



Participatory budgets in Europe

Between efficiency and growing local democracy



by Giovanni Allegretti & Carsten Herzberg

TRANSNATIONAL INSTITUTE
and the Centre for Democratic Policy-Making

TNI BRIEFING SERIES
No 2004/5

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Amsterdam, October 2004

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Introduction

Over the last 6 years, the diffusion of decentralised co-operation practices among local administrations, and the efforts of the movement that says 'Another World is Possible' to spread awareness of some important experiences in the democratisation of urban management in Latin American cities, have seen the birth of the first experiences of participatory budgets in Europe. These are experiments to involve citizens in the construction of spending priorities for the local administrations through the organisation of annual cycles of public meetings (open but regulated) and other instruments for supporting the gradual improvement of how choices to be inserted in planning documents (Budget Plans and Public Works and Services Plans) are made.

Over the last 15 years – especially following the fame acquired by experiences such as that of the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre – many international institutions (primarily UNDP, Habitat and the World Bank) have contributed to spreading awareness about the most significant Latin American experiences. The European Union has even funded exchange and emulation projects, launching a Network (No. 9 of the URB-AL co-operation Programme) entirely dedicated to the issue of Participatory Budgets. The mutual learning during the programmes of dialogue and co operation between cities was the main factor that allowed *'the return of the caravels'*. That is, the 'disembarkation' and the taking root in European soil of creative innovations born from urban management in cities in the Global South, which themselves had been stimulated by a 'virtuous rethinking' of land management models often borrowed from Old World Countries during and after periods of colonisation.

These Latin American practices have centred on 'urban conflict' rather than on the search for 'social peace', interpreting urban conflict as a source of creative solutions, capable of drawing on the wealth of the different stratifications in cities without mortifying them through homogenising approaches. In this way, they have tried to put different sectors of society into dialogue with each other, and to involve 'antagonistic' movements in the experimentation with innovative management policies for the transformation of land use. This was to ensure that, along with the offer of opening up institutional powers to joint decision making with residents, enough real responsibility would be taken by the different strata of society in the experimentation with social, economic and environmental policies centred on sustainability. This also avoided the re-emergence of that aspect of 'asymmetry' that characterises 'vertical subsidiarity' in relations between local institutions and civil society, that is reciprocal and complementary relations among local authorities, provinces, regions, states and supranational institutions.

With the globalisation of problems usually comes a corresponding 'localisation of solutions'. With the decentralisation of responsibilities, however, there is rarely a parallel decentralisation of resources and decision-making powers to deal with them. The result is a resort to outsourcing. Externalisation of social responsibilities becomes the rule; and decisions on land-use changes and public policies are rarely shared with civil society. Mechanisms of privatisation tend, in fact, to leave larger and larger margins of power to those that end up managing 'common assets', once 'public assets' in both ownership and management terms.

Many examples of Participatory Budgets have pointed to an inversion of the mechanism: the Local Authorities make the first move, offering citizens spaces for government and decision-making and,



in exchange, try to obtain the commitment of residents and their organisations to implement innovative policies centred on new forms of responsibility for the common 'assets' of an area.

Two main reflections underpinned this approach, that gave life to a real urban political movement, centred around the World Local Authorities Forum for Social Inclusion:

- The first is that the objective of sustainability is not reached only through actions aimed at realising its principles (reduction of the ecological footprint, land saving, precautionary principle, energy saving, closure of natural cycles, protection of biodiversity and socio-diversity, etc.), but requires citizens to consciously adhere to those principles as many actions require a definite change of culture and lifestyle;

- The second concerns 'good governance'. Many South American states find themselves subject to the impositions of structural adjustment, and cities are compelled to adopt decentralised transparency and reorganisation procedures aimed at the attainment of financial accountability, stability and credibility. 'Good governance', however, has not been 'pivotal' to the practices of Participatory Budgets. It has not

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been 'the end' of the adoption of participatory processes. In most cases, it has been a means by which to spread a culture of democratic alternatives to those traditional forms of 'governance' that the sociologist Boaventura. de Sousa Santos considers responsible for forms of democracy that are ever less 'intensive' and as posing serious threats to the 'demo-diversity' of the planet.

This briefing shall try to examine some features of the rooting of Participatory Budget practices in Europe, concentrating on a few countries marked by an even greater number of urban experiments. The analysis developed here, which draws on the preliminary evidence of ongoing research at the TNI in Amsterdam¹, can only be a work in progress, given that in Europe we are often in a non-advanced phase of dynamic experiments subject to rapid and often consistent changes. We shall also try to offer a contribution to answer the following question:

"What lessons for building liveable cities and communities in the South, and vice versa can be learnt from historical and contemporary processes of social mixing and identity formation in the cities of Europe?"²

¹ See the Working Paper *"Between efficiency and local democracy growth: the challenge of Participatory Budgets addresses the European context"* (TNI, 2004) by Giovanni Allegretti and Carsten Herzberg commissioned by the Transnational Institute of Amsterdam and published on the TNI website in Italian. This constitutes the 'core' of a more detailed book, to be published in January 2005 by EDIESSE, whose title is: *"Bilanci Partecipativi in Europa. Nuove demopratiche nel vecchio continente"*. It contains also a description of other countries' experiences (like Belgium, Portugal and a more detailed paragraph about recent attention to PB's issue in the eastern Europe).

² A question posed by the Network-Association of European Researchers on Urbanisation in the South in its call for papers for its annual conference 2004.

The Participatory Budget in a panorama of ongoing transformation

In a framework of 'asymmetrical subsidiarity', increasingly marked by the phenomena of the growth and articulation of the role and structure of cities, the tendential growth of decision-making tends to ally itself naturally with the creation of space for the direct participation of citizens in decision-making. Involving citizens in discussion about choices is a consequence of the crisis of thought and of sole rationality provoked by neo-liberal hegemony ('TINA' – there is no alternative). Citizen involvement is necessary to provide differentiated answers to the growing complexity of social demands, to cope with the need for continuous cuts in public investment (especially in the most 'sensitive' areas of intervention), and to rebuild the trust of citizens in politics.

