

Participatory budgeting in the UK: from the “grassroots” to the national agenda

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For several years, participatory budgeting processes in the UK could be counted at one or two hands, some of the first examples being the cities of Bradford (2004), Sunderland (2005), London-Harrow (2005), Newcastle (2006), Coedpoeth (2006) and Salford (2007).¹ Since July 2007, when Hazel Blears (Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government) announced that within 5 years every local authority in England should have set up a process of participatory budgeting (PB), the situation changed dramatically. If the declaration of the Community Secretary will be realised, the UK would be the first country in Europe where PB has been systematically introduced in every local authority (in Latin America, Peru and the Dominican Republic have introduced PB in their national legislation).

In general terms, PB is a process where the budget-making process of a territorial entity or an institution is made transparent and the public is involved in making decisions for parts of the budget. Invented at the end of the 1980s in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, PBs have in recent years become more widespread in many European countries as well and more than 100 experiences exist today. Decisive in this regard was the organization of the World Social Forum in the year 2001 in Porto Alegre. It introduced a vivid process of “idea exportation” of this first democratic innovation coming from a Latin-American country to the western world (from “south” to “north”).

In the UK, first links towards Porto Alegre had already been established before this date by a Manchester-based NGO working on issues of community empowerment. This is the reason why PB in the UK started from a community perspective, and not from a left party perspective like in France or other south European countries. Before Blears integrated the process of PB in her policy approach, it was not a very well known process, supported only by a small group of committed people. How could it develop from the “grassroots” to the national policy agenda? Who are the actors that promoted the idea and practice of PB in the UK? What are, based on the current political context, the prospects with regard to the future development of PB? After a presentation of some key elements with regard to the political context, I will deal with the first two questions and conclude the article with proposing some arguments with regard to the future prospects.

¹ The paper is based on fieldwork carried out within several research projects (since 2004): a European comparative project on PB financed by the German Hans Böckler foundation and carried out at Berlin Humboldt University and the Marc Bloch Center, Berlin (cf. Sintomer Yves, Herzberg Carsten, Röcke Anja, *Les budgets participatifs en Europe. Les services publics au service du public*, La Découverte, 2008); the PICRI-project “Les dispositifs participatifs locaux en Ile-de-France et en Europe : vers une démocratie technique ?” financed by the region “Ile de France”, and my Ph.D.-thesis at the European University Institute. The analysis is based on qualitative methods: observation of PB and other participatory events (Salford), interviews with local (Salford) and national actors who influence the diffusion and implementation of PB (civil servants, politicians, NGOs), analysis of policy documents and of existing literature on the topic.

Between central targets and the “empowerment” of local communities: an ambivalent political context

When Tony Blair came to office, local governments were facing a difficult situation as their power had been significantly weakened for many years.² With the aim of introducing the “minimal state”, Margaret Thatcher had systematically reduced the autonomy and competences of local authorities (who also constituted an important power basis for the Labour Party). In the UK, local government do not have a constitutional status, but depend on central government legislation. One central means for carrying out this political programme was a massive privatisation strategy. Under the system of *Compulsory Competitive Tendering* (CCT), local authorities were forced to put out to competitive tender specified services or functions. As a consequence, a growing number of former competencies of local governments (building, construction, refuse collection, housing management, street cleansing, etc.) had been “outsourced” to private bidders and therefore taken out of direct local government provision and of democratic control. Second, semi-public, centrally controlled institutions (called *Quangos: quasi-non-governemental organisations*) were created for the management of former municipal responsibilities such as regional development, energy policy, transport, and planning. This “quangoisation” not only reduced even more the competencies of local authorities and took them beyond democratic control, but also made it impossible to coordinate them (in addition, health services and policing are traditionally under control of particular public bodies, and not part of local government competences). A third element of the Thatcher policy towards the municipalities had been a tight control of their finances. Central government limited the local tax raising powers with instruments such as “capping” – ceilings imposed on local governments, where elected local officials could be surcharged personally for failing to deliver balanced or prudent budgets within their authority – and “ring fencing”, which means that specified expenditure (e.g. on housing, education, child care, etc.) must follow and support national priorities and measures.

