

## **MORE THAN\* 20 YEARS OF PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY IN PORTO ALEGRE**

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**ABSTRACT:** If current trends are confirmed, Europe will soon be in dire need of political innovations to revive its democratic practice and citizens' involvement. We could start by looking at democratic experiments in other parts of the world, for instance Brazil's local participatory democracy. This is an insider's view into one of the world's most vibrant and multicultural democracies.

**Keywords:** Political Innovation. Local Democratic Practice. Participatory Democracy. Multicultural Democracies.

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### **1 INTRODUCTION**

Have you ever heard of participatory budgeting? This new form of participatory democracy has enjoyed some significant success in Brazilian cities and is being increasingly used all over the world.

At first, the phrase “participatory democracy” itself may appear to be redundant: participation ought to be inherent to the concept of democracy – from the Greek word *demokratia* which means, literally, “rule by the people”. It is indeed popular participation that defines democracy and distinguishes it from totalitarian political systems. But theory and practice sometimes need to be reconciled through actions – and words.

## **2 THE BIRTH OF A DEMOCRATIC INNOVATION**

In Brazil, the first full participatory budgeting (PB) process was developed in the city of Porto Alegre in 1989, and has since spread to hundreds of Latin American cities – as well as dozens of cities in Europe, North America, Asia and Africa.

To understand the PB experience, it is important to recognise the context of Brazilian political history, especially in the 80's. Between 1964 and 1985, the country experienced its worse authoritarian period. Only a few years later, a new constitution was adopted in 1988, formally marking the return to democracy with regular elections since 1989. To understand democracy in Brazil, two elements are particularly relevant: the extremely inegalitarian distribution of “political-economic” power and the relatively high degree of autonomy that is granted to states and municipalities in Brazil (a very decentralised federation by international standards).

It is in this background that the participatory budget in Porto Alegre was introduced. In short, the city of Porto Alegre was divided into regions, in which round discussions took place between citizens and representatives of municipal government to talk about proposals for public investment the following year. This original initiative then quickly spread throughout the country.

## **3 GETTING CITIZENS INVOLVED**

Obviously, participatory budgeting developed in varied ways in each city, but they share a common core: the public debating of a budget proposal before its legislative adoption, in an open process involving all citizens who want to participate. Those debates have standard rules, with decisions from the plenary meetings going through a higher stage of appeal (Council of the PB in Porto Alegre) that organises the demands, giving them their final shape before they reach the executive.

Participatory budget has allowed the spread of democracy in Brazil by asserting popular control over the public administration, with public spending treated literally as such, “public”. All citizens can have a say in how their tax money is used.

The initiative has led to the formation of a new decision-making power that has effectively democratized government policies at the local level. Perhaps more importantly, it has greatly increased citizens' involvement in the public space, as a "nontraditional and empowering" exercise of political rights.

#### **4 TRANSFER AND EVALUATION: THE TWIN CHALLENGES**

To properly evaluate the concrete results of participatory budgeting, such as the Porto Alegre experience (pioneer in this subject), one fact should not be forgotten: the local environment. However, evaluations made so far have demonstrated the enormous difficulties to verify if the scheme's ambitious goals are actually achieved – and transferable.

In general, works on the issue have focused on Porto Alegre as a successful case study, leaving behind the theoretical framework that could help develop and analyse other experiences. The environment and structure of each region and the characteristics that make each city unique, including the culture, customs and history, are constantly forgotten. Yet it is essential to watch carefully not only the country in which the process is being developed, but also the main factor capable of influencing the outcome: what I would call "city-citizenship". This basic but often ignored factor is central to the success of such local initiatives.

Evaluating the results of participatory budgeting is therefore a complex task, made even more so by the delimitation of what ought to be in sight. The public debate intends to improve the allocation of resources through the direct participation of society, but the impact depends on final outcomes through a number of filters (not least the initial make-up of the participatory panel). In any case, this political involvement creates a fertile ground for the enlargement and development of modern democracy; accompanied, of course, by greater transparency from the state and the formation of a new conception of citizenship.

There can never be too much innovation in citizens' involvement.

Remember that the programme of participatory budget, already developed for 20 years in the south of Brazil, was selected by the UN as one of the 40 best practices in Urban Public Administration (among thousands of local initiatives around the world).

There is no doubt that the PB stimulated the creation of new channels, and strengthened existing ones, for the community to decide on the evolution of public services. But we should always keep in mind that every experience will be singular in its final result.

### **EXPLANATORY NOTE**

(\*) This article was also published in Europe almost five years ago; however, the theme is still actual and, maybe even more interesting in times of politics of austerity in face of the global financial crisis. Many projects for political change have lost credibility and democratic politics comes under pressure. Citizens must be aware of the situation to be able to evaluate the social investments and spending of the government as the social consequences of the global political economy reaches new heights.

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