A factor motivating the opening up of local government towards participative forms is also the push given by the 'privatistic' conceptions of the New Public Management, that have tended to favour a new consideration of the role of citizens-customers-consumers, especially in relation to the use of monopolistic services where the 'exit' option (in other words going elsewhere) is not practicable.

This 'instrumental' and 'reductionist' interpretation of participation does not necessarily support a role for residents in the final decision-making. It is often an attempt to build - on single issues – only that consensus required to compensate for ever more fragile electoral legitimacy, to temper protests and conflicts arising from 'top-down' options for local areas, and to cover the failure of the state and market to respond to the vital needs of a significant proportion of citizens, especially in peripheral or developing countries.

It is precisely in these countries that practices have begun to develop that can broaden, restructure and enrich the experiences with simple consultation of citizens, already in use in some European cities since the '70s. The multiplicity of channels through which the experiments have received attention on the old continent has resulted in many different perceptions of the experiences in different countries. This multiplicity is also responsible for the different 'prevalences' (on political or technical issues, communication mechanisms, aspects of institutional modernisation or those linked to the ability to fight social exclusion) that the first critical emulations in Europe have demonstrated.

In Europe, the issue of Participatory Budgets in particular has gained a central place in discussions on decentralisation, governance and the reform of relations between local contexts and 'global flows'. It has also allowed us to rediscover, develop and enrich experiences developed organically in different parts of Europe, creating dialogue among them and sometimes 'hybridising them' constructively by drawing on the policies and management practices tested in countries of the Global South.

To date, there is no universal way of describing 'participatory budgets'. There are no models, only different families of experiments. Participatory budgeting's potential lies in its capacity to create a 'space' governed by regulations, which protects equal access by every citizen to decision-making on spending priorities in a local authority, rather than reserving access only for the strongest social-economic organisations, as was the case with traditional forms of 'planning' and 'negotiation' applied in many countries since the Second World War.



From this viewpoint, the Participatory Budget can become 'the place' to rebuild - over time and collectively - the concept of 'common assets', transforming social tensions into 'shared projects', within spaces self-managed by civil society but marked by healthy dialogue with the institutions concerned. Amongst the objectives of the Participatory Budget (on its own or through associations) may be the ethical development of the institutions, and an increase in the civic spirit of residents and their ability to maturely interpret the complexity of the local area. At the same time, it may seek to address the distortions generated by the market society, extend 'rights to the city' to all those who inhabit it and to spread forms of 'negotiated solidarity' (Abers, 2000) that allow for the fair redistribution of public resources in favour of the most culturally, socially and economically disadvantaged categories.

The French Experience

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The French republican tradition has always been dominated by the idea that elected members represent the general will of the citizens in the best possible way. This idea, entrenched at the highest levels of politics, has informed the official policy on "proximity democracy". In 2002, the "Vaillant" Law obliged the creation of District Councils in all cities with over 80,000 inhabitants. In the majority of cases, their role is merely advisory and links them closely to city institutions. They are not considered autonomous spaces for the self-organisation of residents. Furthermore, they deal with micro-local issues concerning the management of transport, housing, urban planning, safety, use of public spaces, etc. In some places, 'district portfolios' have introduced more 'solid', though not more radical, forms of joint management at the micro-local scale. Citizens, gathered in open assemblies or through meetings of representatives, may decide upon apportioning of money (usually marginal amounts and often subject to the careful consideration of the District Councils) to infrastructural investments or for specific local projects.

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In this context, the Participatory Budget has presented itself as a strong political-ideological project promoted by some parties of the parliamentary Left as part of an effort to halt the local haemorrhaging of votes through a concrete struggle against traditional 'centralism'. The point of reference is Porto Alegre that, in times of neo-liberalism, has become the symbol of a possible alternative way to govern a place. Its experience has spread through a series of movements and associations in the social network, particularly the international network *Démocratiser Radicalement la Démocratie*, coordinated from France.

In brief, the French cases tend to have three general objectives:

- The enhancement of public management and 'local governance', through the integration of daily experiences of local politics and the promotion of horizontal links between social actors.

- The transformation of social relations. Participatory Budgets often find especially fertile ground in cities that have a concentration of the most disadvantaged social strata (particularly in the metropolitan area of Paris). The objective of social dialogue here is to create consensus and, at the same time, to strengthen conviviality, solidarity and to defuse social tensions through constructive use of 'conflict'.
- The third objective refers directly to participatory democracy, underlining the difference between 'participatory democracy' and the simpler traditional republican concept of 'proximity politics'. What tends to be lacking in the latter is recognition of the role of participating residents as joint decision-makers.

Where the Participatory Budget refers to the experience of Porto Alegre, participation often tends to be directed towards investments in the urban area, discussed during local assemblies held in the various districts and in the complementary theme meetings held on issues of transport, social issues, education, the environment, etc. Another trait linking the different French experiences is the fact that participation is founded mostly on the creation of open assemblies. At the micro-local level, citizens may make some decisions about district funds, but at the higher level, municipal budget discussions with citizens are only consultative. Official acceptance of the citizens' recommendations depends, above all, on political will.

In Saint Denis (pop. 85,000) since 2001, there have been theme meetings concerning the main planks of strategic development and some 'budget workshops' where delegated citizens articulate the proposals of 14 districts and examine them in depth. When it is time to vote on the budget at the City Council, the results of the Participatory Budget are presented.

In Bobigny (pop. 45,000) since 2002, there have been efforts to integrate the Participatory Budget into a widespread system of participation, centred on the cycle of public meetings called "*Let's talk frankly*". Six Citizens' Initiative Committees lump the districts together, and have the right of veto at the City Council. For any issues relating to resources and public responsibilities, they can also present their own projects. For evaluations of the feasibility of realising the proposals of residents, there are different routes of participation. The most important is an Observation Post for Commitments through which the administration gives direct voice to civil society organisations.

