When local participatory budgeting turns into a participatory system. Challenges of expanding a local democratic experience

Emil A. Sobottka, Danilo R. Streck

The experience of participatory budgeting that began in Porto Alegre in 1989 was carried over to the state level in Rio Grande do Sul in 1999. Since then, governments have tried out different modes of popular participation and consultation, culminating with the creation of a system of popular and citizen participation where participatory budgeting is one among various possibilities designed to allow citizen participation. In the article we discuss some more evident challenges of such an expansion, like the tension between participation as a principle and a strategy, bureaucratic mediations, some conditions for democratic participation, the different regional cultures of participation, as well as the relevance of organisational matters. The research methodology is based on participatory principles and procedures. In this sense, the study can be also seen as an experiment of using participatory methodology with policies and projects involving large geographical areas

Key words: participation, participatory budgeting, local democracy, participatory Action Research

Introduction

25 years ago participatory budgeting was implemented in Porto Alegre (Brazil). The idea was to mobilise the citizens to discuss and indicate by themselves the main priorities for investing a parcel of the scarce public

International Journal of Action Research, 10(2), 2014, 156-183
ISSN 1861-1303 (print), ISSN 1861-9916 (internet)
DOI 10.1688/IJAR-2014-02-Sobottka

resources. Starting as an informal experience encouraging people to present local demands in the public sphere, it proved to have unforeseen consequences like questioning the traditional model of representative local democracy, widening the circle of people interested in political affairs, allowing the residents to question bureaucratic structures and to exercise a bit more control over their rulers (Sobottka, 2004; Guimarães, 2004).

The origins of the participatory impulses in the region reach back to the 1960's when local communities started to search for alternatives for development based on their own resources. In the 1980's, after the military dictatorship, there were in South Brazil some experiences which took up the idea of popular involvement in municipal planning. There was also a strong democratising impetus in social movements which had a quite significant impact on the Federal Constitution approved in 1988, opening space for citizen participation in a variety of forms and in all governmental spheres (Avritzer, 2008).

In the last three years this experience is being expanded to the regional level as a participatory system, embracing geographical expansion and more issues. In the article we discuss some more evident challenges of such an expansion, like longer distance, different levels of being affected, more bureaucratic mediations, the "inevitability" of some level of "representation", the different regional cultures of participation, as well as persistent reasons for citizens and members of political parties to continue participating, and for governors to invest in such a participatory process.

This effort represents the continuation, on regional (state) scale, of a series of experiments carried out since 1999. It started with the classical model of participatory budgeting as implemented in Porto Alegre, based on local, municipal and regional plenary session with broad popular participation and debates. Later it turned into a consultation process about priorities through ballots which could be cast in boxes located in public spaces such as schools and shopping centres, or through internet. Currently, participatory budgeting is part of a rather complex system of participation, which includes a digital office and a permanent council for development whose members represent various segments of civil society and government.

In our research process the tension between two different meanings of participation among the different actors has attracted attention: for some, participation is a democratic principle: public issues have to be discussed and decided by the affected citizens in the public sphere; for others participation seems to be a strategy to mobilise support, legitimise positions and to present performances. Although there may not be a clear dividing line between these two poles of the tension, the appreciation of the outcome of participation may be very different in both cases. As a principle, participation correlates with radical conceptions of democracy, where sovereign citizens define the rules of their shared living and charge their government with specific tasks; as a strategy, participation is a resource, such as elections, which is used by citizens to legitimise their claims, and by governments to ensure the legitimacy of their domination. In other words, participation can offer a political opportunity to ensure the conquest of citizenship rights by legal means and for deepening democracy, but it can also be used as an empty formula seeking power in adverse conditions while the decisions that really matter are taken elsewhere (Sobottka, 2004; Sobottka et al., 2005).

As a principle, participation may be a creative force for permanently inspiring different procedures for dealing with public administration. At the same time, in a larger geographical scale, and with a larger population and more complex power relations among political parties and interest groups, strategy is a prominent feature of participatory budgeting. The argument in our article is that there is a risk that participation is turned into a mere strategy for the fulfilment of immediate needs, losing track of its motivating inspiration which is indispensable for keeping the participatory process alive.

We then ask about some conditions for keeping this tension in a productive relationship. Among them we highlight the role of regional co-ordinators able to mobilise the local communities, the government's capacity to deliver the "products" approved in the process, the attention to organisational matters such as the site of the meetings, information about the programme, etc.), space for discussion of priorities instead of just presenting demands previously agreed on within a given segment of the population. Trust and communication are identified as basic ingredients in participatory budgeting.

Our research methodology is based on participatory principles and procedures. The study can be also seen as an experiment in using participatory methodology with policies and projects involving large geographical areas (in this case, a state in South Brazil) as well as large populations (the state has over 10 million inhabitants). The research strategies involved from classical data collection methods such as questionnaires and interviews to meetings with co-ordinators and community members which we called "double reflection groups". In the paper we make room for discussing some learnings and identify challenges faced in the process.

Research as active empathic presence

A study on the participatory budget in a state that has a geographic size and a population larger than those of many countries can be seen as a participatory research experiment on an expanded scale. Its purpose is to analyse the participatory budget as a political-pedagogical process in which, so it is presumed, one can identify signs pointing to alternatives to the globalised development model that shows symptoms of exhaustion in all regions of the world. Maybe in fact we are not only facing a financial crisis and a crisis of political representation, but a civilization crisis that, in terms of research, requires understanding the micro and macro levels in social relations as a unit.

Participatory budgeting is an important place to understand society on the move and the directions of this movement. Since research is not politically neutral, the researcher must ask themselves about the actions they wish to potentiate with their work. According to Zemelman (2006, p. 112), "One must detect the realities that can be potentiated, but these realities are not necessarily prescribed in a theoretical corpus; rather, they will depend on what do I want to know for, which is an axiological or ideological 'for what'."