After the successful elections of 1997, the Labour government put a very strong emphasis on increasing the “efficiency and effectiveness” of public services, instead of pursuing a blind privatisation policy. Officially, one example for this changed focus has been the introduction of the Best Value regime, requiring local authorities to “make arrangement to secure continuous improvement in the ways in which its functions are exercised, having regard to a combination of economy, efficiency and effectiveness”.³ As this quotation shows, the “economy” still plays an important role within the Best Value regime, and some would say that it constitutes simply a new label for an approach which was, and still is, highly “impregnated” by the ethos of CCT. Since then, other such evaluation programmes have been introduced, lately with a stronger territorial and comprehensive focus on local service delivery.

During the first term of New Labour, the powers and autonomy of local authorities didn’t significantly change. Though New Labour slightly improved their legal status with the introduction of the “powers of well-being” in the area of economic, social and environmental development and improvement⁴, their financial dependence from central governance, and the privatisation policy (through so-called Private Finance Initiatives), remained. Blair also

² This section is based on chapter 4, part 2 in Sintomer Yves, Herzberg Carsten et Röcke Anja, 2008 (cited above) of which Jez Hall is the co-author.

³ Local Government Act 1999, part I,3

⁴ Local Government Act 2000.

continued the practice of “capping”, and in the first years the number of “ring-fenced” areas, as well as the number of *Quangos*, even grew compared to the Thatcher years. New Labour introduced a variety of mechanisms in order to assess the local performances with regard to centrally set targets, or used existing institutions such as the Audit Commission (created 1982 by the Tories).

It is only more recently that there seems to be a change in the relationship between local and central governments. One example is the introduction of *Local Area Agreements* which reduce the number of centrally fixed targets for local authorities and give them more possibilities to establish local priorities. They are set up by Local Strategic Partnerships⁵, are then agreed between the local area (local authority and LSP) and central government and renewed annually. Another step into a new relationship has been the introduction of a “concordat” between local authorities and the central government, which constitutes “for the first time an agreement on the rights and responsibilities of local government, including its responsibilities to provide effective leadership of local areas and to empower local communities”.⁶

A rather ambivalent topic with regard to the local-central relationships is the issue of citizen engagement, and the national promotion of PB is a good example for this (see below). Such as the focus on the “effectiveness and efficiency” of local government, the greater focus and citizen- and user participation constituted an important difference between the political programme of Thatcher and the Modernization Agenda of New Labour. Confronted with a legitimacy crisis of representative democracy, “democratic renewal” has been since 1997 a central topic within the Modernisation Agenda. During the first years, however, this program included mainly institutional measures such as to modernise local electoral arrangements, to introduce clearer political management structures, and to strengthen the council’s role as “leaders” of their local communities. Existing participatory elements were mainly focussed on citizens in the role of *consumers* of local services rather than as co-deciders or co-planners.

In the last few years, the focus has shifted from a consumer-orientation towards the greater engagement of *citizens* and *communities*; the most obvious reason for this development is the fact that the former approach did not reduce the democratic deficits which remain at a very high level: “61% of citizens feel that they have no influence over decisions affecting their local areas; only 42% of people are satisfied with the performance of their local council; only around a third of the population vote in local elections, and of those who do not vote 41% claim that it is because they do not think it will make a difference; and residents in the most deprived areas have the highest level of alienation from the political system”.⁷

With regard to this situation, the government sees it more and more important to really “empower” local people and to strengthen “local communities”, in other words: “to pass power into the hands of local communities so as to generate vibrant local democracy in every part of the country and give real control over local decisions and services to a wider pool of

⁵ LSPs are non-statutory organisations that are independent from, but accountable to the local council (there are ongoing discussions whether they should become statutory). Created in 2000, LSPs have the tasks to bring together local plans, partnerships and initiatives to provide a common forum for public service providers in order to match the local needs and priorities.