The experience of Morsang-sur-Orge (pop. 19,500) is the most radical to date. It took shape in 1998 with the creation of the 'District portfolios'. In 2001, five citizen workshops were set up to tackle budget issues. Meetings are open to all residents and decisions are made by all present. Elected councillors participate in the assemblies, playing the role of mediator between the citizens and the administration, though they do not have voting rights in the assemblies. Before the adoption of the budget by the City Council, the entire population is consulted on the proposals emerging from the workshops.

A particular experience shows that the Participatory Budget does not have to be the solve reserve of local authorities, but is an idea and a strength that can be applied in different situations. OPAC in Poitiers is a public agency that manages all social buildings (7500 lodgings). Since 2002, the organisation has been demanding that tenants decide part of the investment projects (17%). There are



also six Local Planning Councils made up of an equal number of agency members and tenants.

Although the dialogue between institutions of delegated democracy and forums of direct democracy is sometimes difficult, the Participatory Budget structures in France allow forms of deliberation in which decision-making power is shared between citizens and the municipality. This is thanks to representative bodies that bring together delegated participants to examine and detail requests and arguments that had been tabled during larger assemblies. Over time, in cities like Bobigny and Morsang-sur-Orge, some independent Observation Posts have been set up to imitate the example of similar such structures that have been developing in Cameroon for a few years now. These guarantee increased autonomy for citizens in controlling the efforts of the institutions to carry out residents' proposals. They can follow the entire process of approval and realisation, reporting and explaining any delays through appropriate independent media.

In France, some administrations guarantee the opening up of organisational structures to citizen participation. Sometimes, citizens may even be consulted on the setting up of the rules governing the participatory process itself.

The point of reference is Porto Alegre that, in times of neo-liberalism, has become the symbol of a possible alternative way to govern a place.

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One of the biggest problems, however, is the small number of participants involved. It has also not been possible to profit from citizen participation in debates on the Council budget as a whole, largely due to a lack of definition of the function of their contribution, particularly in relation to the entire urban territory. Another problem has to do with unclear procedures for prioritisation of proposals, which weakens the credibility of the process.

The German Experience

The most experiments with Participatory Budgets in Europe to date have taken place in Germany - between fifteen and twenty, according to the interpretation of Participatory Budgeting being worked with here. It is, furthermore, the place where experiments have lasted the longest and where there are the most wide-ranging political coalitions promoting them.

The context in which the first experiences took root was characterised particularly by the progressive loss of social legitimacy by political parties, afflicted by dropping membership and the growth of electoral abstention. Reunification of Germany pushed many of the sixteen *Länder* (regional government) to open up the regulatory framework to more active involvement by residents in political decision-making. The various 'Constitutions of the Councils' (*Süddeutsche Ratsverfassung*) made it possible to directly elect mayors in most municipalities. The 'party list' system was also done away with in most municipalities to allow voters to express preferences for particular candidates. The most important constitutional innovation was to introduce 'popular initiative' laws (*Bürgerbegehren*), followed by the introduction of the right to referenda (*Bürgerentscheid*). The idea of the "*Bürgerengagement*" (the engagement of citizens directly or through associations) has been growing in importance and popularity, meanwhile. It often takes the form of volunteer work by residents for the benefit of the council and the local community in an effort to optimise the use of public

resources in the face of the desperate economic situation of German cities. Many of the cities are now being provisionally administrated by the *Länder*, as a result of their inability to achieve financial equilibrium.

The financial crisis has closely linked the development of Participatory Budgets to efforts to modernise local public administration. Transparency has become the most important objective. The need to make residents truly participant in public decision-making, mainly as 'consumers', however, was secondary almost everywhere. In Germany, the provision of information on the origin of resources and public expenditures plays a primary role, whilst discussion on investments is less central. These are 'cut off' processes that view the Participatory Budget not so much as a decision-making body, but as a supplementary instrument to improve decision-making by the City Councils. From this perspective, the most frequent reference point for the German experiences is not the city of Porto Alegre, but rather that of Christchurch, New Zealand, winner of an international prize in 1993 for being a model of 'good governance'.

This explains why, the main actors in the Participatory Budget processes of Germany are the municipal foundations and organisations that work on institutional modernisation. The greatest efforts, and the most visible on a national scale, are those of the Bertelsmann Foundation, set up by the famous media group. In 1998, together with the Hans Böckler Trade Union Foundation and the KGSt Local Government Research Institute ("cities of the future"), the Bertelsmann Foundation launched a preliminary Participatory Budget pilot project that included six cities, concentrated in the area near the Black Forest. In 2000, the Bertelsmann Foundation, together with the North-Rhine Westfalia *Land*, started up a second pilot project focused on six different cities.

In this case, incentives were offered by a public institution at the supra-municipal level. The passing of a resolution by the City Council became an indispensable condition for legitimising the setting up of the Participatory Budget. Unlike in other countries, the Participatory Budget in Germany was still not of central interest to civil society, nor was it characterised as a political project owned and carried forward by individual parties. The situation began to change after a representative of the Council of Porto Alegre and a member of the association *Solidariedade* (made up of popular representatives of Participatory Budgets from the same city) undertook an information tour of more than 18 German cities. From then on, Participatory Budgets were introduced in an increasing number of cities by popular German organisations and movements. In Berlin today, all the political parties have started to dialogue on the preparation of a motion to organise a Participatory Budget on the scale of the Berlin *Land*, starting with experiments in a few of its districts. The result is still 'open' and the model has still to be built.

The organisation of the Participatory Budget in the German cases tends to be split generally into three stages. In the first, the information stage, citizens receive the necessary information about the city's revenue and expenditures, with detailed explanations of local taxes, transfers from super-ordinate institutions and how inflexible expenditures (personnel, management) make it difficult to increase resources allocated to 'investments'. The second phase consists of citizen consultation, which usually takes place during public assemblies, with the help of questionnaires often also available on the Internet. The third stage is the reporting phase, following the City Council vote on the budget. The Participatory Budget usually corresponds to an organisation set up by the administration (often only by the Council for Finance or for the Budget) and is considered a supplementary

route to traditional policies. Within these three stages, the different models have a certain degree of creativity when applied in reality.