Throughout the research project we participated in a number of activities, mainly as observers. We placed ourselves intentionally in an initial position of listening, aware that many people involved in the process have long experience as public managers or as citizens involved in their communities. Thus

we participated in training seminars, in the government school, in regional public hearings and in municipal assemblies. We also collected information through a questionnaire in which we sought the quantification of data on the profile of the participants, the entities they represent, as well as their expectations and frustrations at the process. Significant moments of the study were the meetings with state and regional co-ordinators with whom we discussed the objectives, the emerging results and the directions taken by the process.

There are two methodological features which we would like to highlight in this paper. The first one is the challenge of developing large scale research within a participatory and dialogical framework, where all stakeholders share the responsibility for the production of knowledge. Given the multiplicity of agents involved in the process and the variety of contexts, participation could hardly be considered as co-determination or co-production in a strict sense (Kristiansen & Bloch Poulsen, 2010). Although there is a verbal agreement and a feeling of mutual expectations, the initiative resides in an academic research project. The expectation can be seen in the way our group is welcome in the meetings, sometimes greeted with the heavy responsibility of telling the story of participatory budgeting in the state. Participation might be identified as an active empathic presence of researchers in the process, i.e. a *being with* which has an explicit purpose of advancing democratic procedures, but whose identification with the process does not preclude a critical appraisal.

As mentioned above, besides classical data collection procedures, the topic under investigation is a field for methodological experimentation. One of such experiences is what we called *double reflection groups,* requiring a whole day of work with a group. After individual interviews with members of the community, the co-ordination of regional participatory budgeting, municipal leaders and office holders, we: the research group composed of two senior researchers, two graduate students and four undergraduate students, presented preliminary findings in slides, each of which ended with the phrase: “We would like to understand better…”, for example, why people with higher education degrees seem to be over represented in the meetings, why so few women are chosen as regional delegates, or the role of the re-

gional co-ordinator of popular participation. The discussion on each topic was recorded in audio and video.

In the afternoon the process was inverted. The research group reflected on the data presented in the morning and on the opinions exposed on each topic. For example, on the difficulty of the process to reach issues of a macro level, such as could affect the economic matrix of the region. In this particular case, the economy is basically built on agriculture, increasingly meaning agribusiness with large soybean plantations, the suppression of small farms, and the consequent depopulation of the region. Afterwards the floor was opened for all participants to engage in a common discussion. There was clearly a sense of dialogue where the engagement with the challenges identified in the previous reflections, for a moment, encountered the role distinction of the participants.

A second methodological feature, closely related to the first one, is what we identify as convergence of disciplines (Fals Borda, 2013, 2010; Streck, 2013a, 2013b). Participatory budgeting has been analysed from different disciplinary perspectives: as a democratic innovation (Avritzer & Navarro, 2003), as an effective instrument for partially correcting regional imbalance in the allocation of resources (Fedozzi, 1999), as a pedagogical process for citizenship learning (Streck, Sobottka, & Eggert, 2005; Moll & Fischer, 2000), among others. Participatory budgeting is a quite special place from where to see the community and the region as a heterogeneous totality, which would require much more than the convergence of classical academic disciplines. There one can see different sets of knowledge coming together in a context of negotiation and dialogue. This is so because what counts at the end is not an individual advantage, but a gain for the community or region in which eventually individuals also claim special recognition. At a recent regional hearing it was very interesting to see how people who did not know each other started to connect their knowledge about the frequent floods that affect the region. The urban dweller pleaded for protection of the houses in his neighbourhood, the municipal officer presented data on the economic impact of such incidents and finally a farmer concluded by saying that without a vigorous support for the rural area where water flows can or should be controlled, cities would hardly be safe from these frequent disasters. All of

this can be expressed in academic jargon, but there is undeniably practical and theoretical knowledge being shared and formed in these places.

In this study we will give special attention to socio-political and pedagogical dimensions of participatory budgeting within the larger framework of the newly created State System of Popular and Citizen Participation (Sisparci), incorporating, whenever possible, reflections from other fields and from our fellow research participants.

From participatory budgeting to the participatory system

The 1980s, in macroeconomic terms often referred to as the "lost decade" was in Brazil a very favourable time for civil society organisation in social movements, trade unions, political parties, and civil associations, expanding substantially the possibilities of participation in the public sphere. Especially popular social movements succeeded in consolidating themselves as agents with their own identity and the ability to develop and articulate various forms of participation. As a consequence, they succeeded also in influencing the definition of various social policies (Sobottka, 2000). At the decline of the military regime, a substantive democratisation beyond the electoral ritual was assumed by these movements as essential to the improvement of their living conditions.

Organization and participation in various formal and informal spaces were strengthened for making political pressure in the nascent democratic life. Thus, in the short space of about a decade, civil, political and social rights were enrolled in the legal system, particularly in the Constitution adopted in 1988, at amplitudes never before seen in the country. But this expansion, in particular of the social rights of citizenship, would soon be revealed as ambiguous: between the registration of rights in the Constitution and the possibility of their effective realisation an abyss was gradually opened: and the institutional mechanisms available at the time were insufficient to overcome it.

This was one of the factors that led social movements to bet on a decidedly more direct participation in decision spaces. One strategic objective became the conquest of state power by democratic elections in order to assure

effectiveness for the formally guaranteed rights. Another strategic objective was the expansion of channels of direct participation in everyday decisions about public policy, and as a means for social control of government actions. The latter goal has found its expression in a variety of issue related policy councils at all levels of government, and was also the origin of the claim to participate more directly in the definition of the public budget.

When the policy known as Participatory Budget was implemented in Porto Alegre, it consisted initially on a series of informal meetings in which municipal government representatives met with people interested in discussing how the resources of the city budget should be invested in the following year. Technical and political representatives participated in these discussions collecting suggestions of the citizens and promising effort to include them as far as possible in government planning as well as in the proposal of public budget that the government have to submit every year to the local parliament. They also committed themselves publicly to make the next year what the people had placed as priority.

