Noëlle Payton
SSC 252
American English
15 May 2006
2443 words

Interview: Towards Direct Democracy

Introduction

In a democracy, according to Nobel Prize-winning economist Sir Arthur Lewis, "all who are affected by a decision should have the chance to participate in making that decision either directly or through chosen representatives" (Lewis, cited in Lijphart 1999, p.31). In the present age, most democracies function according to the latter model, through chosen representatives. The idea of direct democracy, in which citizens participate in the actual decision-making, seems to have all but died out.

Over the past few decades however, Latin America has been the stage for some interesting developments concerning direct democracy. Policies encouraging citizens to play a larger and more direct role in decision-making have been widespread and diverse, including the most prominent concept of participatory budgeting. This concept, which has over time developed into a full-fledged scheme of integrating citizen input, allows citizens to take part in plenary meetings in which they can voice their opinions and make their priorities heard concerning their municipality's budget.

Mr. Claudio Acioly, an architect and urban planner and currently a staff member of the Institute for Housing and Urban Development Studies (IHS), has extensive experience managing projects, conducting research, teaching students, and even advising national and local governments on policy reform and institutional development all over the world. Starting his career upgrading informal settlements, his interests have broadened to include the linkage between policy and institutional and organizational changes and civil society participation. He was intensively involved in the participatory budgeting process during his research on the process in the municipality of Santo André, Brazil, in 2001. This paper is largely based on the interview conducted with him on May 4, 2006, at the IHS in Rotterdam.

Participatory budgeting (PB): history and workings

In 1989, the progressive and popular Worker's Party –"Partido dos Trabalhadores"– won the municipal elections in the birthplace of participatory budgeting, Porto Alegre. The new local government was faced with a severe lack of financial resources they had inherited from their

predecessors. Aware of the popular distrust fueled over the years by clientelism and favoritism, they decided to bring everything into the open and started experimenting, while deliberating extensively with civil society, with what has become participatory budgeting.

Many cities in Brazil and beyond have adopted PB after seeing the success in Porto Alegre. Because PB is not formalized in law, the exact procedures differ from city to city, but the general ideas are similar. In general, 10 to 20% of the municipal budget is up for PB. This means that these resources are made available for community development projects varying from housing improvements to setting up a rubbish recycling center. These projects are often carried and overseen by citizens themselves. As not all aspired projects can be funded, priorities must be set. This is done with the involvement of citizens (often organized in neighborhood associations), government officials, and nongovernmental organizations, during plenary meetings on district-level and forums organized around specific themes.

Each year the municipal government must first present the results of the previous year in district-level plenary meetings. They not only report, but more importantly justify the decisions they made concerning last year's budget. Then there are smaller-scale meetings, mostly on neighborhood level, in which citizens discuss their priorities for the coming year. Usually during a second plenary meeting, citizen delegates are elected, priorities are presented, and anybody who wishes is given a chance to address the assembly.

The citizen delegates spend the rest of the year deliberating with each other, their 'constituencies', and government officials, and visiting each other's neighborhoods in order to ultimately come up with a budget proposal for the legislative chamber. The chamber will then have the final word on which projects will be implemented. In Santo André, an estimated total of 10% of the population is involved in PB at some point during the whole process, of which the majority are from the low income and lower middle classes.

Why more participation? The literature

Judging by the literature, the increase in participatory efforts by both governments and citizens should not be too surprising. Already in 1979, Max Kaase and Samuel H. Barnes (p.525) pointed out the need observed by Huntington and others for new political institutions, because "the existing institutions of political involvement … are no longer adequate to handle the quest for broadening participation." They define the reasons for this demand mainly in terms of increased levels of education and the proliferation of Postmaterialist values (Kaase & Barnes 1979, p.524), but we shall see that these reasons differ from the driving forces behind participatory developments in Brazil.

The need for broadening participation in decision-making is also mentioned by Peter Mair (2005, p.6) when he refers to work by Thatcher and Stone Sweet. They see broadening the possibilities for participation to include actors besides cabinets and executives as the answer to "the growing importance of 'procedural legitimacy'" (Mair 2005, p.6). 'Procedural legitimacy' is expected to benefit from "transparency, legality and the provision of access to stakeholders", leading to greater accountability besides that provided by elections (Mair 2005, p.6). This approach more closely resembles what can be observed in Brazil.