In Vlotho (pop. 20,533), school pupils were involved in an integrated project aimed at working out the budget policy, with the vast majority of their suggestions being adopted, albeit not bindingly. In Groß-Umstadt (pop. 21,620), the Participatory Budget is integrated into the financing of the Local Agenda 21 projects.

In Emsdetten (pop. 35,000) since 2001, the administration organises a public seminar whose participants (about a hundred) are chosen by a draw. At every 'stand', participants can get information on taxes and management costs, and can make proposals to increase taxes or cut expenditure. The Administration may choose whether or not to take up the suggestions but, at the budget-reporting phase, they must explain their decisions and all political parties represented in the Municipal Council must accompany any refusals with notes and comments.

In Rheinstetten (pop. about 20,000) since 2000, citizens may choose from a list of nineteen services, which should appear in the information pamphlets of the Participatory Budget that are published at public meetings - with a small glossary on the language of the budget - in the different wards of the city and at an information point situated in the public market. The consultation phase is carried out with the help of a questionnaire, also distributed in schools, which asks the citizens their opinion in order to understand the degree of satisfaction with public services and to collect proposals for improvements that would reduce expenditure. Citizens are also given the opportunity to pass resolutions on investment projects. Following the vote on the budget at the City Council, there is a budget report information session open to the public.

In Esslingen (pop. 92,000), the city has set up Internet centres in the districts, where anyone can be trained on the use of computers. On the basis of this initiative, the city – in 2003 – launched an Internet discussion on the budget. The process was split into two phases: the first opened up the discussion, while the second debated what emerged as the main issues of interest (energy saving, reduction of personnel, investments, taxes, etc.). The process was managed by a professional moderator who established links between citizens and the relevant department of the administration. The process also included the possibility of an online 'chat' with the Mayor and the Councillor for Finance.

One certainty that emerges from the comparative analysis of the German cases is that in these types of direct democracy, relations between the City Councils and the participants are not easy. The Councils tend to perceive Participatory Budgets as a threat rather than an excellent source of data to improve decision-making processes. Citizens remain full of doubts about the real impacts of their proposals, given that they are often unclear about the reasons for Council decisions on their proposals. This may lead to frustration and lower the degree of mobilisation for the process.

On the other hand, Councils and Committees have a tendency to practice 'selective hearing' towards citizens' proposals, rather than follow the priorities laid out in the guidelines presented by residents. In terms of transparency, progress has been made, but information often remains superficial and 'discretionary'. What is lacking is training for citizens that would allow them to exercise real and conscious control over the institutions.



Till now, Participatory Budgets in Germany seem to be dominated by the Administrations and tend not to be perceived as a halfway house between institutions and society, but rather as a new public space where exchange can be 'opened up' but where a strong asymmetry persists between the subjects that use it. Currently, the Participatory Budget seems an increasingly fashionable fad. It remains to be seen whether it can make budget cuts (almost inescapable in this economic and financial context) fairer or whether Participatory Budgeting will be transformed simply into a tool by which to legitimise the austerity plan of the government, without any impact on its contents or the distribution of the 'readjustments'.

Eastern Europe is watching the German scene with increasing interest. There, thanks to the impositions of International Financial Institutions and of 'donors', modernisation of the administrative apparatus is increasingly talked about. This can be linked to the struggle against corruption in public institutions (a reason Participatory Budgets are getting the attention of some Asian countries, such as India and Indonesia, and also thanks to the efforts of international associations such as Transparency International). In St Petersburg recently, the institute "Strategy", which promotes research in the field of the human and political sciences, launched an initiative called "Transparent Budgets" in collaboration with other partners in various Russian cities and with support from the Ford Foundation.

The Spanish Experience

Spain is the European country that perhaps most closely resembles the Latin American context. It is Spain that is engaged most in exchanges with Latin America, due to language and recent history. The long dictatorial regime in Spain has altered the relationship between residents and local institutions, making it necessary to gradually rebuild citizen trust in delegated democracy.

Currently, while the City Councils (that nominate the Mayor and the Council) are elected on 'bloc' lists linked to the parties, the possibility for participation in decisions by residents are manifold and varied among the cities. On the basis of a general regulation that spells out some guidelines, cities have the possibility of adopting their own rules on participation. One of the first cities to use these was Barcelona in 1986. During the '90s, sector councils were created in many other cities and promoted as places for consultation on individual issues. They do not offer any autonomy to civil society, however, since they are presided over by a member of the City Council.

In 2003, Law 57 for the modernisation of the State updated the basic regulations on participation, forcing the large cities to identify some local districts and to use new representative bodies to promote the participation of citizens in the management of the city.

Within this dynamic framework since 2000, the first experiences of Participatory Budgets have devel-

The situation began to change after a representative of the Council of Porto Alegre and a member of the association Solidariedade (made up of popular representatives of Participatory Budgets from the same city) undertook an information tour of more than 18 German cities. From then on, Participatory Budgets were introduced in an increasing number of cities by popular German organisations and movements.



oped, with the greatest spread being in Catalonia and Andalusia. The debate on Participatory Budgets is as politicised as it is in France and Italy, but there is also a great deal of interest in the modernisation of the administrative machine, supported by the Bofill Foundation, the Independent University of Barcelona and the Catalan regional administration, among others.

The peculiarity of the Spanish models of Participatory Budgets is their reference to 'associative democracy'. In various cities, the associations (especially neighbourhood associations) are the only legal participants in the processes. The organisational rules are usually clearly pre-established. Several models are supported by their own regulations that decree the functions of every actor, the methods for organising and managing assemblies, and even formulae for the territorial distribution of resources destined for investment. These are generally created jointly by the council and by citizens. Often these regulations are approved by the City Council, and thus risk being rather inflexible instruments as against the rapid changes required by the changing consciousness of residents who participate in the processes. The paths of these models run according to different phases, the first of which consists of general information provision and presentation of projects, leading to the elaboration of a list of priorities by a few popular delegates.