With many aspects of self-organisation, this informal consultation was gradually becoming more organised through its own rules, and became part of the regular activities of local politics. Both the priority to invest public resources where the most needy population live, as well as the concern with issues affecting the whole city and requiring a technically well-founded approach, like public urban transportation, culture and economic development, formed a political compromise between the social groups (Avritzer & Navarro, 2003).

The long associative tradition in the city of Porto Alegre has facilitated the organisation of the concerned population and gave support to this initiative, but the involved movements were very jealous of their political autonomy. Although it was defined by the authorities as a co-management of the city, the Participatory Budget in Porto Alegre remained an informal consultation of the executive power of the city. Even having a very strong legitimacy among the inhabitants, the Participatory Budget had a weak institutional basis and depended on the will of the local authority.

While for many participants this was seen as an open channel to share decision-making, it gradually became clear to the participants that it was also an

instrument of marketing, used by the political parties to strengthen themselves in their electoral goals, but at the same time moving important decisions away from the participatory process. This double-sided participation brought ambiguities to the process and took it, beyond the initial charm, to lose much of its legitimacy. After 16 years in power, in 2004 the political group that created the Participatory Budget lost the elections in Porto Alegre. Part of the defeat has been attributed to a growing carelessness with the commitment to respect the will of the people expressed through the Participatory Budget consultations, delaying expected investments in several years and even slowing down the approved policies.

When in 1999 the same political group that implemented participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre was first elected to govern the state of Rio Grande do Sul, there were already some initiatives to broaden the channels of participation. One of them were the Regional Development Councils (*Conselhos Regionais de desenvolvimento*: Coredes), created as regional forums of "leaders" to discuss regional development. They were not directly concerned with the public budget, but with decentralisation of public management. Nevertheless, they became the administrative and political reference for the subsequent experience of inclusion of citizens in participatory budgeting. Even partially changing its functionality, the new government made abundant use of this structure.

Another already existent initiative was a consultation on regional priorities to be included in the budget by voting. The Regional Councils drew up lists of potential demands of the regional community, and voters could choose some priorities within those lists. The government pledged to include the most voted one as priority in the budget within the limits of what was technically and financially feasible. Unlike participatory budgeting, this consultation did not involve physical meetings or discussions; it allowed only choosing between previously defined areas for investment by voting.

Between 1999 and 2002, a first experience of participatory budgeting on the whole state of Rio Grande do Sul was implemented. Drawing on the experience accumulated over ten years, the ruling Popular Front structured a consultative process, starting from municipalities and the Regional Development Councils as local and regional units, to culminate in plenary representa-

tive meetings at the state level. Its primary function was to point out the priorities for public investments during the preparation of the annual budget.

The cycle of the participatory budgeting on the regional level had a calendar that was repeated annually. It began with preparatory meetings in all 495 municipalities, with the goal of informing the public about the process and the amount of resources that could possibly be invested in their region. There was also defined the timing and content agenda of discussions for the meetings in the 28 regions of the state. The outcome of these regional meetings returned then to the municipalities for debate and decision by the population, and were after that condensed in regional forums with elected representatives. Besides the meetings on the level of municipalities and regions, also a set of thematic forums with a more technical focus took place; they dealt with problems considered more technical, generally affecting many regions and specific to particular sectors.

The consolidation of the demands made in the forums of delegates was done in partnership with government representatives. This allowed higher qualification and technical, legal and financial suitability of the demands of citizens, but also gave the government a "golden share" at the end of the consultative process. Although it was very intense, partly due to strong opposition from other political parties, this experience of participatory budgeting lasted only four years and was not continued when the opposition won the next elections.

Having an area comparable to Czech Republic, Slovakia, Austria and Hungary together, distances in the state of Rio Grande do Sul represented a difficulty for all participants. And taking into account that the whole process was a voluntary activity for the citizens, it is easy to see how difficult a regular participation in the meetings was for members and for representatives from popular social movements. In the place of the direct participation of citizens from the neighbourhood in the decision about the priorities to invest the resources of their town, at the state level claims needed to be grouped together to have any chance of receiving support also from other participants and to be approved. They also became publicly defended by regional representatives/delegates and not by the directly affected people. This changed the

dynamics of the very public dispute over the priorities of the policy (Weyh, 2011).

Another important change was that the topics under discussion were getting a little more distant from people's everyday lives. While in Porto Alegre's experience the prioritised items were often such as paving the street, running water for the neighbourhood or the regularisation of land ownership where the own home is located, in the state budget discussions were on the development of the municipality, on support to agriculture or on the construction of a hospital that would serve the entire region. Even if they were considered important issues, many of them were perceived by participants as distant, and sometimes people even considered themselves barely able to influence decisions about topics considered “complicated” for them.

The opposition from some political parties also brought difficulties. A court prohibition to use state funds to pay for this consultation had as consequence that even government representatives who travelled through the state to organise the meetings had to have their costs covered by sources other than public funds. It certainly caused some difficulties (Charão, 2005), but gave a more informal character to the meetings, motivating even the most shy people to speak and to engage themselves, and strengthened the emergence of local leaders committed to their communities (Herbert, 2008).

Despite these difficulties and limitations, there was a very satisfactory participation during the four-year term led by the Popular Front under the leadership of the Workers Party. Family farming, small local enterprises as well as public health and basic education received priority attention in the period. But a good part of the urban population did not participate in these mobilisations and felt itself not addressed by the idea of a more participatory democracy. They did not grant legitimacy to these initiatives, and were sensitive to the arguments of the opposition of an "abandonment" of the cities.

During the following two terms, parties opposed to participatory budgeting ruled the state. Unlike what had happened in the city of Porto Alegre, where even being opposed, the former opposition parties have continued participatory budgeting, at the state level they discontinued this experiment of consulting the citizens, introducing much more restricted alternatives for

participation. This shows that at the state level this process probably had not acquired for the population such a great importance that politicians had to fear resistors.

