

## What Accounts for Success in Participatory Governance?

Denden Alicias, July 2009<sup>1</sup>

Participatory governance processes have mushroomed around the world but a number of studies have already pointed out to the failures of sustaining the participatory projects and in empowering ordinary citizens. In this article, I draw attention to a complicated set of enabling factors for success in participatory governance. The insights and lessons here are culled from the studies of Rebecca Abers on the internationally acclaimed participatory budget policy in Porto Alegre, Brazil. With the rise of progressive political parties in Southeast Asia, coupled with the introduction of participatory governance spaces in conjunction with decentralization, the insights from Porto Alegre may be helpful in thinking about local governance transformations in the region.

- **A dual process of commitment building is necessary for the success of participatory institutions.**

State actors (politicians and bureaucrats) and ordinary citizens should be motivated to support, take part in, and respect participatory processes. Without the motivation and commitment, polices are unlikely to be empowered and participatory.

Taking a realistic view of the motivations of state actors, Abers (n.d., 2000) argues that *political will is not enough*. Reform efforts of progressive state actors create political and practical burdens that, more often than not, they cannot withstand. Politically, the attempt to transfer power to a forum, where ordinary citizens can make decisions, means taking power away from those that have it and who also possess the resources and ability to resist such change. Practical problems also arise in participatory process especially when the state administration pushing it is inefficient and lack funding. “Participatory decision-making requires money to organize the process and financial, operational, and legal capacity to implement its results”.

The PT (Workers' Party) administration in Porto Alegre was able to hold out such political and practical challenges by *treating the participatory process as a political asset*. Participatory budget became a central part of the party's strategy for re-election. How did they do this?

The PT administration in Porto Alegre successfully *built an alternative political coalition composed of the urban poor (neighborhood leaders), middle-class, and section of the economic elite*. By responding to the demands (community-based infrastructure) of the neighborhood leaders, who have traditionally relied in clientelistic relations with populist politicians, the PT administration had won their support. By focusing initially on infrastructure and resisting to privilege local labor cooperatives, the administration was able to win the support of the construction companies. The dual support of the neighborhood leaders and construction companies bolstered PT's bargaining power with

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the city council/assembly so that it was able to pass critical tax legislations that consequently increased the city revenue. This widening of fiscal space then has enabled the administration to continue to attend to the material demands of the participatory budget participants.

How did the support of the middle class come about? It was all about a right timing. Participatory budget was introduced in the most opportune time. It was initiated at a political moment when major national corruption scandals have generated huge street demonstrations throughout the country. Brazil's middle class, who was yearning for social justice, transparency, and accountability in government was quick to find an expression in PT's participatory policy. "The fact that the participatory budget gained international attention further increased its popularity among the middle class". The administration's hard work in building an image as an "international innovator" has surely paid off.

From the "demand" side of the participation equation, the budget policy worked so well because it drew the poor into the decision-making process and it responded to the pressing demands of the urban poor. It was noted that the participatory budget addressed the needs of the urban poor even before the budget policy was initiated. Ordinary citizens were drawn into the process not mainly because they wanted to deliberate but because they wished to get infrastructure for their neighborhoods to improved their lives. The competitive element of the process also provided its vitality. People have mobilized to go to the meetings because the process provided the prospective of providing returns to their specific needs and concerns.

Hence, participatory process/policy seems more likely to work when both government and the participants are convinced that a participatory system will *benefit their interests*. In the case of Porto Alegre, the interests of stakeholders were to build political support on one hand and to resolve perceived problems on the other.

- **Participatory policy needed appropriate administrative reforms. The sincerity of participatory effort is gauged by the seriousness of its administration.**

Porto Alegre's participatory policy helped strengthened PT's reputation for administrative competence. Rather than complicating city governance, the participatory process actually helped bring a highly fragmented administration under control. Three key reforms were put in place to make the participatory work:

- One, all budget decisions were centralized to the Municipal Budget Council. This has regulated the highly autonomous nature of budget allocation by various city agencies.
- Two, a municipal information system was created to track the expenditures in all city agencies.
- Three, a planning office with direct ties to the mayor was created. This has increased the authority of the Budget Council to ensure that the agencies implemented the Council's decisions.

- **The value of starting small**

PT's administration would not have been able to enhance its capacity through participatory budget were it not for the program's obvious practicality. The administration *started with decisions that are within its administrative competence and with small-scale public works that required little external funding or technical capacity.*

Critics of the Porto Alegre budget process observe that the process focuses heavily on the immediate and local issues. However, Abers contends that “it is precisely this focus that attracts people into the budget fora”. The program started out in dealing with issues that were important to neighborhood residents. “There was no need to convince poor Porto Alegre residents that basic sanitation, flood control, street pavement, bus service, schools, and health posts were important to their lives”. *Only when the program has gained momentum on these relatively modest essentials that large public works and non-capital components of the budget were included* in the scope of the participatory budget.

- **Demonstration effect—a key to sustaining participation**

In the initial stages of the participatory budget process, only a few areas of the city that has strong histories of neighborhood organizing participated intensely. Overtime, impoverished areas with little prior history of civic organizing came to participate with greater intensity. How, then, did unorganized residents know that participating in budget forum might actually be worth it?

Two factors are accounted for this: One, the budget policy has a demonstration effect. As visible public works were built in the neighborhoods, less organized residents recognized *that participation in the forum might actually yielded returns.* This again highlights the importance of the initial thematic focus of the policy-- high-impact infrastructure projects that can be implemented in a year. Two, the administration has hired activists from neighborhood movements to help organize the participatory budget process. In the course of their action, these activists were exposed to areas that had not yet participated, sought out potential leaders and helped them organize the community from scratch.

References:

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