Why more participation? In practice

The reasons for implementing PB in Brazil can be approached from two sides: from the local and national governments' side and from the citizens' side. From the governments' side, they recognized that the population had become substantially less tolerant towards government corruption and sought to regain the population's trust. Furthermore, they wanted to prevent authoritarian history from repeating itself and the Worker's Party in particular was ideologically a popular front to begin with. Finally, they were also interested in creating a stronger civil society.

As for the population, there was a strong reaction against corruption, resulting in a strong civil society movement advancing PB as a means of control over the state. As the budget had always been the source of corruption, people wanted to make sure they knew where it was going. In addition, living conditions were very poor for many people, and their wish and need for improvement encouraged them to persistently pursue greater participation with help from non-governmental organizations and grassroots associations.

Effects of PB

The question now is, of course, did they accomplish what they wanted? An assessment of the effects PB has had on the government, the citizens, and the community as a whole should point us towards the answer. These effects include material and many immaterial consequences.

For the government, PB has meant opening up all the doors to the citizens, which is not entirely without risk. They have not only allowed citizens to take part in budget priority-setting, but they have also committed themselves to making the budget public every three months. On the other hand, though, this huge increase in transparency and citizen involvement leaves the government in a position in which they can count on considerable policy legitimacy: "Don't complain about the outcomes," they may say, "they're yours."

PB has also affected politicians more personally. Although conservative politicians might still regret the extent to which they must accept citizen influence, more progressive politicians not only contribute to decision-making in their function as a government official, but also as a citizen. This means that they also take part in the PB process simply as 'one of the citizens'.

There has also been a great change in the government's relationship with the citizens. Citizens are now taken seriously and get more respect from the government. There is an ongoing dialogue between citizens and the government, which also avoids the problem indicated by Kaase and Barnes (1979, pp.526-528,530) that authorities must distinguish between political actions which are underpinned by understanding and those that lack any understanding. Furthermore, the citizens get more response from the government, both in the form of policy outcomes and justification of these outcomes, just as Hanna Pitkin (1967, p.164) argues that justification should be provided, especially when there is a discrepancy between the wishes expressed by the citizens and the final outcome.

Among the citizens, PB has stimulated the belief that they *can* exert influence. They have come to believe that "my participation results in something" and many are very enthusiastic. As a result, a different type of citizens is emerging. They are politically active and critical, aware of their rights and obligations, and knowledgeable about the workings of the government. This affirms Renske Doorenspleet's statement that participation "increas[es] the political efficacy and skill of democratic citizens" (2005, p.6). The enthusiasm of the citizens has also made them more willing to make time-consuming and completely voluntary efforts (for example as a citizen delegate), as Kaase and Barnes had predicted (1979, p.531).

Another prediction come true is that citizens are willing to "accept political outcomes not to their liking" (Kaase & Barnes 1979, p.531). This is not due to satisfaction of self-realization and outcome legitimacy (Kaase & Barnes 1979, p.531), although they may also play a role, but to the fact that citizen delegates visit each others' neighbourhoods to see the needs there for themselves. These visits may convince them that their demands are perhaps less pressing, and leaves them willing to give up their own priorities. Another reason is that people have learned that a sacrifice in one year is likely to bring about compensation in the following year.

A very important effect of PB is that it opens up opportunities for those who would normally have none or very few. Citizen delegates change each year, and each year the elected individuals receive training from nongovernmental organizations and gain many skills on the job. In this manner a great deal of capacity-building is occurring through the

development of new leaders coming from all strata of society. In the future they may even proceed to become professional politicians.

Finally, the most direct and perhaps most desired effect is the material effect of PB: a change in the allocation of resources. In previous governments, clientelism and favouritism had controlled the allocation of resources in such a way that most resources were directed at the wealthier neighbourhoods. As a result of PB, more resources are being directed at low-income neighbourhoods. People have come to realize that more participation generally means more resources, which is of course a great impetus to increase participation.

What makes it work?

PB has proved to be rather successful in its achievements and continued existence. Different actors have contributed to this success, including the government, the citizens, and nongovernmental organizations. A few key factors determining success will be pointed out.

A rather straightforward explanation for the continued existence of PB is the continuity of the Worker's Party government in Porto Alegre since it was elected in 1989. They were re-elected several times, and their commitment to PB ensured its existence. It will be interesting to see whether the recently elected non-Worker's Party government will continue to apply it, as there is no legal framework obliging the government to use PB.