⁶ Department for Communities and Local Government, *An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success*, Communities and Local Government Publications, 2007a, p. 53

⁷ Department for Communities and Local Government, *Strong and prosperous communities. The Local Government White Paper*, 2006, p. 30-31.

active citizens”.⁸ “Communities” are groups of citizens which share a common interest, a common feature (language, ethnic background, etc.) or simply the same place of residence (a community can be used with regard to residents of a neighbourhood, a district, city or even the whole country or world). The idea of “community” is not new, but has come to the centre of attention during the 1960s in the framework of a strategy to fight urban poverty. Under New Labour, the concept of “community” has had a strong revival and is repeatedly referred to in speeches and policy documents. Partly this can be seen as expression of a similar focus on social urban renewal and the fight against poverty. Although previous governments had dealt with these issues, too, the newly elected The Blair government put a strong focus on them and launched two major regeneration programmes: the *New Deal for Communities*, and the *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal*.

Another reason for the constant reference to community has to be seen in its central place within the political programme or ideology of New Labour. It is part of the underlying values of the “Third way”⁹ and its social-liberal policy approach (moderation of market effects without recurring to an enhanced state role, revitalizing the economy through investments in education and infrastructure, strengthening families and civic engagement). The idea of community is “discursively central” to the New Labour project, because it distinguishes it from New Right and Old Labour ideas.¹⁰ This goal, which is the guiding principle of the “Third way” as overall approach of the government, becomes clear in the following statement by Tony Blair: “People don’t want an overbearing state. But they do not want to live in a social vacuum neither. It is in the search for this different, reconstructed, relationship between individual and society that ideas about ‘community’ are to be found. ‘Community’ implies a recognition of interdependence but not overweening government power. It accepts that we are better able to meet the forces of change and insecurity through working together”.¹¹

The notion of community, in this perspective, has both a factual and normative dimension: it points to the fact that people are part of different communities (the family, a neighbourhood or nation-state), and that they should be part of a community – or that it is important to *re-built* these communities. There is also a strong moral element in the community-concept as it is sustained by New Labour, pointing to the *responsibilities* and *duties* of citizens living and acting within a community. From this perspective, communities are constituted by “reasonable citizens” and should be places of consensus and mutual understanding rather than of power conflicts. Generally speaking, the notion of community “has become the central collective abstraction for new Labour, in a discourse whose organising concepts are: community, opportunity, responsibility, employability, and inclusion”.¹² This notion could, however, easily be integrated in the agenda of a conservative government, as as such it is not linked to any more radical or transformative conception of politics.

It is more recently that the Labour government has linked the idea of community to a more participatory approach of politics. “We want to shift power, influence and responsibility away

⁸ Department for Communities and Local Government, *Communities in Control. Real people, real power*, Communities and Local Government Publications, 2007b, p. 12. Very often, “empowerment” is normally used with regard to disadvantaged (“powerless”) groups of the population. In the most conflict-oriented interpretations, empowerment is seen as a means for the emancipation of suppressed groups and their access to power. In more consensual interpretations, it is rather seen as a top-down approach through which a government agency helps members of certain groups to develop a greater sense of pride of themselves and to be able to “manage” their lives, but without altering the existing power hierarchies

⁹ Blair Tony, *The Third Way*, 1998, p. 3

¹⁰ Levitas Ruth, *Community, Utopia and New Labour*, 2000, p. 188.

¹¹ Blair Tony, *Guardian*, 23 March 1995, cited in Levitas Ruth, 2000, cited above, p. 191.