Since 2011 the current government of the state Rio Grande do Sul, once again led by the Workers' Party, has proposed a set of modalities of participation. He called it "State System of Popular and Citizen Participation".[1] It is chaired by a management committee with equal representation of members of government and of civil society. Among the main agencies that compose the system are the newly created State Council for Development (*Conselho de Desenvolvimento do Estado:* CDES), with invited representatives of various sectors of society, the Regional Councils for Development (Coredes), with representatives of civil society from 28 regions, and a new government agency called Digital Office (*Gabinete Digital*), a channel for "e-participation".

Participatory budgeting is integrated into this system as a central element. An important innovation was holding regional plenary sessions to discuss priorities to prepare the Pluri-annual Plan which serves as a "framework" for the annual budgets and, more recently, the inclusion of the priorities voted at the municipal assemblies and the state level hearings into the budget law that guides the elaboration of the next annual budget.

The annual budgets are prepared according to the following stages: regional public hearings at which the participants select up to 10 among the 15 thematic areas that will serve as a base to present "demands" at the public assemblies which will be held in each municipality. These 15 areas are defined in the Pluri-annual Plan and guide the drafting of the budget for the next four-year period. This means that if a region chooses health as a priority area, the projects in this area may carry greater weight when the delegates of the municipalities (one delegate for every 30 voters of the local meeting) meet again to define the items that will be part of the ballot on which the voters will mark their priorities. After the vote, which may be either in ballot boxes distributed around the municipality or by internet, the delegates consolidate the proposal to be sent to the office responsible for elaborating the

[1] See www.participa.rs.gov.br

budget. Among the demands are equipment for the local police, hospital or school, support for ecological projects or for NGOs that work with children and youth. Since the amounts for projects of the participatory budget are already pre-defined by region, and since they must fit the previously established guidelines, this procedure ensures their inclusion in the proposal for the state budget that will finally be voted by the state parliament.

The changes that occurred in the participatory process when it was the first time expanded from the local level (Porto Alegre) to the level of the state (Rio Grande do Sul) were to a large extent "necessary" adaptations to allow the consultation to reach the highest possible number of people, but at the same time to be held within an acceptable period of time and with acceptable costs for all. It can be said they were pragmatic adaptations. The situation looks very different now in the new edition of the participatory process at the state level. As the name indicates, the government now intends to implement a *system* of participation. Many more areas of public policy were involved and the budget became only one part of this system.

Two other forms of participation of this system may be highlighted here: a more systematic dialogue with the mayors from the 495 municipalities in the state and a council of economic and social development. The dialogue with the mayors is important for the population, because many of the public policies depend on funds transferred by the state government to the municipality. If this dialogue does not work, citizens are harmed by the lack of public services. At the development council approximately 80 "leaders" of various segments of civil society, from churches and intellectuals to trade unions of entrepreneurs and of workers meet to discuss problems and to give inputs for future policies. Despite being initially hailed as a major initiative to better listen to society, this council has also been criticised because it has no deliberative power, because its participants are invited directly by the government itself, and because the governor, who should chair it, is very frequently only represented by a substitute.

Under the name Digital Office[2] was created a more permanent communication channel between the government and the population. The initiative

[2] http://gabinetedigital.rs.gov.br/

intends to offer a bidirectional communication between government and citizens. The practice, however, shows that so far it is above all a communication channel *from* the government *to* the people, informing about the development of projects and informing about the governments initiatives.

Two other well intertwined changes seem to affect more directly the idea of participatory democracy. The first one is related to the budget line items that are under discussion. In the previous experiences of participatory budgeting a (perhaps relatively small) part of the resources for *investments* was subject of discussion. All other current expenses of the city or state were defined in a very traditional way by government bureaucracy. Thus, for example, the two expenditures which together make up to 90% of the state spending: spending on active and retired staff and on the service of the public debt, were not discussed publicly. Several attempts were made to also include them in participatory budgeting, but political and bureaucracy resistance were always higher than the pressure of citizens to change this procedure. But the priorities of the participants concerning investments were widely respected, and transformed into public policy.

Now, in the current system of participation, possibly due to an economic crisis in the state, the volume of investment resources is very small. The amount of resources under discussion is inflated in that a portion of *current government expenditures* depend now on having its priority defined in participatory budgeting. One consequence is that an important part of maintaining health, education and security services, for example, that are constitutional obligations of the state, depend on the support they receive in this participatory process: with the risk that many mandatory public services do not receive enough funding.

This shift in budget lines has a very close relationship with a shift in the participating public. While in the original experiences participating citizens came mainly from what we might call civil society: people who came on their own, who became mobilised by neighbourhoods initiatives, or were participants in social movements, trade unions or other civil organisations – currently more than half of the participants in public meetings of the participatory budgeting process are public servants. They come to defend investment in their offices everyday needs. Nurses want funds for the needs of day-to-

day health posts; public school teachers want to ensure that in their schools there are chalk, cleaning supplies and school meals; police officers in their uniforms claim cars to patrol the streets, and life jackets to protect them.

One participant in a double reflection group remarks in this regard: "It seems to me that this process may not be as democratic [as officially presented]; it is now more representative from institutions." Referring to the previous participation form, she continues: "that participation was more effective, more emanated from the popular classes, had more representation of the communities" [M., double reflection group]. Another respondent in our research explained how participants are currently mobilized in some governmental organisations. According to him, superiors constrain their subordinates to participate in the consultations, they have to carry mobile ballot boxes and collect votes for specific themes that the director chose. This participant concludes laconically, "so, this is not popular consultation, it's an induction, constraining a person to vote in a priority that is not what he chooses, but what institutions want" [G., double reflection group]. The risk that these procedures bring to the participatory process was so described by one of our interviewee: "We are taking a popular decision without the presence of the people" [Ma., Santo Ângelo]. At the same time, during observations directly in the regions we could note that there are still lots of ardent supporters of a genuine citizen participation in these consultations. They resist "bureaucratisation" of consultations and mobilise people in their social circles to defend the idea of a democracy made by citizens themselves.

