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## Learnings and obstacles for citizenship education in participatory budget

**ABSTRACT:** The article analyzes facets of the participatory budget (PB) in the state of Rio Grande do Sul (Brazil) highlighting the way it relates to forming active citizenship by democratic participation. In the first part the proposal of participatory budget practices in is briefly presented, especially the State System of Popular and Citizen Participation (Sistema Estadual de Participação Popular e Cidadã) (2011–2014). Then the pedagogical potentials are identified: the participation in a space for discussion; dialogue with the communities; knowledge of reality; mobilization to participate. As a counterpoint the limits of the PB are presented related to communication, party-politics disputes, discredit of the governing authorities, discontinuity of public policies and the lack of a local and regional technical capacity to elaborate projects.

**KEYWORDS:** Participatory budget; pedagogical mediations; citizenship, participation.

### Introduction

A crucial issue that democracies face today refers to the participation of citizens in shaping their societies. Civil society organizations and social movements of different political tendencies and with different strategies share the assumption that their voices are not heard, and that they don't feel really represented by the elected officials. Thus, there is a quite widespread understanding that representative democracy should be supplemented by mechanisms that allow direct participation of citizens in decisions that affect their lives. In this socio-political context, the participatory budget (PB) has become one of the most important practices to democratize society in recent decades.

In Brazil the pioneering experience was introduced in the city of Porto Alegre during the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores) administration led by Olívio Dutra in 1989. An important innovation occurred with the expansion of the participatory budget to the entire state of Rio Grande do Sul, in 1999, again under a government led by the Workers' Party. After 2002 administrations with different political orientations reduced the participation to more simplified processes to consult on priorities and projects, eliminating the movement of participatory and collective construction. In 2011, again in under a Popular Front administration led by Governor Tarso Genro, the participatory budget returned, but within a State System of Popular and Citizen Participation (Sisparci).

This is in brief the context in which the present reflection is conducted. The data we present and analyze refer mainly to the period from 2011 to 2014, but the memory of the participatory budget between 1999 and 2002 will also be used as a resource. Both periods provided a field of research to understand the participatory budget as a pedagogical practice to form citizenship, even in expanded geographical spaces and with a much larger and more heterogeneous population. Although it is not possible to separate the pedagogical aspects from the administrative and party-politics ones, in this text we prioritize emphasis on the contribution to the development of the democratic culture.

Education will be taken in the broad understanding of being the process through which society forms itself, generating and transmitting values and knowledges. This takes place in formal school settings, but also in non-formal and informal social relations. PB, as we understand it, is an important context for learning citizenship for a variety of reasons, but mainly for dealing with the hard core of public administration, i.e., the allocation of public funds.

The text is organized in three sections. In the first, we locate the readers in relation to the practice that provides the base for our reflection, the State System of Popular and Citizen Participation. We also inform about the methodology that served as guidance for our research. In the second part, we highlight educational possibilities of the participatory budget. The third part is more or less the counterpoint to the previous one, identifying major obstacles or difficulties.

The central argument that will be taken up again in the final considerations is that the participatory budget is indeed a powerful means to create an informed, active citizenry. At the same time, for various reasons that will also be raised in the text, there is what Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2000) qualifies as "a waste of experience". This refers both to the individual experi-

ence of each citizen that is lost to the community and society, but also refers to the experience of collective construction.

### **Participatory budget as a space for popular participation**

The Brazilian representative crisis is part of world scenery, which involves economic, social, political and cultural issues. In many countries, we witness low voting turnouts and dissatisfaction with the institutions of representative democracy. In this context, PB can be conceived of as a counter-hegemonic space allowing an organization from the base to the top of societies (Santos 2002). It has in its history the attempt to construct a democracy on whose horizon people learn citizenship and participation, and thus one can aspire to a new logic in the organization of power in the State. PB has proven, for example, to be an important instrument for redefining priorities in terms of distribution of public resources and for qualifying public administration. Also Schugurensky (2009) has pointed out that increases in citizen participation, including PB, may be seen with optimism because they suggest a revitalization of community life, an expansion of social capital, a more vibrant society, and a strengthening of participatory democracy.

