



| Online Participatory Democracy tools allow citizens to easily connect to the debates in their communities.

LEARNING ABOUT INTENSIFYING DEMOCRACY FROM OTHER CONTINENTS

by Giovanni Allegretti

Involving citizens in choosing policy priorities has proven able to increase their quality of life. When the discussion between institutions and citizens focuses on resources, spaces to discuss different scenarios for increasing wealth and rationalising the expenditures of the places where we live emerge. Participatory Budgeting is a democratic innovation that over the last 30 years has produced strong effects. In the Global South first, but increasingly in Europe, inspiration is coming from elsewhere – notably from Latin America.

Democratic innovations (DI) are a large family of structured practices shaped to directly involve citizens in taking decisions on the places where they live, which often combine bottom-up and top-down approaches, and a strong deliberative approach (to improve the quality of ideas and arguments for defending them) with the goal of creating co-decisional mechanisms, which could try to rebalance some asymmetries of powers in society.

Under this perspective, democratic innovations are hinged on mediation and articulate debates, rather than on reductionisms to mere yes-or-no dualisms. Thus, such processes are very different from the instruments of so-called “direct democracy” (as referenda, acts for revoking political/administrative mandates, etc.) which – not by coincidence – are often mythised by populists for their capacity of banalising and sloganising complex choices, favouring

a shift from democratic cultures to leader-based deviations.

In the end of the '80s (when many dictatorships were being overthrown), especially in Latin America democratic innovations were massively used to reactivate a virtuous circle of mutual trust between citizens and the new re-democratised institutions. In these experiments, it was clear that citizens become quickly intolerant to any participatory exercise

that did not impact substantially on the transformation of their living spaces and habits.

Thus, only when participation as well as the outcomes are real and substantive, all actors get more responsabilised and grow together in a highly pedagogical “learning environment”. This message – reinforced by hundreds of concrete successful experiences, especially at local level – reached Europe around the beginning of millennium and gave birth to a growing amount of DI experiences that have been mushrooming especially since the economic-financial crisis after 2008.

Many studies show positive impacts of DI in different domains of territorial and policy transformations. The virtuous circle activated by the reconstruction of mutual trust that citizens’ participation allows, can constitute an “enabling environment” that facilitates other administrative reforms, which are usually difficult to carry out, but also changes required in our daily lifestyle by sustainability goals, the rationalisation of mobility, the local tax systems, the creation of new public-private-people (PPP) partnerships. It even increases fiscal civism, as some people who did not pay taxes start doing so, once enabled to exert active oversight on how money is spent.

The diffusion of Participatory Budgeting (PB) is a good indicator of DI expansion, which counts on a new class of politicians who imagine another way of conceiving politics, where they govern “with” and not only “for” citizens, serving their constituency in the role of facilitators and support-teachers, rather than substituting citizens in their ability to imagine answers to their problems and forms for shaping their dreams.

In 2010, there were 1,500 cities practicing Participatory Budgeting in the world, with less than 500 in Europe. In 2014, there were 3,000 examples worldwide and almost half of them were in Europe. And in 2018, out of more than 7,700 cases worldwide, there were almost 3,600 European PBs (without

#ParticipatoryBudgets scaled up from +7,700 cities to national govts! They help to rebuild trust, oversight of public policies & increase transparency – @allegretto70



counting the hundreds of Russian experiences) Capitals such as Madrid or Paris reserve more than 100 million euros per annum for PB, while smaller resources are invested by Lisbon, Reykjavik, Bratislava, Chisinau, Prague, Milan, recently by Rome, and others.

In Europe we still don’t have cases of national legal frameworks for making PB mandatory at local or regional levels (as in Indonesia, Peru, Dominic Republic, Kenya or South Korea), nor do we have cases like New York, which last November voted in a local referendum for extending PB to the entire city. But in Europe, Participatory Budgeting is scaling up faster than in other continents: some regions or countries adopted policy measures to incentivise PB (as Tuscany, Scotland or Poland), and Portugal, since 2017, devoted governmental funding for creating nation-wide thematic PBs (in sectors like education, science or youth policies).

So, PB is not only going beyond the barriers of local administrations, but is cross-pollinating other institutions, such as schools, university departments, housing or development agencies, and even prisons.

At the same time, in several cities and regions PBs are being coordinated with other tools (as participatory planning, community-based monitoring, citizens observatories, public debate on large infrastructures), often getting inspired (again!) by Latin American examples aimed at creating more effective “participatory systems”, where interconnected but different channels of social dialogue could attract different target groups, and communication technologies could reduce costs of participation both for organisers and participants.

Thirty years of PB experiments show clearly that their high potential for reverting the crisis of representative institutions is still to be fully exploited. Switching the concept of “decision-makers” and restoring trust in institutions, PB has been able to obtain different goals in different realities: from reducing child mortality to increasing transparency of public accounts; from including vulnerable groups in decision-making to increasing the resources of public budgets through a discussion on partnerships and revenues, and not only on expenditures.

The EU can still do a lot for outing democratic innovations central and help to establish a direct dialogue with citizens on very concrete matters. But avoiding the mistakes of the European Citizens Initiative (ECI) is important. With the ECI, the superposition of strong “gatekeepers” allows these gatekeepers to jeopardise all the efforts of citizens at the final stage, or to cherry-pick their ideas. This only frustrates citizens, when they realise that the much-declared centrality of their role in transforming Europe is just a rhetorical artifice for greenwashing the worn-out image of institutions and make technocratic and market-driven choices more ‘acceptable’.



> **AUTHOR**

Giovanni Allegretti is co-director of the Ph.D “Democracy in the XXI century” and of the “PEOPLES’ Observatory: Participation, Innovation and Local Powers”. Architect, planner and senior researcher at the Centre for Social Studies at Coimbra University, Portugal.