Surely further analysis will be needed about this change: what specifically led to it and what are its consequences. But two considerations can already be done now. On the one hand, today there are less independent citizens and members of social movements participating in the meetings. On the other hand, the government was very able in transferring to the participation process a conflict concerning the distribution of very scarce resources, thereby avoiding its responsibility for the lack of investment in certain public policies.

Between principles and strategies

There is not one single reason for participating in the public hearings. There are community leaders, accompanied by a group of dwellers from their communities, who may want to put housing among the priorities; the police and the fire department may claim support for safety; sometimes a teacher comes in with a whole class and makes the case for education; NGOs are a quite permanent presence claiming for resources for their work in poor areas in the cities; there is also room for expressing needs that reach beyond the resources allocated for decisions in participatory budgeting, such as the one representing the "movement for a federal public university" in a largely populated area where there are only private or community universities.

Participation has a pragmatic sense according to each individual or group's reasons to spend his/her free time in meetings that usually happen in the evenings. But there is also a deep understanding that participation is a value in itself, reaching beyond eventual immediate gains. It is a feeling that a democratic society, in spite of historical and contextual handicaps, is possible. In our view there is no reason for dichotomising between principles and strategies of participation. The point we are raising is that democratic participation is antithetical with a purely instrumental use of participation, as can be learned from history where dictatorial regimes or market driven interests exploit people's involvement without any interest of sharing power. There must be allowed space for the emergence of principles, not necessarily from the leaders of the process.

Participation has been at the forefront of the Brazilian political agenda since the second half of last century. The well known literacy method of Paulo Freire (1982), which was based on the assumption that reading the world as preceding the reading of the word was a way of overcoming the democratic inexperience embedded in a history of authoritarianism, exploitation and oppression; it was one among many manifestations of popular and community involvement in gaining some say regarding their well being. In the Northwest region of Rio Grande do Sul (municipality of Ijuí) the Base Community Movement (*Movimento Comunitário de Base*), as early as 1961,

developed a methodology of small group discussions that would reflect on the local situation and propose collective actions. The three principles of the movement refer to the human person as a) having dignity, value and excellence on his/her own; b) as having the capacity to create, to perfection him/herself while improving their world; c) as a being of relation, i.e., it is through assuming co-responsibility with others that men and women "humanise themselves, make history, create culture, and construct civilizations" (Brum & Marques, 2002, p. 35).

The military dictatorship installed in 1964 represented an interruption in the process, but as soon as 1983 a pioneering experience in South Brazil (municipality of Pelotas) put participation as the key element for municipal planning under the slogan "All the power emanates from the people." While acknowledging the existence of similar experiments, there was reaffirmed the importance of what was called the "conceptual fundamentals of popular participation", which were "popular sovereignty and the qualification of representative democracy through participatory practices of democracy" (Souza, 2002, p.19). Participatory planning consisted basically in going to the communities and listening to the demands of the people. Models, they argued, would have to be created according to local and regional conditions.

What we see in this process is a movement from humanistic and communitarian values, certainly very much influenced by theology of liberation, to an emphasis on democratisation of Brazilian society. The participatory budgeting, initiated in Porto Alegre in 1989, can be seen as a landmark in this development. Here participation became focused on what is the hard core of any public planning. It was not a governmental concession but the result of pressure exercised by popular organisations that demanded more resources for poor areas in the city in what has been also claimed as an "inversion of priorities" (Horn, 1994). The municipality of Porto Alegre accomplished the development of strategies of participation which later became integrated in state participatory budgeting, such as the regional thematic hearings for identification of a set of priorities which serve as parameters for demanding particular projects, the election of regional delegates, and the appointment of regional co-ordinators of participation.

The observations of the process confirm that the larger the geographical area and the heterogeneity of the population, the greater the importance of creating adequate strategies which on its turn may contribute to overshadow some of the underlying principles. These, nevertheless tend to be kept alive not seldom by individual participants, who can be regional co-ordinators of participation, community leaders or just citizens who believe that there is being created something that can make a better democracy.

The tension between participation as a principle and as strategy is of particular interest when dealing with the integration of participatory budgeting within a broader system of citizenship participation. Our observations up to this point lead us to suggest that there is the risk that the opacity of the system as a whole, with many channels of participation very loosely connected or not connected at all, as well as the managerial abilities required to deal with the complex relations within each sector and among them, tends to overemphasise the strategic dimension.

Participatory budgeting has its logic and procedures quite clearly defined, but in this very process it tends to become mechanical. The amount of resources to be allocated for projects decided by popular demands is already determined by the administration, according to criteria which include population and participation in the previous year. There are usually three minutes for each citizen to defend priorities or present specific demands, there is the election of delegates who will participate in the process until the final draft to be included in the state budget, there is always an official report from a government official. All these procedures are increasingly structured, controlled by the organisers of the public meetings and withdraw the space of direct and spontaneous communication that is essential to a public sphere open to everyone, for an effective participatory democracy.

This process is adequate insofar as one accepts the limits of individual and community participation in open discussions. These limits can be seen in the message given to students in an assembly: “You should be mobilised with your friends, to create a big network in the internet to vote for the demands that you presented and this has to be constant; this participation cannot be only this year and the next year I will not go; we are also in a pedagogical process” (Nova Santa Rita). But there is also a growing feeling that this is not

enough. People miss discussions that reach beyond immediate and localised needs that can be supplied with quite small funds. There are many voices that manifest a desire to have a say about projects that see local and regional development in a broader perspective. When people refer with some nostalgia to the experience from 1999 to 2002, it is to the discussions on larger scale projects that they are referring. For instance, at this time among regional priorities there would be included the discussion about roads that connect various municipalities and which therefore required a much greater involvement in discussions and negotiations. Asked if participatory budgeting accomplishes its aim, this answer expresses what can be heard by many participants: "I think it does (accomplish its aims) in part, then we still don't have a debate or mass decisions. As a dialogue, a debate, a participation" (Missões). In this sentence, dialogue and debate are integrated with participation.