In Brazil, the processes of elaborating the public budget are regulated according to the Federal Constitution of 1988 that established, among other things, what is the responsibility of the federal, state and municipal government. The Constitution was a major milestone in the process of redemocratization of Brazil, which had just come through a long period of civil-military dictatorship. Immediately after its approval, the first initiatives to seek popular participation in elaborating the public budget arose, and the municipality of Porto Alegre pioneered this experience during the administration of the Popular Front in 1989 (Fedozzi 1999; Fischer and Moll 2000). The PB of Porto Alegre was considered a successful experience of popular participation, it became internationally known and was adapted to other cities in the country and abroad (Avritzer 2010) with various levels and forms of participation. Moreover, governments with distinct political and administrative orientations now promote participatory budgets.

The PB attained a statewide level also during an administration of the Popular Front, a coalition of left-oriented political forces led by the Workers' Party, in which Olivio Dutra was governor of the state of Rio Grande do Sul (1999–2002), and it had many similarities to that of Porto Alegre. The cycle of popular participation began with preparatory meetings in all municipalities aiming to teach the population about the process. (Sobottka, Saavedra

and Rosa 2005). The state participatory budget consisted of 5 stages: regional plenaries for defining guidelines; thematic regional assemblies for development; municipal public assemblies; plenaries of the regional forums of delegates to the participatory budget; election of priorities by state council of the participatory budget.

In 2011 the Popular Front was elected to the state government again with a proposal to return to popular participation, now with an innovation, the State System of Popular and Citizen Participation (Sisparci-Sistema Estadual de Participação Popular e Cidadã ). The Sisparci was implemented during the administration of Governor Tarso Genro, composed by various tools that, when integrated, formed this system. Its history already began with the challenges to broaden a proposal of popular participation that went beyond the participatory budget. Characterized as a complex, multifaceted system, it included direct and indirect participation mechanisms, beginning with a parity managing committee of members of the administration and of civil society, then going through an executive coordination, covering four areas: budget decisions, social control, social dialogues and digital participation. With the intention of establishing a dialogue among all these sectors, the participatory budget attempted to situate the budgetary decisions in a more complex process through dialogue with all spaces that made up the system.

Analyzing the directions of participation in Brazil, social scientist Leonardo Avritzer (2016) states that participation ultimately centered on the main cities of the country, in areas that became traditional from the beginning of the redemocratization process, such as health, social assistance, education and urban policies, and that this reality contributed to the segmentation of participation. This phenomenon is thought to have caused the loss of centrality of the PB in the Popular Front governments, which can be noted by the fact that the amount of money to be used for decisions taken by the communities and municipalities was reduced, as happened in Rio Grande do Sul. PB thus, to a certain extent, fell into discredit among part of the population and of the social movements themselves.

In this context, the team that developed the research project on “Popular Participation and Development: A study of political-pedagogical processes in the Participatory Budget of the State of Rio Grande do Sul (2011–2014)” participated in various activities promoted by the government, with an emphasis on public hearings and assemblies. In these spaces, audios were taped and questionnaires were applied, which after they were organized and systematized generated data on the profile of the participants and their impressions

and opinions on the PB. Seminars and spaces for reflection were also organized with government representatives, regional leaders and researchers.

The research methodology was based on the principles of action research, considering the production of knowledge basically as a process of collective self-reflection, instead of individual intervention in themes and social issues (Eikeland 2007). The basic question was whether PB can contribute for educating citizens, and – if so – what are its strengths or potentialities, and what are its weaknesses that represent a waste of accumulated experience. In group meetings conflicting themes were brought to open discussion, such as the tension between participation as a political-pedagogical principle and as an electoral strategy, the role of the various stakeholders, the kind of development being promoted, the channels of communication between the various agents, and the relation between participation and delivery of “products” decided upon by the citizens.

The different spaces that the research team promoted and where researchers participated generated a large database with different materials, which will be used to identify aspects of the pedagogical dimension in the participatory budget. The participatory methodology allowed opportunities to confront various perspectives on the same issue, thus ensuring greater validity to the findings and analytical considerations. In this article priority will be given to description of the emerging positive and negative aspects.

