluation plan for the Open Budget initiative can reveal how the program is functioning across the country, identify barriers during voting cycles, and assess citizens' trust and perception of transparency. The results can be reported to relevant agencies for further cooperation and improvements.

The evaluation plan proposed in this paper addresses six evaluation questions — three implementation and three outcome — using a mixed-methods approach combining non-experimental

descriptive and correlational designs with quasi-experimental regional comparisons. Data from the Open Budget portal, the Ministry of Economy and Finance, household surveys, focus groups, and specialist interviews will be integrated to provide a full assessment of the initiative's performance across Uzbekistan's 14 regions.

Key expected contributions of the evaluation include identifying which regions are falling short of participation targets and why; establishing whether the initiative has contributed to measurable improvements in institutional responsiveness and citizens' trust; and determining whether funded projects genuinely reflect the priorities of local communities. Together, these findings will provide evidence to guide further scaling, design improvements, and regional resource allocation for the Open Budget initiative.

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