Conditions for democratic participation

Democratic participation cannot be taken for granted as it moves between principles and strategies. In this study we are interested in identifying some conditions which may favour or which may represent an obstacle for democratic participation. By democratic participation we understand a process in which there are present at least these essential elements, as identified by Fricke (2013): an open dialogue; a space for collective reflection; the voice of each individual being heard in an open change process. We ask to what extent participatory budgeting represents a rupture with traditional ways of doing politics, and what conditions would be necessary to enhance the development of democratic participation. In this section we explore some of these conditions summed up in two points: trust in people's sovereignty and knowledge, and organisational matters and communication.

Trust in people's sovereignty and knowledge

Trust between elected officials and citizens is a very rare feeling in most representative democracies today. Participatory budgeting, as seen earlier in this paper, originated from the experience of citizens feeling deceived by generations of politicians, thus taking in their own hands the possibility of

having a direct influence on the use of at least a small part of public funds. One condition that sets the tone for the type of participatory budgeting is the trust in people's sovereignty and knowledge, in the trust in the "wisdom of the many" (Roth, 2011). The depth of political will, which could be defined as a precondition for democratic participation, depends on the degree to which citizens are trusted.

The fact that at least some spaces of participation in public budgeting in the state have continued over many years, having passed through three administrations with quite different political perspectives, is a sign that officials cannot dismiss people's knowledge of reality as just commonsensical public opinion. It is people who know better where the shoe pinches, but as the process shows, there are many shoes that pinch, and the pain does not necessarily have the same intensity.

Participatory budgeting can be seen as a place for building up trust which, on its turn, is a basic condition for legitimacy in democracy. Let us see how this happens. From the side of the government the movement for constructing bridges is manifested by the presence of officials who are part of the executive power. They may not necessarily be the highest ranking ones, but nevertheless they are there as government, and have to account for what their government does or does not do. There is the expectation that critiques and proposal will somehow echo in some place where decisions are taken. Since it is a process that extends throughout the year, people know that there will be other opportunities to bring up the issues. It can be noticed that year by year there is given more attention to feedback on funds which have been spent on demands by local communities or regions.

However, the vast majority of people that do not participate in meetings and do not vote on priorities and projects, may have different opinions about the relation with state officials. This can be exemplified in the words of a citizen who points out the difficulty of mobilising the population for the "discredit." This discredit has as its major target the state government, but not only. It can be observed that in places where there is a greater level of trust within the community and municipality, there is not only more participation in terms of numbers of citizens but also in terms of the quality of participation. For example, at the end of a recent regional hearing for selecting the ten

priorities, the leader of a caravan from a municipality stood up to say that they were glad to notice that the priorities they had agreed upon in their local meetings had been indicated. It means that a lot of discussion had been done before coming to the official hearing, but also that those people who came to the regional meeting were entrusted to represent their communities.

The situation mentioned above points to one of the major challenges of Brazilian democracy today. On one hand, there is little expectation that state officials, in all government levels, provide the framework for trusting relations. Many of the constitutional spaces of participation become instrumentalised for pragmatic party or personal interests. On the other hand, local organisations do not find adequate channels for objectifying their needs in terms of viable projects, which weakens the motivation to participate. The fact that in the participatory budgeting meetings there are so many public agencies is a symptom that there is still a long way to go for having a trusting relation on a broader social scale.

Organizational matters and communication

Of no minor importance are organisational matters which have to do both with participation as a principle and with strategies for participation. In a state with a great diversity in term of population density there is to be considered first of all the difficulty posed to organise participation in less populated regions where people have to travel great distances. This may be, for instance, one reason for having a relatively high involvement of public organisations that can count on transportation provided by their departments or by the municipality.

Another important organisational factor apparently of minor importance is the place where the meetings take place. Since in the present structure of participatory budgeting the Regional Development Council play a major role, and since they are presided over by university presidents or representatives, most meetings happen in university settings. This may account for the relatively high proportion of citizens with an academic degree participating in meetings, usually much higher than the average of the whole local population.

A key element for the functioning of participatory budgeting is communication on all levels and in all dimensions. Our observations allow us to argue that communication is still a weak point in the whole process. It starts with the information on the process and of some data regarding projects which were approved and implemented, without space for reactions of the public. They are listeners expecting their turn to speak, and when it comes they will present their demands in a couple of minutes sometimes cleverly integrated in a network of arguments. But this does not seem to be enough to understand this as a significant process of communication. A participatory democracy depends on a strong public sphere (Habermas, 1995) and participatory budgeting can be an important part of such a public sphere (Fischer & Moll, 2000; cf. Pålshaugen, 2002). The first experiences in fact were much closer to an open and integrative process of communication. By structuring the meetings rigidly, the participatory system may become technically more efficient, but fails to give an important contribution to democracy.

One major problem of communication starts with the invitation to the meetings. In the excerpt below, a teacher incisively confronts government officials and authorities because they do not know local reality, or do not take it into account when organising the meeting:

> People (!), just to confirm what Diego said here: the reason for the distance from what happens in our town. First: it is badly disseminated, not everyone has access to the newspaper at school, at the school it has been three months since we last have seen it. Second; most of those who are here get up early, to go catch a bus to Porto Alegre, Esteio. They go to work in other places because here there are no jobs for them. So they leave the dormitory town and then they come to school, go home, lie down and sleep (Inajara, Nova Santa Rita).