¹² Levitas Ruth, 2000, cited above, p. 191.

from existing centres of power into the hands of communities and individual citizens. (...) A vibrant participatory democracy should strengthen our representative democracy”.¹³ Yet, as pointed out above, the British government is also pursuing a strong privatisation policy which heavily reduces the scope of citizen participation and of democratic control. This double emphasis on democratisation/participatory democracy *and* on privatisation/marketisation, constitutes a real contradiction. It becomes clear when, for example, a senior politician evokes in the same sentence the need to focus on “consumer choice and community involvement”.¹⁴ As such, this double emphasis is not specific for the UK, as most western democracies have engaged privatisation policies and increasingly focus on citizen engagement. What is, however, specific about the British context is that both ideas are pursued by the same government and pushed for very strongly.

Within this ambivalent context, the process of PB has been inserted into the government empowerment agenda. While the next section deals with the concrete steps of this development, I will come back to the future prospects of PB with regard to this particular context in the conclusion.

From Porto Alegre to the UK: how participatory budgeting became part of the government agenda

Like for most countries, the principle source of inspiration for PB in the UK was Brazil, and especially the cities of Porto Alegre and Recife. Interestingly, however, the driving force for implementing PB in the UK have not been left-wing political parties, but NGOs and people working within the broad domain of neighbourhood renewal and bottom-up community activism. One of the first “transmitters” of the idea of PB towards the UK was a small NGO based in Manchester, “Community Pride Initiative” (CPI), supported by the ecumenical charity “Church Action on Poverty”. Together with Oxfam’s UK Poverty Programme, CPI had developed the idea of a ‘learning exchange’ between the ‘North’ (Manchester, Salford) and the ‘South’ (Porto Alegre, Recife). In this framework, a member of a Brazilian NGO came to Salford and Manchester in May 2000 and introduced the idea of PB. This visit was followed three months later by a 10-day trip from three activists from Salford and Manchester to Porto Alegre and Recife in order to learn about the practice of PB.

After this visit, members of CPI (which since January 2006 has become the “PB Unit”) tried to develop and promote PB in the UK. Jez Hall, a former community activist in Manchester who had been in Porto Alegre for CPI, has played a particularly active role in this regard. CPI saw PB as a promising process which could provide a more systematic and comprehensive approach towards issues of community participation, improvement of service delivery and the “renewal” of deprived neighbourhoods – all issues that were, and are, dealt with under the Blair/Brown reform agendas. They also believed that PB could be perfectly combined with existing structures of community participation, and tried to explore this idea in the region of Greater Manchester, especially in the cities of Manchester and Salford. Whilst the local advances with regard to the development of PB were rather slow¹⁵, the idea started to spread throughout the country.

¹³ Department for Communities and Local Government, 2007b, cited above, p. 1.

¹⁴ Milburn Alan, *Active citizenship: the ten-year agenda*, 2004.

¹⁵ In Manchester, no real advances in terms of increased citizen engagement could be made. In Salford, it took several years until the first official PB pilot project was organised in 2007. The reasons are multiple. From the

In 2004, members of the neighbourhood renewal team in Bradford's "Local Strategic Partnership" initiated the first official PB pilot in the UK. One source of inspiration had been the book "Reclaim the State" (2003) by Hilary Wainwright, a left-wing activist, free-lance author and editor of the leftist journal "Red Pepper". The decision was taken to develop the existing process of small grant funds spent by deprived "communities" towards a PB process. In the following months and years, this PB process of grant spending including different (disadvantaged) areas of a city influenced many other pilot projects of PB in the UK. Especially helpful in this regard was the production of a short DVD about the process which gave a concrete idea of this process and could be easily distributed to interested people or downloaded via internet (many pilot areas have thereafter continued to produce a DVD of their experience). Other pilots, too, have constituted model examples for interested policy-makers, for example the various modalities of a PB process practiced in the city of Newcastle on issues of environment and young people.

