

Participatory Budgets in Europe

Following the successful experiences in Porto Alegre and in other Latin American cities; participatory budgeting emerged in Europe. In the last 5 years the number of PB initiatives increased from 12 to 150. There are currently 1000 cities in the world where some form of participatory budgeting can be found; from small towns with around 2000 people to mega-cities such as Sao Paulo or Mexico City.

Currently there is no single model of PB. The diverse challenges brought about by neoliberalism have created very complex social demands which have to be met at the local level. PB initiatives, thus, need to fit the specificities of the community such as government structures and political environments. As a result participatory budgeting is very context specific. The only condition to its success is that it is able to become a space where all citizens have equal access to the decision making process.

The majority of PB initiatives in Europe are supported by left wing parties. They are often pilot projects either limited to a city district or a specific issue. Consequently they are more a sectorial policy than a locus for city wide policies. In most cases PB projects have been initiated by government institutions unlike the bottom up PB processes in Porto Alegre. Some of the most common challenges facing PB projects in Europe could be summed up as (1) progressive cuts in government spending at the local level; (2) reaching out to the most excluded groups in the communities and (3) motivating residents to participate.

Participants in most PB initiatives in Europe come from the same similar segments of society mostly from middle class and/ or middle aged groups. Since most European cities are very multicultural it is imperative that minority groups are included in the process. Translating materials to different languages, training staff in equal opportunities and developing outreach strategies are some of the ways to address this issue. However they incur costs which need to be considered at the planning stage of PB projects. Many PB initiatives, such as the UK and Spain, have created a social criterion which gives additional weight to projects focusing on underprivileged areas or groups. In addition positive discrimination is often used when representatives have to be elected to participate in PB processes, for example, in Seville at least a third of delegates have to belong to minority groups and 50% have to be women.

In order to involve participants from different age groups many countries have resorted to the internet. In Modena the PB assemblies were streamed through the web and residents could vote and send messages on line. In Jun (Granada) the government provided every family with a computer and training (Jun has a population of only 2800) so residents could participate in the budget sessions on line. Spain, Germany and Portugal have created PB schools or children's PB in order to engage kids and educate them about citizenship.

The different experiences with their successes and challenges offer some insight into the workings of participatory budgeting in Europe. The models suit specific contexts but always highlight ways to promote the collaboration between citizens and government in order to improve the quality of life in their communities.

Case Studies

The French Experience

The reference for the French PB experience is the Porto Alegre model. Participatory budgeting has been promoted by the left as an attempt to engage citizens in politics again and increase support for the party. There are 4 main objectives to the French PB: (1) promote local governance; (2) stimulate community cohesion by easing conflicting between different social groups; (3) promote participatory democracy by involving citizens in the decision making process and (4) improving the dialogue between elected representatives and citizens. The PB in France has focused on creating open assemblies in which any citizens can take part. The assemblies can decide on some aspects of the district budget; however at the municipal budget level citizens are only consulted.

The most far reaching experience in France is the participatory budgeting in Morsang-sur-Orge. This municipality is a middle class suburban city with a population of around 19500. In 1998 the administration created 8 neighbourhood councils open to all residents. Elected representatives also participate in order to discuss proposals with the community but they do not have voting rights. Each council was allocated " 60000 for local projects and they have full autonomy to decide how these resources are spent. Together the councils control 20% of the city's investment budget. In 2002 the municipality expanded popular participation by introducing 5 thematic workshops where residents and politicians meet to discuss projects for the municipal budget. The results are then presented to the municipal council.

The German Experience

The German experiments with PB have lasted the longest in Europe and are supported by different political parties. They were borne out of the need to politically engage citizens again, as electoral abstention started to raise questions about the legitimacy and effectiveness of representative democracy. The importance of popular participation has been widely accepted as a way to improve public administration and increase transparency. However this movement has often been translated into citizens working as volunteers in the government. In Germany most PB initiatives have focused on providing information to residents about the city's budget by making the revenues and

expenditures public. PB projects usually do not include participatory decision making processes. The reference model for these projects comes from the Christchurch (New Zealand) experience. The situation changed somewhat after a delegate from the PB in Porto Alegre together with a representative of the association Solidariedade went on a tour to promote participatory budgeting. Both government and third sector became interested in the process and PB projects started to be implemented all over Germany. In most cases, however they focus on consultation.

The German PB processes are usually composed of 3 stages: (1) citizens receive information about the budget focusing on revenues and expenditures; (2) Residents are consulted in public assemblies about priorities and (3) public officials report on the final version of the budget approved by the council. One example of this model is the city of Esslingen. The government set up in 2003 internet centres where residents could also receive computer training. The administration used this space to promote on line discussions on the city's budget. Priorities were identified during the debates and a moderator linked each one of them to the corresponding department in the council.

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