The study revealed the difficulty of communicating through the classical mass media, such as the radio, newspaper or sound truck. Either the newspaper does not arrive, or people are at the factories, stores or schools, and the message does not reach them. At the same time one sees the important role of the personal invitation. The research project ratifies what José Luis Rebellato (s. d., p. 98) found in Uruguay: "The issue of how *to reach the non-organised neighbour* becomes outstandingly relevant and may be an essential key to the

development of a radical democracy." We still need to find out what role the digital media is having in these personal invitations (Malone, 2012).

The regional co-ordinators of participation play the important role of making the process work on the regional and municipal level. As defined by one of these co-ordinators himself: "This figure of the regional co-ordinator was created precisely so that one could interact with the municipalities, so that one could make this approximation between state government [and people], discuss the problems, discuss the demands and even discuss here the demands of the party, and be with you [the people] in all municipal assemblies" (Nova Santa Rita). This co-ordinator is aware of his mediating role between the state government and local communities, between the various agencies that are institutionally part of the process (*Coredes* and *Comudes*), and between the local and regional organisations and institutions (schools, social movements, NGOs, etc.). The words of a participant in another region confirm this strategic role of the co-ordinator: "This person who functions as co-ordinator of popular and citizenship participation has to have an insertion in all municipalities where he has to dialogue with a variety of political agents as much from the government as from the civil community; he has to know these persons, has to listen to them, has to have sensibility to understand what these person demand and what they expect; and this role, I believe, has been made with much competence by our regional co-ordinator" (Santo Ângelo, Missões).

Concluding remarks

The study brought to light some challenges that emerge when a local experiment of participation is applied on a large geographical scale. While the expansion may represent hope for the advancement of democracy, the experience in Rio Grande do Sul, besides new potentials, shows also adaptations that become necessary, and difficulties that need to be overcome.

Among the potential for overcoming historical and present day handicaps we identify the following:

a) Participatory budgeting points to the vision that development does not depend on one strong leader or party. Within Brazilian society there are

forms of organisation that can be mobilised for developing regional projects. However, mobilisation should not refer only to the acquiescence to previously defined projects, but encompass the trusting relation in identifying priorities and creating strategies for their implementation.

b) In participatory budgeting there is the possibility of creating a productive confluence of social and popular movements with social and state organisations. It is a space for new institutionalising forces to make their argument for the expansion and democratisation of existing institutions as well as for institutions to make adaptations or promote changes.

c) It allows for individual or small group (minorities) expression in a public space. As we have seen in this study, participatory budgeting has the potential of being an instrument for producing a rupture with the historical "culture of silence" in Brazilian society. However, when losing the dimension of participation as a principle, this important aspect tends to be obfuscated by the supposedly more urgent and not necessarily explicit agendas of strategies.

What are the weaknesses, especially when participatory budgeting could be considered as a test for implementing a system on a state or, as planned, a national level? We highlight only some of them identified in our study:

a) The development of open and efficient communication channels. In all contexts covered by our study, communication seems to be a basic obstacle for the success of participatory budgeting. It is not only communication from governmental agencies or officials to the citizens through the distribution of more folders, more media time or more internet information, as sometimes understood by the promoters. This is obviously important, but communication as required by citizens entails a mutual active listening to each other. This is a very difficult goal to reach, given the variety of players that take part in the game with their respective agendas.

b) To view participatory budgeting, as well as other participatory initiatives, as a long term project with a strong pedagogical potential. In a democratic society, there is always the possibility of discontinuity of projects and policies due to the periodic electoral events. This, however, should not be

seen as an argument for not betting on the introduction of processes with long term pedagogical consequences, creating a higher level politics and a social contract where differences and equality are well balanced (Streck, 2010).

c) To not lose sight of participation as a principle, which allows developing different models and strategies of participation. These should be seen as the consequence, and not as the starting point. Comparative studies on participatory budgeting and of other forms of citizen participation will be of great importance for the development of new models, according to the particular cultures of participation, and anchored on broad principles of democratic participation.

For us, as researchers, as already pointed out in the methodological notes, the topic poses challenges, and produces learnings that will deserve a closer look at some other time. Besides the more evident ones as the financial resources needed, the conditions for mobility in a large geographical space, and difficulty of combining the schedules among the various stakeholders, there is the highly differentiated social, political and cultural context that emerges at closer looks on the map that starts to be designed. These challenges take us to reaffirm the importance of larger scale studies in the tradition of action research (Fricke, 2011; Gustavsen, 1994; Fals Borda, 1979), and our interest in enhancing the social, political and pedagogical relevance of our active empathic presence in the process.

References

Avritzer, L., & Navarro, Z. (Eds.) (2003). *A inovação democrática no Brasil: o orçamento participativo.* São Paulo: Cortez.

Avritzer, L. (2008). Instituições participativas e desenho institucional: algumas considerações sobre a variação da participação no Brasil democrático. *Opinião Pública*, 14(1), 43-64 <dx.doi.org/10.1590/S0104-62762008000100002>.

Brum, A., & Marques, M. (2002). *Uma comunidade em busca de seu caminho.* 2. ed. Ijuí: Unijuí.

Charão, I. (2005). Despertar cidadãos: diálogo com Iria Charão. In D. R. Streck et al. (Eds.), *Dizer a sua palavra*: *educação cidadã, pesquisa participante e orçamento público* (pp. 183-208). Pelotas: Seiva.

Fals Borda, O. (1979). *Historia doble de la costa*. Bogotá: Valencia Editores

Fals Borda, O. (2010). La investigación-acción participativa: política y epistemologia. In *Antologia: Orlando Fals Borda* (pp. 205-225). Bogotá: Universidad Nacional de Colombia.

Fals Borda, O. (2013). Action Research in the convergence of disciplines. *International Journal of Action Research,* 9(2), 155-167.