The city of Newcastle is also one example where the idea of PB has first been introduced through European networks which exist around the topic. Council members of Newcastle had first heard of PB through the participation of their city in the network "Partecipando" of the EU programme URBACT which aims at a greater citizen participation in urban regeneration actions. It was thereafter that they visited Bradford after the first PB pilot project and then developed, supported by the PB Unit, their own project. Information about the situation in Europe has been regularly "fed" into the discussion circles in the UK through the PB Unit or other organisations, although this didn't have a direct impact on the development of a pilot. It rather appears that the existence of PB in other countries helped legitimizing the idea of PB: "PB has become more credible now that it is in Europe. Instead of it being something where before you always had to be a "true believer" to think that you could transfer something from Brazil to the UK. But now that it is in Europe, the potential audience and credibility for it had grown considerably" (D. Jones, now a freelance consultant working on PB and citizen engagement, and formerly of the Audit Commission, interview¹⁶)

Generally speaking, knowledge about the process of PB and pilot areas spread through numerous conferences and workshops, organized by the PB Unit or other organisations. An important step forward with regard to the organisation of conferences and pilot projects could be made with the grant funding of CPI by a government department, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister which is now called Communities and Local Government (CLG). The decision to fund PB pilot projects was supported by a former senior community advisor to the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit in CLG, Tricia Zipfel, who was working on community participation and empowerment programmes. Before coming to the CLG in 2001, she had been involved in the development of the "Oxfam UK Poverty Programme" and had made links with the Community Pride Initiative.

The idea of PB immediately "resonated" with her broader interests in different and radical participation methods in some countries from the global south, her political and professional engagement being rooted in the values of liberation theology. Liberation theology is a radical

part of Salford city council, there existed a certain sensitivity towards a Manchester-based organisation, as Salford has been traditionally "in the shadow" of her neighbouring and internationally known city. In addition, Salford has a quite long tradition of community participation and therefore might not have seen a real need for modifying the existing approaches. Finally, the initial proposals by Community Pride Initiative, which were quite close to the Porto Alegre model, appeared too radical for the civil servants and politicians involved with participation in Salford.

¹⁶ In terms of transfer processes it is interesting to underline that D. Jones, who has a background of trotskyst activism, is an old political friend of Hilary Wainwright.

interpretation of the Christian religion aiming to change power relations for the benefits of the poor (instead of helping them without changing the existing framework), and is also part of the ideological roots of the workers' party in Porto Alegre. In addition, the Brazilian process showed important similarities with her previous work on participation projects in UK deprived areas, for example Tenant Management Organisations. Since 1994, council tenants have had a statutory 'right to manage' their estates including a devolved budget to carry out the housing responsibilities (such as repairs, cleansing and allocations). "There are many parallels between the devolved budgets managed by TMOs and participatory budgeting. Because of my experience in developing TMOs, I immediately thought that participatory budgeting could provide a framework for extending resident involvement beyond housing to a much broader service delivery agenda" (Tricia Zipfel).

In order to facilitate the diffusion of and discussion about PB, she set up the "National Reference Group" in 2004 (in close cooperation with the PB Unit).¹⁷ The meetings, organised several times a year and chaired by a representative of CLG or another central government Department, bring together civil servants, representatives from interested NGO's, local government officers involved in pilot projects and members of the PB Unit. The discussions concern the pilot work and the potential links between PB and the overall policy agenda: "People would come along from Newcastle, from Bradford and the other places that were doing the piloting and they talked about what they had done. And we would compare [the pilots and learn] from the different places. But also we did discuss at the reference group of how to get more support for PB. So there was a certain degree of (...) planning and thinking about 'okay if things continue to work how can we get more publicity for it? What types of events can we organize?' (...) It's like a group of people who are committed to PB, using their interest and support for it and their positions within government to promote it" (Davy Jones, interview).

Through this networking process between committed people, as well as through the limited, but continuous reference to it in diverse policy documents (all documented and published by the PB Unit), the idea of PB continued to spread throughout the country. In other countries, like for example Germany, there have also been networks of people and organisation who have quite successfully promoted this process, although in the German case their perspectives on PB were strongly linked to Public Management reforms (at least before the reference to Porto Alegre came). In France, this aspect of pragmatic idea exchange, mutual learning and evaluation of existing pilot projects has been rather absent throughout the last years and, partly, explains the limited diffusion of PB in this country.

