

Participatory Budgeting: A School for Citizenship

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Jockeying to get funds for a neighborhood playground or clinic is nothing new. But in the absence of an organized procedure, cities tend to respond to the loudest and most organized groups, often a community where people have education, steady jobs and time to lobby.

Participatory Budgeting (Orcamento Participativo OP), launched 25 years ago in the City of Porto Alegre, in Southern Brazil, was designed to put all neighborhoods on an equal footing, with equal access and opportunity. In addition, the goal was to deepen democracy by giving residents not just voice but decision-making power.

Even though city budgets struggle—desperately these days—to cover basic necessities, even a 1% or smaller set-aside is sufficient to start the process. Brazil highlighted this local innovation at its first World Social Forum 15 years ago in Porto Alegre, and since that time, cities around the world have been experimenting with popular participation in budget decisions on community projects.

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Participatory Budgeting has been the centerpiece for building participatory democracy under the leadership of the Workers' Party (PT) in Brazil, from 2003 to the present. But when the Workers' Party lost the citywide elections in Porto Alegre in 2004, the Participatory Budgeting process lost local government support and became dysfunctional.

In Canoas, the neighboring industrial city, the Participatory Budget was not introduced until 2009 with the election of the Workers' Party's mayor, Jairo Jorge. Many of the original innovators became instrumental in redesigning the process in ways to make it sustainable. Still a centerpiece, Participatory Budgeting is only one piece of what the City calls a new system of participatory government. By adding new and complementary participatory pathways and programs, Canoas created a synergy that boosted all participation. In addition, the process itself has been refined, so that it cannot easily be dismantled from the top down.

In this way, the Canoas government has systematically raised the expectations of residents and has begun to erode the widespread lack of trust in government among people. For the Mayor, Jairo Jorge, changing the mindset of people, lifting them out of hopelessness, showing them change is possible, is the main challenge. "The biggest challenge facing popular or left governments," he wrote, "is the distrust and disillusionment that people feel about politicians and government."

To close the distance between government and neighborhoods, Canoas has made it a foundational principle to "de-sanctify authority," eliminating pedestals and making it easier for people to make demands of government. The City encourages people to voice their demands in regularly-held plenaries on social services, in the "City Government in the Streets," "the Mayor at the Train Stop," for example, and then reports on the number of demands met, suggestions taken, holding itself publically accountable.

On a practical level, the leadership divided the city into quadrants to increase access and opportunities to city programs. For the OP, however, they further divided the area into what they call 15 "micro-regions." Each micro-region runs its own OP process, and can choose 2 projects for its community and 1 for the city as a whole.

The micro-regions each receive about one million *reais* ($250,000), and have to limit the cost of each project to half of that. Of course projects can be developed over a number of years, and local commissions can also apply for state or federal

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funds.

Since 2009, the people of Canoas have selected 117 projects, involving 86,000 residents, which amounts to 10% of the voting public. That is the highest OP participation rate in all of Brazil.

How big is a micro-region? That depends on how poor or wealthy the community is. The wealthier better-served neighborhoods form relatively large micro-regions, while the poorest areas are divided into numerous micro-regions so that overall the greater the need, the larger the number of projects, even though each micro-region still gets only two. In this way organized money or gentrified neighborhoods do NOT have an advantage. The majority of projects will be constructed in the poorest areas.

The process begins with an open assembly to learn about the projects already built and those under construction. The Mayor attends each one, to answer questions about what did or did not happen. Mayor Jorge gives a presentation designed to educate participants on budgetary issues. Anyone can bring up potential projects and will then have to explain and defend its overall importance. The assembly will then vote to prioritize the suggestions.

The top five will go through additional screening and discussion, giving participants a chance to re-organize and work in groups around their top choice. This step collectivizes the work, as people find allies and supporters, re-negotiate terms, if needed, and together each group will make their presentation. In subsequent gatherings they will choose representatives to accompany the proposals through to completion.



City Government in the Street" meets every Saturday in a different

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neighborhood.

Not everyone can attend weeknight assemblies and meetings, but everyone has a stake in the outcome. Once the viability of the projects is established, relative costs, materials, environmental issues etc., the top choices will go to a popular vote in the micro-region. All elections and voting in Brazil take place on Sundays. For elections, it is a national holiday, because voting is obligatory. Whichever group has the most support, goes door-to-door, educates neighbors will come out on top.

The groups get technical support in planning and costing out their projects, and an on-going education in government budgeting. With each year, the number of “seasoned” participants grows, and as the projects get built, greater interest and credibility in the process grow as well. The process creates engagement, awareness, collectivity and trust.

Canoas is an industrial city, built on refineries and industrial processing of oil, gas and steel. Emphasis is placed on environmental issues and justice to make sure that the poorest do not have to survive in the most polluted areas. Apart from the Participatory Budgeting, for example, it is a citywide priority to move any land occupation or settlement located near environmental dangers to safer areas with added city and state funding to provide housing.

Without these other social programs and democratic vehicles for participation, the Budgeting alone could be too small to win the trust and support of the people. This is why in Canoas education plays a central role in awakening and mobilizing the people.

It is not just any education, not just vocational training nor literacy. It is called “Citizenship Education,” and grew out of revolutionary experiments in education for transformation, originally initiated by educator and philosopher Paulo Freire. The education fosters confidence, broader perspectives, critical thinking and a validation of the values of fairness, justice and equality.

Numerous cities around the world already practice or have tried participatory budgeting, but without the framework of a new participatory system and new forms of education, it is very hard to implement and sustain.

At the recent World Social Forum in January 2016 in Porto Alegre, Brazil, two major panels focused on the importance of promoting the direct participation of urban

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residents in government decision-making. Mayor Jairo Jorge recently published a book exhorting the left, in particular, but all progressives, to *Radicalizar a Democracia:* “We must engage citizens increasingly in . . . governments, giving them decision-making power over investments, public policies and strategic development projects at the city, state and national levels.”

Radicalizing democracy is the Workers’ Party answer to neo-liberal policies and growing inequalities.

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