Fedozzi, L. (1999). *Orçamento Participativo: reflexões sobre a experiência de Porto Alegre.* 2 ed. Porto Alegre: Tomo Editorial.

Fischer, N. B., & Moll, J. (Eds.) (2000). *Por uma nova esfera pública*: *o orçamento participativo*. Petrópolis: Vozes.

Freire, P. (1982). *A importância do ato de ler*: *em três artigos que se completam.* São Paulo: Cortez.

Fricke , W. (2011). Socio-political perspectives on Action Research. Traditions in Western Europe – Especially in Germany and Scandinavia. *International Journal of Action Research* 7 (3), 248-261.

Fricke, W. (2013). A realistic view of the participatory utopia. Reflections on participation. *International Journal of Action Research* 9(2), 168-191.

Guimarães, J. (2004). As culturas brasileiras da participação democrática. In L. Avritzer (Ed.), *A participação em São Paulo* (pp. 197-211). São Paulo: Uesp.

Gustavsen, B. (1994). *Dialog und Entwicklung: Kommunikationstheorie, Aktionsforschung und Strukturreformen in der Arbeitswelt*. Berlin: Sigma.

Habermas, J. (1996). Three normative models of democracy. In S. Benhabib (Ed.), *Democracy and difference*: *contesting the boundaries of the political* (pp. 21-30). Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Herbert, S. (2008). *Orçamento Participativo na perspectiva de Freire e Gramsci*: *condições para emergência e formação de lideranças.* Porto Alegre: Redes.

Horn, C. (Ed.) (1994). *Porto Alegre*: *o desafio da mudança.* Porto Alegre: Ortiz.

Kristiansen, M., & Bloch-Poulsen, J. (2010). Employee driven innovation in team (Edit) – innovative potential, dialogue, and dissensus. *International Journal of Action Research*, 6(2-3), 155-195.

Malone, M. (2012). Tweeting history: an inquiry into aspects of social media in the Egyptian Revolution. In B. L. Hall, D. E. Clover, J. Crowther, & E. Scandrett (Eds.), *Learning and education for a better world: the role of social movements.* (pp. 169-182). Rotterdam: Sense.

Moll, J., & Fischer, N. (2000). Pedagogias nos tempos do orçamento participativo em Porto Alegre: possíveis implicações educativas na ampliação da esfera pública. In T. Genro et al., *Por uma nova esfera pública*: *a experiência do Orçamento Participativo* (pp 143-168). Petrópolis: Vozes.

Pålshaugen, Ø. (2002). Discourse-democracy at work - on public spheres in private enterprises. Concepts and Transformation. *International Journal of Action Research*, 7 (2), 141-192

Rebellato, J. (s/d). *Intelectual radical*. Montevideo: Extensión-Eppal-Nordan.

Roth, R. (2011). *Bürgermacht: Eine Streitschrift für mehr Partizipation.* Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung.

Sobottka, E. A. (2000). Movimentos sociais: a busca da ampliação do espaço político. In H.-G. Flickinger (Ed.), *Entre caridade, solidariedade e cidadania* (pp. 80-97). Porto Alegre: Edipucrs.

Sobottka, E. A. (2004). Partizipativer Haushalt in Porto Alegre: Soziale Bürgerrechte und Legitimität der Regierung. In H. Eidam & D. de Souza (Eds.), *Metaphysik und Hermeneutik. Festschrift für Hans-Georg Flickinger.* Kassel: Kassel University Press, 2004,. p. 292-309.

Sobottka, E., Saavedra, G., & Rosa, V. da (2005). Legalidade, legitimação e democratização no orçamento público estadual. In D. Streck, E. Eggert, & E. Sobottka (Eds.), *Dizer a sua palavra: Educação cidadã, pesquisa participante e orçamento público* (p. 55. 84). Pelotas: Seiva.

Souza, B. (2002). *Todo poder emana do povo.* Pelotas: Educat.

Streck, D. (2010). *A new social contract in a Latin American education context.* New York: Palgrave McMillan.

Streck, D. (2013a). Partizipative (Aktions-)Forschung und disziplinäre Konvergenzen – Überlegungen basierend auf einer Studie über einen Bürgerbeteiligungshaushalt im Süden Brasiliens. *Soziale Passagen* 5(2), 211-227.

Streck, D. (2013b). Pesquisa (ação) participante e convergências disciplinares: Reflexões a partir do estudo do orçamento participativo no sul do Brasil. *Civitas,* 13(3), 477-495.

Streck, D. (2013c). Participation in social research: "Quijotism" or construction of a world view? *International Journal of Action Research* 9 (2), 192-208.

Streck, D., Eggert, E. & Sobottka, E. (Eds.). *Dizer a sua palavra*: Educação *cidadã, pesquisa participante e orçamento público.* Pelotas: Seiva.

Weyh, C. (2011). *Educar pela participação*: *Uma leitura político-pedagógica do Orçamento Participativo Estadual no município de Salvador das Missões/RS.* Santo Ângelo: Furi.

Zemelman, H. (2006). *El conocimiento como desafio posible.* México, DF: Instituto Pensamiento y Cultura em América Latina.

About the authors

Emil A. Sobottka is professor at Graduate School of Social Sciences of the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul – Brazil. Recent research projects focus on social policy, social movements and political participation, and participatory research methodologies.

Danilo R. Streck is professor at the Graduate School of Education of the Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Unisinos), Brazil. Recent research projects focus on popular education, Latin American pedagogy, pedagogical mediations in participatory social processes, and participatory research methodologies.

Authors' addresses:

Emil A. Sobottka
Rua Prof. Fitzgerald, 192 – Petrópolis
90470-160 Porto Alegre, RS
Brazil
Email: sobottka@pucrs.br

Danilo R. Streck
Rua P. Rodolfo Saenger, 144
Bairro Jardim América
93035-110 São Leopoldo-RS
Brazil
Email: dstreck@unisinos.br or streckdr@gmail.com