The final "breakthrough" of PB to the national policy agenda was led by Hazel Blears, Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. Whilst PB had been mentioned for the first time in the government White Paper "Strong and prosperous communities" in October 2006 (Tricia Zipfel having had a certain influence on this decision), Blears put the process in the centre of her political programme and developed a "national strategy" which foresees the introduction of PB in all local authorities (in England) by 2012. Participatory budgeting now "sits at the heart of the Government's drive to devolve more decisions on local services and facilities to local communities".¹⁸ As the citation makes clear, the introduction of

¹⁷ A less formal forum for exchanging ideas about PB (in form of case study reports, training days, informal networking) is the "Practitioner Group", initiated by the PB Unit at the beginning of 2004. Another powerful tool for the diffusion of PB is the electronic newsletter created by the PB Unit in January 2006 (see www.participatorybudgeting.org.uk).

¹⁸ Communities and Local Government, *Giving more people a say in local spending. Participatory Budgeting: a national strategy*, 2008, p. 11.

PB on the national agenda needs to be seen as part of the policy agenda moving towards the issues of “empowerment” and “community engagement”, as well as towards more local control, less centralism and less targets as described above. All of a sudden, PB with its focus on local spending and community engagement, “fits the policy agenda almost like a glove” (D. Jones, interview).

In addition, it certainly played a role that Blears’ constituency is the city of Salford. She was elected as Member of Parliament for Salford in May 1997 (she had been a city councillor between 1984 and 1992 and still lives there) and therefore must have been aware of the discussion process between the city council and Community Pride about PB. By the way, it might not be by mere coincidence that one of the first members of CPI, Ed Cox (who also comes from a background of church-related activism against poverty), is now her official policy advisor on questions of community participation.

Furthermore, Blears probably saw PB as a good possibility to establish a political profile for her new government position as Community Secretary, a position she occupies only since June 2007. Participatory budgeting presents the advantage of being a process with a certain “radical touch” and is therefore very suitable for creating or strengthening a political image. In the case of Blears, it is probably more appropriate to speak of the strengthening of her political image as she has for a long time been supportive of a more local and participatory approach. “All my life I’ve been a firm believer in local activism. My whole political approach, fashioned on the streets and estates of Salford, is anchored in localism and devolution”.¹⁹ Within the Labour government, she belongs to the adherents of the “New Localism”, an idea developed as counter-conception towards the centralistic tendencies of the first New Labour years (1997-2001). Two fundamental ideas of the New Localism are the strengthening of municipal autonomy and a greater neighbourhood focus based on the direct participation of local residents. It goes without saying that PB fits well into this political approach.

Towards a “fourth way”?

The development of the process of PB in the UK is unique in Europe. Nowhere else it has, until now, been integrated in the policy agenda of a national government. The main keys for the understanding of this development are the changing policy focus of the government, a continuous networking process of a group of committed people, and the fact that a state Minister chose to support this instrument. With regard to the networking process, two elements are of particular importance or interest. Important has been the fact that PB was not only developed and supported “on the ground” (by NGOs, local officers etc), but that some of its promoters had a position in national institutions and used their influence and power to promote PB at this level. The fact that both Tricia Zipfel from the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit and Davy Jones from the Audit Commission (who had organised the first national PB conference in the UK in 2003) were members of the National Reference Group was important in this regard, as it helped to convey PB more legitimacy within the government and to get a representative from the Treasury to the group (Gordon Brown was personally briefed about PB while he was Chancellor).

¹⁹ Communities and Local Government, *An Action Plan for Community Empowerment: Building on Success*, 2007, p. 4.