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There are dozens of experiences of Participatory Budgets in Spain today. Among the first were in Rubí and St. Feliu de Llobregat (in the Barcelona metropolitan area), where the Participatory Budget went along with other processes of citizen participation, particularly those of an urban planning nature. They used new methods such as technical matrices constructed with residents and choosing citizens by draw to take part in popular commissions on some issues that impacted considerably on the budget. These experiences were short-lived due to a political change. Other cities like Seville are gradually beginning to experiment with forms of Participatory Budgets.

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In Sabadell (pop. 185,000), the Participatory Budget started in 2000. The process was set up with the help of the University of Barcelona. It has three stages. In the first, a participatory diagnostic is set up in the field to identify the most important issues and to sensitise the inhabitants to participation. The second phase consists of a "citizens' workshop" in which, using the EASW methodology (European Awareness Scenario Workshop), 'visions of the future' can be worked out on the different issues. Subsequently, the actions needed to reach the objectives are identified and a list of investment proposals is adopted. In the third phase, the strategy is applied on the scale of the seven districts in order to evaluate the impact of the investments on every district and to define some specific investments for its neighbourhoods. The strategy is monitored by an "accompaniment commission" made up of representatives of the municipal administration and citizens.

Albacete (pop. 150,000) sets great store by its 600 plus structure of associations. Since 2000, residents may make proposals on projects and services through Assemblies open to all citizens. A Participation Council made up of the representatives of the different sector associations (neighbourhood, culture, education, ecology, migrants etc.), negotiates the projects to be created with the Council, taking account of the resources of the budget and technical-legal feasibility. Five qualitative criteria are used for classifying the proposals: equality policy; quality of administrative services; sustainability of economic development; attention to young people and education; urban and housing infrastructure.

In Córdoba (pop. 300,000), the citizens make decisions on investment projects within resource lim-

its defined by the municipal councillors. There are 3 levels of participation: neighbourhood, district and city, split into a series of assemblies. Criteria for the ranking of residents' proposals on social issues are worked out. Citizens and the Neighbourhood Associations determine the investments just as they determine the criteria for ranking, both at the level of neighbourhood and of district. Subsequently, popular delegates elected in the assemblies draw up a list of proposals applying these criteria. During the third phase, the list is put to the district assembly for approval. Likewise, each district elects two representatives to work out the list of the citizens' projects, respecting the available budget resources and the order of the projects defined by the districts, which cannot be altered. The municipal administration offers technical assistance for appraising the feasibility of the projects. Furthermore, both the delegates and the popular representatives receive training. Surrounding Córdoba are other cities with experiences of Participatory Budgets underway, such as Puente Genil and San Juan de las Cabezas.

The organisational logic of the processes started in Spain has brought to light two tensions: The first concerns the connection between the individual participants and the associations, and another occurs between the neighbourhood and the district. At the neighbourhood level, the mobilisation of individuals appears to be more intense, and tends to create an atomisation of investments that does not promote 'real weight' of residents in decision-making about the resources of the city as a whole. Proposals easily reach figures that surpass financial capability. Furthermore, socially disadvantaged groups tend to participate little or gain little advantage from investments.

In Córdoba, people have tried to overcome this problem by applying some 'social' criteria for the distribution of resources, giving greater scores to proposals which 'positively discrimination' in favour of the weakest groups. In France, on the other hand, there is little control over the commitments administrations have to take on in relation to the decisions coming out of the Participatory Budgets process. People often do not know to what degree projects consensually agreed have been accomplished. The proposals are therefore sometimes repetitive or contradictory, and the trust in institutions on the part of residents is slow to rebuild.

The advantage of the Spanish routes to Participatory Budgets is represented by the presence of a strong will on the part of the councils to make available the means for organising participation. In Córdoba, for example, there is a team indirectly linked to the other public services charged with the organising the Participatory Budget in the most effective way possible. It also includes officials responsible for international relations. This guarantees the reinforcement of links with other experiences and the progressive construction of a group inside the Council responsible for the process, its monitoring as well as evaluations of its results and the necessary transformations required.

The long dictatorial regime in Spain has altered the relationship between residents and local institutions, making it necessary to gradually rebuild citizen trust in delegated democracy.



The Italian Experience

It was during the '60s that the issue of participation entered forcefully into the Italian political debate. Factory councils, educational councils and experiences of participatory urban planning were important social phenomena that began to permeate into the body of legislation in the '70s. The Neighbourhood Councils, created with Law 278/76, ratified the many and varied informal experiences born over the previous twenty years, effectively freezing them and removing their ability to truly represent local participation initiatives. The political crisis of the '90s, however, resulted in municipal constitutions beginning to differentiate themselves, particularly after the change to the electoral law of 1993, which led to direct mayoral elections.

The Consolidated Act for Local Authorities of 2000 gave a boost to the multiplication at local level of specific instruments to transform participation from a *symbolic resource* to an *instrumental resource*. The city of Rome – the first in Italy – transformed its wards into 'municipalities', with a certain level of autonomy in decision-making on some sectors of expenditure and executive councils with a directly elected chairperson. In the last decade, however, the possibility for citizens to intervene in administrative procedures and to stipulate contracts, agreements and conventions between private individuals and administrations started to introduce distortions in the concept of participation. This often reduced participation to simple 'negotiation' between strong players, sometimes confusing participation with an administrative action increasingly carried out through the private sector in the form of outsourcing.

The framework for the first Italian experiments in Participatory Budgets, which go against the stream, interprets participation in the context of local government as the right of citizens to impact on options of general interest. Awareness of the Latin American experiences 'exploded' with the first World Social Forum in 2001, through widespread campaigns promoted by non-governmental organisations, associations, social forums and by a few parties of the Parliamentary Left (particularly *Rifondazione Comunista*). After the 2001 council elections, many municipalities (over twenty, including Naples, Venice and Rome) formalised an interest in the adoption of forms of Participatory Budgets, with the mayor nominating a City Councillor delegated responsible for the experiment. In reality, only a few cities have matched this 'formalised pledge' with any concrete innovations in processes of constructing the municipal budget. This situation somewhat reflects the extremely politicised, in some cases decidedly ideological, rooting of the Participatory Budget in the Italian imagination. It has often represented an expendable 'fad' in electoral planning, an instrument of negotiation between political parties or in relations between these and society at large. At best, some administrations have adopted Participatory Budgeting as a 'potential horizon' for the future, limiting themselves to innovations that may serve as preconditions for participatory budgeting to be one day tested.

