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Sustainable Public Management and Institutional Social Responsibility in Practice: A Study of Four Challenges in the Polish Context

Contemporary public, local, and institutional management is increasingly confronted with the imperative to redefine its priorities towards an integrated, sustainable, and participatory approach. In the face of mounting pressure from rising societal expectations, constrained financial resources, and intensifying systemic crises – such as housing shortages, the progressive devaluation of the education sector, and social alienation – the question of the purpose and configuration of modern institutional responsibility resurfaces with renewed urgency.

The transformation of management models towards integrated and participatory frameworks requires not only a paradigmatic shift but also the implementation of novel analytical tools and managerial practices. A transdisciplinary approach becomes essential – one that synthesises knowledge from the social sciences, ecology, economics, and digital technologies. As demonstrated in the work of Ward and colleagues (2020), integrated management is grounded in cross-sectoral collaboration, translational science, and the active engagement of local communities in decision-making processes. The authors emphasise that the effectiveness of such models is contingent upon institutions' capacity to build relationships, foster mutual learning, and assume co-responsibility for implemented solutions.

Similarly, Ortiz-Riomalo and colleagues (2023) highlight the relevance of institutional frameworks such as the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) and Social-Ecological Systems (SES), which enable the examination of complex interactions among actors, contexts, and decision-making arenas. Their research on participatory water resource management in South America illustrates that the success of interventions hinges on the integration of multiple governance levels and institutional adaptability.

Finally, the watershed management approach, as outlined by the authors of a chapter in a Springer monograph (Wagley & Karki, 2020), illustrates the practical dimensions of implementing integrated and participatory models. Central to this approach is consensus-building, the strengthening of local institutions, and the creation of spaces for co-decision-making.

All these frameworks converge on the necessity to redefine the role of public institutions from resource administrators to facilitators of cooperation and social innovation. In this context, the case studies presented herein serve not only as illustrations of ongoing transformations but also as conceptual entry points for further reflection on the future of public governance under the conditions of uncertainty and complexity.

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The first case concerns the implementation of participatory budgeting in municipalities with diverse socio-territorial profiles. Although its use in Poland remains relatively limited, international research indicates that even basic forms of citizen participation can contribute to enhanced social capital, trust, and the legitimacy of public authorities (Schommer, 2023). Examples from Porto Alegre, Madrid, and Toronto suggest that participatory budgeting can function not only as a tool for resource redistribution but also as a platform for civic education and the strengthening of deliberative democracy (Aziz & Shah, 2020). Participatory budgeting thus operates as a mechanism for rebuilding public trust and enabling local communities to co-determine the allocation of public funds. While participatory budgeting models differ in their methodological and institutional designs, they consistently demonstrate the potential to enhance deliberative democracy and foster inclusiveness.

The second case concerns a critical evaluation of the mechanisms for financing higher education in Poland. In the global context, there is a growing discourse emphasising that higher education should be regarded as a public good rather than merely a private investment. Nixon (2020) underscores that the sustainability of education systems requires not only stable funding sources but also the recognition of education as a cornerstone of a democratic society. Newfield (2021) argues that the current funding model – based on student debt and inter-institutional competition – exacerbates social inequalities and contributes to the erosion of the quality of education. Within this framework, there is an urgent need to reform indexation mechanisms and reinforce the state's role as a guarantor of equitable access to education. Consequently, the financing of higher education emerges as a pressing challenge to the common good. A detailed analysis reveals a growing divergence between economic growth and the real level of funding allocated to universities. According to Newfield (2021), the prevailing funding paradigm not only deepens inequality but also weakens the quality of education as a public good.

The third case explores the potential of container housing as an alternative form of residential provision in Poland. Considering rising real estate prices and a persistent shortage of social housing, such solutions may offer a practical response to the needs of economically marginalised groups. When appropriately designed and implemented, container-based housing has the potential to support social inclusion and improve quality of life, particularly when accompanied by participatory planning and community engagement. However, as noted by Qi and colleagues (2024), the effectiveness of such interventions depends on the integration of housing policy with educational and social initiatives, as well as the design of public spaces that foster community-building and social cohesion. Container-based housing, as a response to the housing crisis, represents an innovative solution that may become increasingly attractive. Nonetheless, it demands from public institutions not only infrastructural investment but also the integration of housing strategies with broader socio-educational programmes, ideally supported by business-aligned models of implementation (Garnham et al., 2025).

The fourth case addresses location-based games as tools for city branding and urban education, focusing on the use of applications such as *Pokémon GO*. As Leorke (2019) demonstrates, these games not only engage users with urban space but also generate new forms of local identity and urban narratives. Location-based games function as vehicles for contemporary city marketing while also serving as educational instruments that support situated learning and the development of place-based relationships. Baalsrud Hauge and colleagues (2019) emphasise that well-designed location-based games can enhance participatory processes, promote cultural heritage, and strengthen the sense of community belonging. They also facilitate the creation of impersonal

yet meaningful connections with specific urban environments, reinforcing spatial attachment and civic engagement.

A unifying theme across all these case studies is the need for a governance model that integrates not only economic efficiency but also social justice, inclusivity, and the long-term sustainability of solutions. The proposed approach synthesises traditions from public administration, multilevel governance theory, and values-based management, constructing a framework for institutional resilience and social responsibility.

In conclusion, it becomes increasingly evident that contemporary public management – both at the local level and at the institutional level – requires a fundamental transformation. The complexity of today's social, economic, and environmental challenges calls for a governance model grounded in integration, sustainability, and active civic participation. Only such an approach can foster institutions capable of acting effectively under the conditions of uncertainty while remaining committed to the principles of social justice, inclusiveness, and long-term accountability. Thus, the redefinition of public management priorities emerges not as a strategic option, but as a necessity dictated by the realities of the present.

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