Of particular interest with regard to the networking process is the fact that it has brought together people with different political and ideological backgrounds, but who shared an overall interest in PB (as well as a very pragmatic approach with regard to its policy implementation). At least three different types of political and ideological backgrounds can be singled out: that of a local community activism based on ideas of capacity building and social capital, of a faith-based activism against poverty rooted in Liberation theology, and of radical leftist activities aiming at a greater of bottom-up participation of ordinary citizens and the transformation of power relations. Even though the motivations to act and overall worldviews might be very different in these perspectives, they all share the common goal of establishing a more just and a more participatory society. Or, as Tricia Zipfel explains the fact that she cooperates very well with assumed atheists: “We simply speak the same language”.

So far, the development of PB constitutes a real “success-story” for those who have been engaged with it over the last couple of years. The future development, however, remains open. What happens if such a process is implemented at a large scale? Following a very positive interpretation, the engaged dynamics towards a less centralised approach of the government and the greater focus on “empowerment” and bottom-up participation continue and mutually reinforce each other. Participatory budgeting will become the symbol of a real inclination of the Labour government towards the issues of more local control and the strengthening of (local) democracy, of a “fourth way” where the empowerment of citizens is integral part of the policy approach and where local authorities have a greater autonomy. For this development to happen, however, PB would probably need more personal support in the government and government departments, although the Home Office is already supporting the idea of PB. It would also require a fundamental change of administrative and political cultures, and such “paradigm changes” take a lot of time. With regard to this point, I would like to point out three tensions which play a role for the future development of PB.

First of all, there is a tension between the determination of central government to enhance local citizen involvement on the one hand, and the strengthening of the role and powers of local authorities on the other. How is it possible to concede municipalities a greater “leadership role” within their territory, and to try and implement a national policy agenda which local policy-makers have to implement? The current path of development in this regard seems to be to further develop the national participation agenda with the statutory (!) “Duty to involve” coming into force by April 2009²⁰ (and a new “duty to promote democracy”), but at the same time to leave space for local adaptations of how exactly implementing it. With regard to the willingness of local politicians and civil servants to involve the public, however, it will be decisive how much financial and political autonomy the central government finally concedes to local authorities. If already there is no scope for “traditional” local policy-making, local officers will not be willing to devolve more of the responsibilities to local people. And if they *have* to do so, this squeeze between pressures from below (citizens) and above (central government) will surely not strengthen local democracy as a whole and lead to poorly organised processes or purely formal PB “skeletons”.

Second, there exists a tension between the greater focus on the political and social “empowerment” of people (and PB is part of this agenda), and an approach anchored in Public Management ideas of “measuring” the concrete “outcomes” or the “efficiency and effectiveness” of a concrete policy practice. Is it really possible (and desirable) to “measure empowerment and make it more visible”²¹, such like one can measure the implementation of a

²⁰ The duty is set out in Part 7 (section 138) of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

²¹ Communities and Local Government, 2007, cited above, p. 43.

policy process? With regard to this administrative “heritage” of New Labour, it is “very healthy that PB in the UK started from a community perspective” (Jez Hall, member of the PB Unit). It is also positive that it is the PB Unit, which originally had brought the idea of PB from Porto Alegre to the UK, who has become the official advisor of the Department for Local Government, and not any consultancy firm. In order to underline or preserve some of PB fundamental ideas (such like local ownership, direct involvement, deliberation and empowerment), it has published a document about its “Values, Principles & Standards”. With regard to the future development of PB it will be decisive in how far these values will be maintained and implemented.