In various municipalities, for example, the main budget items have been published annually in simplified form, legible by everyone. In others, Internet sites or magazines have been set up offering information on the phases of construction of public works, or open assemblies have been created to present the Council budgets (once approved). This has meant drawing on traditions that have been widespread for some decades now in many medium-to-small settlements.

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The debate on Participatory Budgeting has developed in parallel to that on Social Budgets, which are interested in measuring the social effects of public policies, or of the organisation of labour in companies, associations or social co-operatives. Even for the academic world until 2003, the principle point of reference was the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre. The actual creation of a few concrete processes in Brazil began processes of emulation and exchange within Italy. This was also promoted by the birth of the national association *Rete del Nuovo Municipio* (Network for the New Municipality (ARNM)) that puts social organisations, universities and administrations interested in participatory local management into the dialogue with each other.

Today in Italy, there are around twenty very different experiences which refer to Participatory Budgets. Many today have a 'soft' character, but it makes no sense to demonise them as mere 'simulations of democracy' as indicated by the radical approach of some popular movements. Some of them, in fact, were born hastily in 2003 with the idea of evolving and progressively broadening propositions. In 2004, many too have been continually structuring and reformulating themselves to allow for greater decision-making for the citizens. This is the case for some towns in the Milan area such as Vimercate (pop. 25,020), Trezzo d'Adda (pop. 11,600) and Inzago (pop. 8,920).

In the same area, we find Pieve Emanuele (pop. 18,000) where experiments in participatory processes have been gradually evolving since 1994, following years of urban planning folly, corruption scandals and arrests of administrators. Since 1998, the Council – as a way of regaining the trust of the citizens in the institutions – has worked with students on the reconstruction of school buildings and repairing relations with neighbouring district. The thinking was also to target schools as a crucial place in which to make future generations more aware of active politics.

The Participatory Budget was proposed in 2002 as an experimental project over three years (2003-2005). From the very start, explicitly reference has been made to the Brazilian experiences. The process involves two cycles: the first composed of six district assemblies open to all through voting cards and strict timescales for verbal interventions. The second phase is dedicated to Participatory Planning Boards (*Tavoli di Progettazione Partecipata* or *TPP*), where administrators, technicians, social and economic organisations meet to find solutions to problems raised; to identify sources of finance and assess technical or regulatory feasibility.

The Boards serve to create a complete Operating Plan for every project that the Council has to approve. 'Minor' suggestions made by citizens become recommendations for the relevant offices. The Council tries to transform them into small low cost pilot projects before the cycle ends, realised in a makeshift way or with cash surpluses, so as to increase the trust of citizens in the process of co-managing the options.

The Participatory Budget – provided for in the Council Constitution, and with regulations that allow rapid organisational changes – is accompanied by attentive monitoring by the participants who suggest strategies for enriching the diversity of citizens involved. Such strategies include repetition of the same assemblies at various times; the construction of crèche spaces and other measures for 'gender budgeting' which have increased the presence of women, winning over the past resistance resulting from the 'masculinist' cultural edifice of the families that predominate locally. There is a set minimum proportion of requests from residents that the Council must accept each year. In the experimental three-year period, it must be gradually increased from 33% to 75% in 2005.



In Grottammare (pop. 13,887) too, the oldest and most organic of the Italian experiments, the process has been transformed in the last two years, hybridising successfully with other similar ones. Until 2002, the many participants in the two cycles of annual assemblies in the neighbourhoods did not vote on decisions, limiting themselves to creating a 'synthesis' of requests with the Council. Since 2003, on the other hand, the Participatory Budget cycle provides for sets of assemblies pre-

ceded by feasibility and cost analyses made by Council technicians: one identifying needs and the other making joint decisions on budget priorities, through different voting cards and structured participatory procedures. A graded list is made of the priorities for the neighbourhood that the Council pledges to respect, guaranteeing at least the accomplishment of 1 priority per neighbourhood. The priorities for the town voted by the residents are, in fact, an appraisal and reorganisation of the 'mandate plan' on which the Administration was elected. The organisation currently refers to a 'political agreement', which is currently undergoing a process of formalisation in the council constitution. For eleven years, a municipal list called '*Solidarity and Participation*' has been managing the town, with electoral consensuses of over 60% and constantly growing.

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A third interesting experience can be found in Rome, in the 11th Municipality (pop. 138,949), split into eight homogenous areas. Since 2003, open Local Assemblies have been held to elect 1 representative for every 15 persons present. In 2004, delegates (who are revocable and not consecutively re-electable) were transformed into simple spokespersons. It had been noted that there was a phenomenon whereby the election of delegates was producing a situation whereby citizens stopped participating once they had voted for their area delegates. The list of priorities proposed by the spokespersons in special Working Groups returns to a vote at the Local Assemblies in a second cycle of meetings. Currently, a formal decree for the process is being approved, which gives its Regulations the 'certainty of law'. The participatory process has had difficulty finding its place in the technical structure of administrative decisions and the public works decided by the citizens are often delayed as a result.

Politically, the Italian Participatory Budget processes suffer from a difficulty in making the leap from the sphere of 'proclamations' to daily management practices. The widespread timidity about experimenting before a 'law' is created on the issue becomes a blockage in making the will of individual administrators match that of the political coalitions that support them. A further critical point can be linked to the habit of fragmenting participation into a thousand different issues, which substantially weaken participation, leaving management based only on 'delegated' power unchanged. The inability to communicate the innovative instrument offered by Participatory Budgeting means few citizens have been attracted to the process to date. Rarely has the threshold of one to two percent of citizens participating been surpassed. Mild, deliberative procedures were created precisely to address this. This concentrate on common growth through debate rather than on moments of decision-making.