There are good reasons for believing that it will. Probably the most important reason is that participatory approaches started bottom-up. Already before any PB activity, neighbourhood associations and other grassroots associations had organized themselves in reaction to corruption. In collaboration with nongovernmental organizations, they placed demands for greater participation. This is in accordance with the roles Doorenspleet ascribes to civil society: to "[structure] multiple channels, beyond the political party, for articulating, aggregating, and representing interests" and "stimulating political participation" (2005, p.6). A comparison with Bolivia, where participatory methods were imposed top-down through legislation, supports the emphasis on bottom-up demands, as participation is not nearly as successful there as it is in Brazil.

What stimulated grassroots mobilization in the first place, and continues to stimulate participation in PB, is the perceived need on the citizens' side for improving their living conditions. Many rather urgent problems they see directly influence their lives, and are thus seen as 'their' issues. Most of these problems require resources in order to be solved, and participation enables them to take responsibility for 'their' issues and direct government resources there. The need for solving problems is thus translated in a need to participate. This

again stresses the bottom-up movement, for these perceived needs are by no means created by top-down laws or regulations.

For the citizens, the belief in their ability to have influence and achieve collective problem-solving is a great driving force encouraging them to continue participating in PB. In Mr. Acioly's words: "If people believe it works, they will become more active citizens." PB practice thus seems like a self-reinforcing process that provides citizens, through the process itself and the outcomes, with the affirmation of their ability to influence, which in turn encourages them to go out and participate again.

Besides government commitment, support from nongovernmental organizations, the mobilization of grassroots associations, and the population at large, one more actor deserves some attention. The press have also had their share of influence. After the military regime I Brazil came to an end in 1985, the press gained considerable freedom and were able to take an investigative stance towards the government. Disgusted by the corruption they met with, they made sure the people knew about it, which very likely contributed to the fervour with which they pursued participation.

Conclusion

The citizens involved in PB have gained much more than they set out to accomplish in their crusade for participation. They have achieved both their goals of directing resources to improving their living conditions, and achieving greater government transparency subsequently leading to less corruption. In addition, they have gained confidence, respect, and a structured system for their voice to be heard and opportunities to be created.

Municipal governments have also achieved what they were aiming for. Greater transparency and accountability has led to trust and policy legitimacy, and civil society has grown stronger in their democratic skills and awareness of citizen rights and obligations. Both were achieved by the specific structure of PB that ensured accountability and encouraged citizens to grow in practice and knowledge. Additionally, the ongoing dialogue between government and citizens enables a clear understanding of each other on both sides.

Despite all the positive results of PB, there is one worrying element potentially threatening its continuance. What will happen when all the urgent problems are solved and the need for improvements is no longer felt? Even though that is, in one sense, the ultimate goal, it would also take away the most important incentive to keep participating. Mr. Acioly fears that the motivation to participate will indeed drop as soon as the problems are solved. The

future, he anticipates, might hold something like the prevailing attitude in the Netherlands now: "I went and voted, so they'll just have to do it."

List or References

Doorenspleet, R 2005, *Democratic Transitions; Exploring the Structural Sources of the Fourth Wave*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc., Boulder, Colorado and London.

Kaase, M & Barnes, SH 1979, *Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Societies*, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills, CA.

Lijphart, A 1999, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Mair, P 2005, 'Democracy Beyond Parties', Paper 05'06, *Centre for the Study of Democracy*, University of California, Irvine.

Pitkin, HF 1967, *The Concept of Representation*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles.

Appendix: Interview questions

In stead of literally formulated interview questions, I defined four themes I wanted to know more about, and wrote down key words to formulate questions by during the interview. The themes and key words were as follows:

1. Participation
- how many?
- who? (minorities, middle classes?; encouragement?)
- what about: new participants; those still excluded?
- limit?

2. Democratic culture
- level of knowledge/ understanding of government structure, etc. (minimum amount required?)
- access to information and ability to process it
- education, mass media
- group loyalties, personal considerations
- short-term considerations
- increased political interest?
- kinds of issues

3. Social capital
- territorial in stead of ideological 'parties'?
- community coherence
- increased membership associations?
- increased efforts and possibilities to attain information?

4. Democracy
- compare with representative democracy
- government *for* or *by* the people?
- strengths/ weaknesses
- dependence on government (for continuity; for successful procedures)
- increased acceptance/ legitimacy policies?