This aspect relates to the third tension between an originally bottom-up process and its top-down implementation strategy. In most European countries, the set up of PB has been decided by local officers and did not emerge from bottom-up processes like in Porto Alegre. The decision to make the introduction of PB quasi a requirement for local authorities constitutes a step further in this regard. And it implies the risk that PB loses its political content and becomes no more than a “tool” which local governments can implement. In this regard, the rather non-political approach towards PB which has prevailed until now, with its consensual focus on “community involvement”, might constitute a disadvantage. “The general culture of participation in the UK facilitates this ‘technological’ means-to-an-end, non political presentation of PB. (...) [T]he new participatory space is increasingly a depoliticised space, which ‘privatises’ overtly political voices”.²² That such a tendency exists is underlined by the fact that Hazel Blears has regularly referred to the idea of “community kitty” instead of “participatory budgeting”. A “kitty” usually relates to a small amount of money and implies a one-off fund to spend – and no transformation at all of the existing institutional framework of representative democracy. A “kitty” would very well fit into the French approach of “proximity democracy” where the participation of citizens remains confined to the micro-local level. Until now, several pilot projects in the UK have had such a dimension of “kitty-spending”: they implied small amounts of money taken from national policy programs (like neighbourhood renewal money) rather than municipal budgets; participation was confined to a very local level (often one or several city areas) and processes did not imply a more general discussion about city-wide priorities or general planning issues.²³

For the supporters of PB, however, this model of local grant spending is seen as a way to “get things started”, to create an awareness for issues of local spending, service delivery and democracy, and not as the final step of development. And there do already exist interesting pilot processes which go beyond the “community kitty”-approach and imply the use of mainstream funds, are based upon a transversal approach across the city or a pluri-annual planning; in addition, interesting pilots have been conducted with regard to the participation of young people (for example in Newcastle) and ethnic minorities (Bradford). Generally speaking, the discussion about PB revolves around a large variety of possible modalities: 1) within local authorities, a) either as grant-spending process (with money from national programmes or mainstream funds) or as budget consultation around mainstream budget; b) as process organised by the council, by a neighbourhood manager or community committee within a particular area or by a Local Strategic Partnership; 2) within public agencies or

²² Blakey Heather, *Radical innovations or technical fix? Participatory budgeting in Bradford: how Latin American participatory traditions are reinterpreted in the British context*, 2007, p. 12.

²³ Following to the definition developed in (Sintomer Yves, Herzberg Carsten, Röcke Anja, *Les budgets participatifs en Europe*, cited above), a PB process must be located at a city-level or a district with own political and administrative competences – otherwise it is not fundamentally different from other existing participation instruments like neighbourhood funds. Several pilots in the UK, which in the local context are considered as “PB” because “normal” citizens can decide about a pot of money, would not “fulfill” this definition, developed in the framework of a European comparative research project.

government departments; in the Home Office, for example, PB could be integrated into a relatively recent focus on a greater “community participation” in matters of local policing and safety priorities. There also exist plans to introduce PB within the National Health Service which has recently strengthened and clarified the existing duties to involve and consult people in the planning of the provision of health services. Finally, the Department for Children Schools and the Family constitutes a particularly interesting case because of its strategy that by 2018, young people should be involved in the spending of 25 per cent of the money directed towards them. Members of these institutions already participate in the National Reference group which, together with the PB Unit, stands for a further development and continuous evaluation of existing practices.

The three (or more) tensions which exist with regard to the way how PB has been set up in the particular context of the UK, as well as the variety of existing or planned processes underline the complexity of the current situation. Will the community-kitty approach become the dominant approach, or will there rather be a great variety of, more or less far-reaching, processes? Will PB become a specific, more inclusive “spending modality” of public funds but without altering the existing power relations and institutional hierarchies, or will this process, together with an ongoing strengthening of municipal powers, lead to a real “revival” of local democracy (a “fourth way”)? The future is open. What seems to be sure, however, is that a process has started which will hardly be reversible. With regard to the possibility of a national government change, it is likely that PB would also be sustained by a conservative government, although probably not with the same intensity and maybe not linked to the rhetoric (and practice?) of a “participatory democracy”. In addition, a conservative government might be more akin towards the community kitty approach, instead of more far-reaching models.

Generally speaking, the modalities of the future development will depend on the willingness of central government to pursue its policy of less centralism and “empowerment”, on the selection of “best practice” models within the Government which will spread throughout the country, on the existence of local policy-makers and residents who are convinced of the process and try to set up new and innovative practices. In any case, there exists a lot of scope for local experimentation and people interested in PB should keep an eye on the further developments in the UK as it promises to be interesting.

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