



Canoas: A Government of, by and for the People

Posted on April 25, 2016 by Ruth Needleman

This is the first article in a series on Canoas, Brazil and its experiment with radical democracy.

Here in the states, we know what it means to see our democratic rights attacked. But do we have a vision of what an expansion of democracy and popular participation in government might look like?

Oakland, New York, Minneapolis, among others, are exploring the possibility of “participatory budgeting,” an initiative to shift decision-making on development projects from the government to the community, and increase citizen engagement. In order to better understand the process, delegations from these cities visited Canoas, an industrial city of 350,000 in Southern Brazil. What they discovered there was a lot more than one innovative program, but a “new system of participatory government.”

Beginning in 2009, with the election of a radical Workers’ Party candidate, Jairo Jorge, for Mayor, Canoas began a process of transformation, opening new possibilities for people to learn and practice self-government. Based on 4 principles, this new system allows for

individuals as well as organizations to intervene and shape public policy and influence economic development.

What are the principles underlying this new “system”?

- To encourage participation and organization, collectively-developed ideas get priority over individual or corporate preferences.
- To meet the challenges of global neoliberalism and new political realities, the government must take risks and engage in “radical innovation.”
- To bridge the gap between government and the people, the government has to support multiple vehicles for popular participation, individual as well as collective.
- To rebuild confidence and bring government into the communities, leaders have to peel away privileges of authority and work on an equal basis with residents. (“Remove the sanctity of authority”)

Is it working? First off, the United Nations has already awarded Canoas first prize in participatory government. Second, the mayor was re-elected in 2013 with 73% of the vote, an unheard of majority in a country with a score of political parties. In Brazil, by the way, it is mandatory for every citizen to vote.

Jairo Jorge, the Workers’ Party mayor of Canoas, has to be one of the most accessible mayors in the world! Every Saturday morning, he accompanies all departments of his government to a different neighborhood. Armed with computers and staff, the city meets with as many people as want to come to settle problems, express criticism or suggestions, or just talk with the mayor. This is called: “City Government in the Streets.” Monday mornings at 6am Mayor Jorge sits at a different train station to meet with workers. And every Saturday afternoon, in a virtual re-creation of the Greek agora or central square, Jorge goes online to chat with people.



“City Government in the Street” meets every Saturday in a different neighborhood.

The city government not only listens but is committed to act on what is learned. Mayor Jorge considers criticisms and even denunciations as a source of creative innovation, not a challenge to his government.

A long-time journalist and leftist, Mayor Jorge understands that individual voices could never transform a political system. That’s why Canoas favors, nourishes and prioritizes the needs of base organizations and poor communities. Every community has associations; every vulnerable group in the city has organization. Every worker in any workplace can be a union member.

The existence of an organization, as we know, is no guarantee that people will participate. In Canoas there are significant rewards for participation, from new housing to training and education programs.

Canoas is divided into 4 quadrants to foster accessibility, activism, and decision-making. In 2011, the City organized a

year-long Congress of the People, in which over 6000 residents participated as individuals and as organizations in setting sustainable development priorities for the next ten years.

For the “Participatory Budgeting,” the quadrants are divided into micro-districts, to allow for more participation in the neighborhoods. Every micro-district gets representation on a Counsel and has two projects approved. The poorer the community, the smaller the district. The wealthier communities have much larger districts, so that more funding is channeled into the areas most in need.



“City Government in the Street” involves a dialog close up with city officials

While Austerity has been tearing Europe apart, Brazil and, above all, Canoas were implementing social programs that lifted 46% of the poorest out of a state of misery. Housing, food, education, health care and job opportunities go first to the most vulnerable populations: African descendants, the unemployed, and those earning minimum wages.

For two weeks in January 2016, I accompanied the Secretary of Social Development in Canoas, Mara Eunice Wolf, to different neighborhoods, to see projects in development, attend union forums, community associations, and learn first-hand how this “new system of democratic government” is working. Since I visited Canoas in January of 2014—and 4 times previously before the election of Mayor Jorge—I have been able to assess the progress. The transformation is visible and exciting.



Ruth joins the mayor and his wife in the streets at the 2016 World Social Forum.

Participation in events, forums, meetings and even elections is higher in Canoas than in

most other cities. Some of the poorest people with the least education have become outspoken and confident face-to-face with government officials. Squatters who were living under high-tension wires, now have small homes with utilities. African descendants in cardboard one-room shacks, excluded from local schools and hospitals, have 2-bedroom homes and priority access to education, training and health care.

The secret to Canoas' success is a continual emphasis on political/economic and ideological education in grass-roots organizations to develop leadership and to unmask neoliberal policies and thinking (what Paulo Freire called "conscientizacao," the development of critical consciousness through reflection and analysis of experiences), the fostering and strengthening of base organizations, and the radical political commitment of the city government. Mayor Jairo Jorge—known by everyone as Jairo—explains this orientation in a new book called "Radicalizing Democracy."

The great challenge of the twenty-first century, especially for progressives around the world, is to radicalize democracy. To achieve this, it has to be the responsibility of those in office to invest in the creation and dissemination of democratic vehicles/mechanism, that can awaken citizens and motivate them to play a central role contributing to local self-governance.But it is not sufficient to create opportunities. Above all, it is necessary to stimulate critical and independent thinking that transforms every man and woman into protagonists in shaping their own lives and the life of their city, to act as subjects and not objects of politics. (*Radicalizar*, 40)

What Mayor Jairo Jorge emphasizes is that the answers to defeating neo-liberalism and achieving sustainable development can only be developed through a collective process of knowledge-creation based on people's own experiences. He calls this "collective intelligence."

The City has invited me to return this June with a delegation to learn about how a better world is already under construction. For more information:

Ruth Needleman,

rneedle@iun.edu

Author



Ruth Needleman