The “stories” are argumentative opinions discussed in the group, and they are representative as much of the content as of the process. In terms of content, they express emerging consensus after sometimes long discussions. In some occasions, group discussions followed individual interviews so that all the subjects had the opportunity to organize their thoughts about the conflicting themes that were presented for discussion and which, on their turn, had originated in previous dialogues on the subject. They are representative of the process inasmuch as they reveal the potentiality of the research process to help individuals and groups understand their acting in PB, collectively organize their ideas and increase the effectiveness of their participation.

### **Pedagogical potentialities**

This section will present what was learned by the participants regarding the popular participation process. In general it was identified that the participants believe that they learn to participate in a public space; to dialogue collectively about improvements in their communities; to get to know the space, the priorities and the needs of the place where they live, and to mobilize so

that there will be a more effective participation by the population. Below, thoughts on these learnings will be presented.

### **Learning to participate**

It may be a truism to state that participation is learned by participating. Participation *lato sensu* is part of our intersubjective constitution. We participate in formal initiatives, actions of resistance, informal initiatives with neighbors and colleagues. The question is to know what this participation means, what people learn from participating, what forms of life it potentiates, what interests are represented in the participation (Verschelden, Brauwere, Droogh Devisscher 2009). In other words, we need to adjectivize the participation, rendering explicit what kind of participation it is, and, since it is democratic participation (Fricke 2013) we find that there are small possibilities of learning to participate by participating. The pioneering experiences of Paulo Freire teaching literacy in the 1960s (Freire 1981) already began with the assumption that there was a culture of silence that had to be broken with the right of every citizen, male and female, to have their say.

In the second half of last century, on the one hand the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985) silenced the voices that rebelled. On the other hand, it provoked a movement of reaction that articulated movements of resistance and struggle for democracy with experiences that ranged from neighborhood associations, passing through ecclesial base communities and workers' unions. The participatory budget appears within this participative movement for change, that always had a strong pedagogical ingredient manifested in popular education (Weyh 2010; Streck, Esteban 2013). This is reflected in the answers of the PB participants to the question about what is learned when one participates:

One learns how important is the participation of the citizens and taxpayers. (Novo Hamburgo/RS).

One learns that people play a fundamental role in the decisions of the State Budget. One learns this in practice, by experience. (Novo Hamburgo/RS).

There may be very different reasons for people to participate in some activity or event, but in the case of the PB as we saw above they usually refer directly to the improvement of living conditions in their neighborhood, municipality or region, through intervention in the public budget. Herbert (2008), in his study of the PB in Rio Grande do Sul (1999–2002), found that

participation in what is a central element of public administration – the allocation of public funds – even enables training new leaders, proving its educational potential to form citizenship in the sense of breaking with historical problems connected to political leadership, such as clientelism and patrimonialism.

### Learning to dialogue

The participants learn to dialogue and debate in the assemblies and hearings at the same time as they understand that their participation in the collective dialogue is essential to legitimize the democratic process, above all by participating in decisions regarding the development of the municipality and the region where they live. In the words of one of the participants, the PB allows “hearing the voice of the population” (São Leopoldo). Another participant underscores that “one learns to organize and discuss improvements” (Novo Hamburgo). Yet another highlights the “freedom of opinion” regarding the investment of the funds and how this is important to form citizenship.

These statements coincide with the Freirean perspective that dialogue is more than a pedagogical technique. Paulo Freire sees in dialogicity the essence of education as the practice of freedom, and identifies a few conditions for this to occur: a profound love of the world and of men and women, humility, faith in human beings, trust, hope and critical thinking (Freire 1981, p. 95). It can be verified that this learning is not easy. It takes place among conflicts and tensions, for instance, when participants in hearings perceive and denounce attempts at manipulation by the coordinators or by some local authority.

Dialogue, based on Freire, is understood as a reciprocal action among subjects in the act of speaking, in which the subjects interact and construct collectively. In dialogical communication there cannot be passive subjects (Freire 1983, p. 67). One of the participants expresses this as follows: “[One learns] about the importance of political participation and how the debate on the participatory budget is essential to apply political and social changes” (Novo Hamburgo).

In the dialogue, which is as important as having the freedom to opine, to have one’s say is the capacity to listen: “Listening to the voice of the population” (São Leopoldo) is a phrase that well summarizes this difficult learning when the citizens are facing the contingency of seeing that their priorities and projects will not be sent on to the next stages of the PB. Not seldom there is the explicit acknowledgment of solidarity with attention to the most pressing needs.