An open conclusion

A close examination of the varied European experiences confirms some of the results that emerged from the first comparisons of Latin American experiences of Participatory Budgets (Torres/De Grazia, 2003; Avritzer/Navarro, 2002; Santos, 2002). One example is that the result of an experiment always tends to be proportional to the presence of four fundamental factors:

- the political will that supports the process
- the high number of associations and the self organising ability of the social networks
- the coherence and refinement of the organisational 'design' elements of the process
- the administrative and financial ability of the authority carrying out the experiments.

In the various contexts, the four factors can change the 'dose', but they must maintain an overall balance so that every deficiency is compensated for.

The European experiences emphasise, perhaps, the existence of a fifth key element for guaranteeing the success of participatory processes: the existence of a strong *need* at the basis of the experiments. In Latin America, the needs that cement the will to experiment are often social in nature: the need to rebalance economic gaps, constructing fairer procedures for the redistribution of land resources. In Europe, the needs that have given a boost to the activation of Participatory Budgets are often political (especially in Latin European countries) or are to do with modernisation and the improvement of the efficiency of the public apparatus (especially in the North East).

An analysis 'from above' further reinforces the interpretation according to which Participatory Budgets are more a "*way of rethinking the connection between direct democracy and representative democracy*", than a mere model for undertaking the former. Despite this, a large part of the European political class continues to perceive them as being a hypothetical 'threat' to the legitimate sovereignty of the institutions of representative democracy.

There is also scepticism fed by many expressions of organised associationism. Their 'distance' from the processes, furthermore, is due to fear of losing the contractual power acquired whilst working with institutions over the past forty years during the growth of the European social fabric (trade unions, professional and sector associations, research institutes, issue networks and movements, NGOs, etc). Furthermore, the majority of European Participatory Budgets have been betting on the involvement of citizens as individuals. Organised associationism, sensing it was being pushed into the margins, often reacted corporatively, neither taking an interest in nor opposing the experiments. The organisational force of associationism and of the Third Sector (together with the habit of political delegation) could be a considerable 'brake' Participatory Budgeting processes taking root. Changing the lobbyist or corporatist behaviours of organised associationism is not an easy task, however. It requires a cultural shift that puts the associations 'at the service' of the participatory processes, rather than vice versa. It also requires a shift in political culture. Political institutions are used to finding a strong ally in the Third Sector due to the persistence of forms of clientelism, and to the habit of counting on forms of social involvement that amount to little more than *planning* among actors invested with different forms of social representativity, which pre-exist and are external to the activation of participatory processes.

The best comparative research conducted to date (Villasante/Garrido, 2003) shows that Participatory Budget processes do not take off when they are conceived to be Forums or Associational Councils. Two problems therefore remain to be resolved that more or less characterise all the European experiences: how to invest in forms of communication and in rules of organisation that favour an increase in the response of citizens to convocations, and – at the same time – how not to lose the added value that the already organised social networks represent. Every experience today is gradually providing the answers that it believes most suitable to its context; but there is still a lot to do. The construction of observation posts on the commitments to the Participatory Budget that bring associations together, as in some French experiences, may be an interesting solution. In many countries of Mediterranean Europe, there continues to be a curious paradox. Organised civil society has made a large contribution to the dissemination of the examples of Participatory Budgets tested in the Global South, but it often shies away from direct engagement in the processes activated in some cities of the old world, and leaves the Councils to take the lead role in their creation.

This problem should not take away from another widespread limitation in the European experience. This is the difficulty of involving the weakest parts of the social network in the public debate on the budget priorities of the administrations. Unfortunately to date, the only forms of 'positive discrimination' carried out during the Participatory Budget processes seem to be those that benefit children and adolescents, categories that can be most easily involved through co-operation with educational establishments. What is lacking are measures to support immigrants and disabled people (multilingual material and/or written in Braille, sign language translators, meetings in disability-friendly places etc.) There are also few cases that reflect on weaker social groups in gender terms. Moreover, experiences of 'gender-mainstreaming' are rare as are instruments for the analysis of 'gender' in the budgets and of the effects that public policies can have on the reinforcement of inequalities between men and women, and on discrimination against people of different sexual orientations. Even technological instruments (email, votes via Internet, etc.) are often not used to build a true e-democracy, but end up reinforcing the digital divide and cultural and age differences (the case of Esslingen is an almost unique experience, perhaps equal only to that of the small Spanish town of Jun).

Given the difficulties experienced in enacting truly 'inclusive' forms of participation, it is extremely important that the workings between delegated democracy and instances of direct democracy do not 'erode responsibility in decision-making' on the part of the institutions. There is, in fact, the risk that decisions – left only to those present during the different phases of the processes of Participatory Budgets – may reinforce exclusion of those not represented on those occasions.

In this light, it is worth citing an extremely interesting European case - that tested in the Manchester area of England. The space that the Participatory Budget is carving for itself today in Salford Metropolitan Borough Council is partly the fruit of an operation led 'from the bottom up' by a few social organisations that have entered into direct contact – through international co-operation – with Brazilian practices of local democratisation. The NGO Community Pride, set up in April 1999 with the support of some church organisations and then of Oxfam, has had a few exchanges with the Brazilian cities of Porto Alegre and Recife. Subsequently, in October 2000, it published '*A Citizens Budget*' for administrators in Manchester and Salford, organising training seminars for the local authorities and interested activists from the civil society of the two cities. A research post on the national budget was also set up. It met twice a week to analyse the situation of political distrust that led to electoral



turnouts of less than 20%. The stress was placed particularly on the need to re-orientate public investments towards the needs of marginalised social groups, which had been expanding continuously over the last few decades of de-industrialisation.

Today, the progressive opening up of Salford Council to experiments with Participatory Budgets is a hopeful sign of the positive opportunities offered by 'hybridisation' and by exchanges of practices tested on different continents. The method suggested by the resource distribution matrices, used in many Brazilian cities and re-proposed by the Community Pride project, is a brilliant example. It mediates (through weightings and indicators) between the needs expressed by participating citizens and the objective needs of an area, no less important just because its residents do not turn up to participatory sessions to flag them up.