### **Learning to know the “city”**

Knowing and (re)cognizing (*Conhecer e (re)conhecer* in Portuguese) are in the nature of human beings, considering that we are always (re) creating and transforming a way of fulfilling our unfinishedness. All of us have experiences and views of the world, which are shared through the collective relationship among groups from different areas, classes and knowledges, who are interacting in the city and in public spaces.

In the context of Sisparci, “Knowing one’s city” is characterized by its broadness, especially as concerns projects. The process of popular participation in the demands in municipalities and regions promotes an overview of priorities and immediate needs of each community. Thus, the system goes beyond the decisions, the votes and dialogues that take place during the process, since the participants begin to (re)cognize the space in which they live.

It is thus possible to evidence that the PB can be seen as a form of democratization of knowledge, considering that it is one of the initiatives to think and learn about the local and regional reality, as indicated by the fragments below:

One learns what are the projects for the region and the municipality with democratic participation. (Novo Hamburgo).

[One learns] to remain informed about the matters of the city. (São Leopoldo).

[One learns about] the basic information about the development of the city (São Leopoldo).

It should be noted how this knowledge is being constructed in a network. A marked example was when the inhabitants of a city were seeking resources to solve the problem of the frequent floods that wreaked havoc for most of the people who lived there. In the discussion it was found that the original reason for this problem lay in the sources of the river and its banks, which had been deforested over the years causing a number of problems that were as serious as the frequent floods.

### **Learning to mobilize participation**

Mobilization is an important part of the process of popular participation, since it is based on the idea that one can identify the formation of critical, active, participating citizens in building a space to struggle for the rights and duties in public decisions (Gohn 2006; Roth 2011). Besides giving legitimacy



to Sisparci, mobilization strengthens the understanding that it is a pedagogical space, contributing to the social participation of the participants (Abreu, Cardoso 2009).

Hence, thinking about the experience of Sisparci and its participants, it is possible to say that the progress and improvement of the process regarding mobilization are not only connected to the administrators, but also to the individuals that participate, since the system is transformed based on their participation. This improvement is announced by the citizens, men and women, when they answer the questionnaires, where the intention to improve the process can be evidenced, especially in the field of “positive aspects, difficulties and suggestions”:

It is clear how important popular participation is, and that the role of each citizen is to invite more and more people to participate and decide on our own future. (Novo Hamburgo).

The mobilization announced by the participants is to invite more people to participate in the process, but this movement can also be seen an attempt to control the demands that result from popular consultation, since Sisparci is consolidated mainly by the delivery of the products voted at the meetings.

[...] the police vehicles here in Santo Angelo are all the result of Popular and Citizen Participation, and we do not communicate with each other. The ICU (Intensive Care Unit) and the resources of the ICU are from Popular and Citizen Participation in the hospital, but there is no communication there, no mark of this process (Double Reflection Group).

The PB can be considered a space for the mobilization of the community in two senses. One of them as the place for the organization of citizens to present and fight for their demands. It is significant, in this sense, that the invitation plays an important role in motivating participation, assuming that it occurs among people who have common interests and a certain level of closeness and trust. Further, a significant participation of already organized sectors is noted, and the PB can serve as an element that give feedback to the already existing organization as a community. It is evident that digital technologies (Hindman 2009) play an important role in mobilizing people to participate, but the long-term effects on citizenship education will still have to be assessed.

## **Fragilities and challenges**

Over the years the PB also showed fragilities that in turn challenge its effective contribution to forming citizenship. Some of them have led to discredit in the process of popular participation that has had problems in reinventing itself within a new political and economic context, marked by a return of conservative social visions and by the financial crisis that affects many state and municipal public administrations.

### **Articulation among managers and participants**

The new model of popular participation presented by the Tarso Genro administration (2011) led to significant changes, considering the organization and structure of the process. Thus, this transition from budget to system caused challenges to the communication and the non-articulation among participating subjects and managers.

It is understood that relations between these agents with different knowledges – managers and participants – should begin with the premise that collective participation invites the other to dialogue, which in turn contributes to the exchange of different knowledges and competencies among the subjects who know the needs of the place where they live, and the managers who implement the demands discussed (Kristiansen, Bloch-Poulsen 2014).

In this sense, articulation is necessary to promote commitment to change and social transformation (Silva 2006), contributing to a critical vision in constructing projects and knowledge of subjects with common interests, but with different perspectives (Hurtado 2005). One of the great challenges of Sisparci that intended to operate with a systemic vision was to establish this articulation and overcome previous experiences. One of the participation coordinators reported at the Double Reflection Group<sup>1</sup> of the Sinos Valley on the difficulty of understanding their role during the process of organizing the PB.

Regarding the role of the coordinators it is very difficult for the agents to understand, they do not really know what we are doing there. And then

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<sup>1</sup> The “double reflection group” consisted of subsequent dialogues within the same group after individual interviews with participants: a) the group from the local community discusses conflicting themes presented by the research team, while the research team listens; b) the research team discusses the previous dialogue, highlight issues, raising questions, etc.; c) researchers and community members discuss key issues raised in the previous dialogues.

you end up by being the state's ombudsman (Vale dos Sinos Double Reflection Group).

This lack of understanding of the regional coordinator's role may also be connected to the marked absence of the State in certain localities, and when the population and the Coredes or Comudes themselves had contact with someone from the government they felt the need to mention some of their anxieties and needs. However, it was essential to articulate these sectors in order for the process to take place and it had a direct influence on the mobilization for participation.

The entire structure of the process, preparing the ballot, campaign, and the money is from the Coredes. So we sometimes work like busy bees, we go to the base, [...] to the small municipalities, to school to explain how the process works, and they answer "Oh, is that how it is done?" (Double Reflection Group of the Sinos Valley).

### **Discredit against the government authorities**

The notion of the limits of the current representative democracies has been widely disseminated. The elected authorities and the political class in general have fallen into discredit, and the PB is a way of fostering direct participation in decisions about the public budget. The PB shows that participation in the budgetary deliberations has the potential to bring government and population closer together, but may also deepen the lack of trust and credibility.

The discredit against the government authorities occurs in several ways. Once because the participation in assemblies and public hearings is not promoted. It is difficult to reach the citizens to promote their participation. In one locality the inhabitants complained that there was a car with a loudspeaker driving around the streets; they forgot, however, that at the time the car came by, everyone was at work outside that community. Elsewhere it was found that the small participation of young people was due to the fact that the meetings took place in the evening, when most of them were at school.

Another difficulty, as already mentioned, concerns the fact that work done based on popular consultation was not disseminated. The consolidation and credibility of the process is recognized by the participants with the dissemination of news of demands and products, since it is based on the "confirmation" and the "stamp" of the popular participation system, that the subjects see the legitimation of the discussions held at the meetings.

Of what use is it to do things if I don't see them [...] the Santo Angelo hospital received a heap of money and when I go to the hospital do I know that it is due to our quota? No. And so, how do I know to demand things?

I voted, because I wanted health, I already see that health is doing better, but who did it? (Double Reflection Group).

Not last, discredit has to do with the small part of the general budget that is placed under deliberation based on the demands of citizens and communities. There are only rare opportunities for the appreciation of the whole budget, since the amount reserved for each region is previously defined according to criteria such as population and number of participants in earlier processes of PB.

### **Party politics dispute**

One of the great regarding the challenges found in implementing and executing Sisparci is linked to the party politics disputes that were involved. When the PB no longer was local politics connected only to municipal participation, it was necessary to articulate state municipalities that are governed by parties with different ideological positions. These disputes become even clearer in relations between the Municipal Councils of Economic and Social Development (Comudes), the Regional Councils of Economic and Social Development (Coredes) and the municipal administrations.

[...] the mayor would not see us. He took over the city administration, I called him and asked for a meeting, since the process is federative, it includes all the bodies: State, municipality, Union, but the municipality also has its part (Interview- Missions Region).

It is clear from what one of the interviewees says that there is tension and a dispute for power within the spaces for participation. The PB has its history in the popular struggles and, initially, one of its objectives was to invert priorities (Horn 1994), in other words, to benefit the majority of the population generally excluded from the representative democracy, known as bourgeois. This is a space that proposes to redemocratize the power relations, but encounters a number of obstacles to implementation, one of them being the disputes of political parties often very distant from the citizens' lives.