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This process is important for various other reasons. Firstly, because it deals with a plurality of different local needs. The discretionary role of 'guarantor' of the equity of options is therefore not solely that of delegated politics because it allows the proposition or production of rules that guarantee citizens a role in building this equality of resource distribution. Secondly, because the method proposed looks after a series of 'weak' interests that are difficult to involve directly in the process. This includes issues of the sustainability of an area and the interests of citizens yet to be born or to settle there. In this way, an experience, that may appear to the casual observer as more technician than those of other countries, goes to the very 'heart' of the meaning of the experiences of Latin American Participatory Budgets. It recovers the original sense of the principles of Agenda 21 that in Europe has often been lost in a mire of micro-experiments confined to peripheral (and isolated) issues of the local administrations.

The 'matrix' project elaborated by Community Pride also acquires an important role as an innovative technical instrument for guaranteeing transparency in decision-making. It aims to address a further weakness emerging from many European experiences, particularly from Latin European countries, namely the scant level of attention paid to administrative reforms that should accompany the execution of Participatory Budgets to make the modernisation of the public machine a multiplier of the effects obtained.

In the majority of cases, the opposite happens. The inability to act on reforming bureaucratic procedures and the poor level of commitment shown in promoting change in the culture of public officials translates into a large obstacle for the success of the participatory process.

The structures do not manage to reflect the novelty of the means of reforming the socio-political culture, and the slowness in practically carrying out the choices made consensually creates disappointment for the citizens and lowers the level of involvement in the Participatory Budget. They thus expose a central fact: that participation is not an independent variable, rather it is a hypersensitive



phenomenon, whose success is strictly connected to the results it produces, and to the time in which it manages to produce them.

These limits certainly do not obscure the great value of processes that have the fundamental role of re-introducing the value of the skills of daily life and knowledge into local planning, even where they struggle to become spaces of joint-decision making for administrators and citizens. They do not do so by considering users only as potential modernisers of public services, but by showing strong faith in social intelligence. From this point of view, Participatory Budgets suggest an interpretation of the principle of subsidiarity (what can be done at the lowest level should be done at the lowest level) that turns 'on its head' the interpretation indicated at the beginning of this briefing. Institutions must not remain *indifferent* to or *stand outside* of the initiatives and proposals, autonomously promoted by citizens and their organisations, to protect and support the general interest but have an obligation to *support* their development.

This interpretation highlights a '*circular subsidiarity*' that underlines how state and society must collaborate permanently to achieve the common interest through a relationship based on co-operation and partnership 'with equal rights and responsibilities'. On this issue, the Active Citizenship Network (supported at the local level by movements such as the Italian *Cittadinanzattiva*) has carried out an important cultural battle trying to bind the results of brave and 'provocative' local experiments with the establishment of the new European Constitution. It has suffered a temporary defeat, but the results of the various experiments remain, suggesting that the battle will continue.

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Participatory Budgeting experiments are blossoming all over Europe, inspired in large part by the fame of the success of Porto Alegre in Brazil and efforts to promote and emulate the process in Europe.

Amongst the objectives of the Participatory Budget may be the ethical development of institutions, an increase in civic spirit among residents, and an enhancement of citizens' ability to maturely interpret the complexity of administering a local area. It may also seek to address the distortions generated by the market society, extend 'rights to the city' to all who inhabit it, and to spread forms of "negotiated solidarity" which allows for the fair distribution of public resources in favour of the most culturally, socially and economically disadvantaged categories. Whereas in Latin America, the motive force for experimenting with Participatory Budgeting are often socio-economic in nature, in Europe, it tends to be either political (as in the case of Latin Europe) or to do with the need to modernise or improve the efficiency of the public apparatus (as in the case of North Eastern Europe).

Set against the context of neo-liberal economic policies, the financial crises of cities, intensifying urban conflict, struggles against privatisation and the deepening crisis of legitimacy of representative democracy, the briefing gives a rare and critical insight into different interpretations and experiences of Participatory Budgeting across Europe. Particular attention is paid to the cases of France, Germany, Spain and Italy, with the experience of Manchester in the UK being highlighted in the conclusion.

The author stresses Participatory Budgeting as a complement to representative democracy, noting that elected administrators, and organised associations like unions and employers' associations, tend to see it as a competitive process. At the same time, while organised civil society has actively contributed to the dissemination of the concept in Europe, it often shies away from direct engagement in the processes, leaving city councils to take the lead in creating them.

Founded in 1974, TNI is an international network of activistscholars committed to critical analyses of the global problems of today and tomorrow. It aims to provide intellectual support to those movements concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable and environmentally sustainable direction.

The TNI New Politics Project aims at stimulating innovative thinking on questions of participatory democracy and progressive governance, and the identities and roles of social movements, civic coalitions and political parties operating from local to global levels in forging new democratic politics and policies. The project intends to develop an alternative political vision to that offered by mainstream political and development theories, while drawing lessons from and attempting to go beyond traditional social democratic and left models.

The project's distinctive starting point is a belief that, at this time of history, the vital innovations lie in practical experiments and experience. In a situation where no inherited orthodoxy provides adequate tools of strategic analysis, the only way to develop these tools is through interrogating, comparing and reflecting on the trials, errors and achievements of experience. This requires a systematic and international process. The programme hopes to stimulate such a process and in so doing to develop a truly global fellowship of committed and creative thinkers and activists.

The project supports writing from the front line of political innovation and arranges for these to be translated and published in a wide range of publications and through the Internet. It also organises seminars and workshops, and collaborates with other research centres, universities and civic organisations engaged in similar initiatives across the world.

The Centre for Democratic Policy-making is a participatory think tank, which emerged from the socialist movement's efforts to engage ordinary people in policy discussions during the aftermath of the Miners' Strike in Britain in the mid-1980s. CDP undertakes hosts an annual school and co-ordinates participatory research groups which commission research and pamphlets on issues of democracy (including economic democracy). CDP holds the 'golden share' in Red Pepper magazine in the Britain, playing a custodial role on the Board of the magazine. See <http://www.activistnetwork.org.uk/CDP/>