Another characteristic of these disputes was the great number of people participating in the hearings and assemblies by "invitation" or convocation by the authorities, as evidenced from the questionnaires applied by the research group. On the counterflux of the idea of a bottom up organization, there was a high incidence of movement in the contrary direction, reinforcing the clientelist politics that the PB had initially proposed to fight.

### **Discontinuity of policies**

Amid many debates with opposing and favorable positions, in 1998, during the electoral campaign, the state parliament of Rio grande do Sul sanctioned law nr. 11,179 which establishes mandatory popular consultation by the Executive Power regarding the use that was to be made of the public money. Although popular participation was assured by law, many proposals and mechanisms were created over the years by the teams and by the governors who administrated the state of Rio Grande do Sul, not always for the purpose of opening the allocation of funds to public discussions. A fact that evidences discontinuity is that some people called the process participatory budget, others popular consultation and there were those who referred to it as Sisparci.

Even though other administrations maintained some kind of participatory mechanisms, the PB continued to be a brand name of the Workers' Party and whenever they had the opportunity they sought to re-establish these spaces. However, there was a visible lack of renewal among those who participated and the topics discussed. Sisparci did not advance much in the discussion beyond basic services to the detriment of larger projects such as highways, construction of technological parks, hospitals and airports, or even discussions about some project of society. The PB then became a place to claim "microagendas".

[...] an institutionalized way for the municipal administration to seek some money from the State to make a municipal contribution. So there are several mechanisms, and it is actually the following: small projects that should be the responsibility of the municipal administration, but since the municipalities are small, and the distribution of taxes at the federal level is not correct [...] meanwhile a difficulty arises, in popular consultation they found a mechanism to obtain funds to make small local roads, to make them, but it then becomes a vicious circle [...] (Government Representative, 2nd Unisinos Seminar of Popular and Citizen Education).

The history of popular participation policies in Rio Grande do Sul is marked by advances and steps backward, among initiatives whose principle was to build a new society and others that only proposed to comply with the mandatory law by holding a brief popular consultation. This may be one of the main implications of the lack of further depth in the debates and that even led to discredit among the population and the social movements.

### Technical capacity-building at a local and regional level

It has already been mentioned that the new model of the popular participation process in the context of Sisparci is more bureaucratic and more institutionalized compared to the first state PB (1999–2002). Elaborating projects also becomes more complex rendering the task difficult for “non-specialists”, i.e., for most of the participants who do not receive technical advice for this. It thus becomes clear that dialogue is necessary within PB, because the knowledge of “specialists” and participants should meet with a view to consolidating the demands and projects, and in turn, the process of popular participation. This capacity-building should also not only be for the purpose of conducting projects, but for the social control of their implementation.

### Final considerations

The PB began in a political environment of hopes of overcoming democratic formalism and creating democracies in which the citizens would feel and really be considered responsible for the public “thing” (*res publica*). At the turn of the century, Tarso Genro (1999, p. 39) wrote with much enthusiasm that “it is necessary to answer the decadence of traditional politics by looking for *new political forms that seek to reunify the formal and informal society politically*” (author’s emphasis). Education would be part of this opportunity to build a new social contract in which the PB appeared as an important source of inspiration (Streck 2003, 2010).

The political juncture in Brazil and in Latin America may be different, but the challenge continues to be democratizing democracy (Santos 2003), radicalizing it (Jorge 2014). Education will necessarily be part of this process by potentiating experiences of sociopolitical awareness-building and transformative action. Among others it has the task of avoiding waste of experiences such as those performed in the PB. In this text we attempted to evidence, on the one hand the creative capacity of society that educates itself by discussing and constructing alternatives, but that at the same time permanently faces the challenge of recreating strategies and horizons.

Much more could be said about learnings and obstacles for learning in and through PB. For instance, there is much to be said about actual or potential learnings by the promoters and organizers of the process, from the choice of the location where assemblies and meetings are hosted to the distribution of time for participants to express themselves. There is also much to be said about what researchers learn when they conceive of research as a dialogical endeavor, where they are expected to present questions that shed new light on issues as part of a self-reflective collectivity.

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