

Innovations in democratic engagement

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Aim

- To draw lessons for neighbourhood governance from participatory budgeting (Porte Alegre) and other innovations in citizen engagement in political decision making.

Participatory Budgeting (PB)

- Originated in Porto Alegre, Brazil.
- Flavour of the month amongst democratic theorists and practitioners.
- Innovative combination of direct citizen engagement in neighbourhood and regional (area-based) assemblies and representation in regional- and municipal-level bodies.
- Led to redistribution of resources to poorer neighbourhoods, significant levels of participation and increased activity in civil society.

PB – How does it work?

- Annual cycle of participation in executive aspect of budgetary decision making (delegated powers from mayor).
- Popular neighbourhood assemblies draw up list of investment priorities.
- Priorities presented at 16 regional popular assemblies where delegates to Regional Budget Forums (number relative to turnout) and two councillors for the Municipal Budget Council are elected.
- Regional Budget Forums generate list of regional investment priorities based on neighbourhood lists and oversee implementation of previous year's investments.
- Municipal Budget Council decides relative distribution of resources to regions and distribution of funds to municipal agencies.

PB – lessons?

- PB highlights the importance of incentive structure – it is explicitly designed to promote participation, particularly amongst poorer neighbourhoods.
- Two factors affect investment:
 - needs-based criteria
 - number of representatives on Regional Budgetary Councils – relative to levels of participation in popular regional assemblies.
- Demonstration effect
 - in the early years the mayor only delegated powers and finances for issues where the city had the capacity to respond within a year.
- How acceptable is:
 - competition for resources between neighbourhoods / areas of a city?
 - competition based not only on needs but also levels of participation?

Other interesting designs

- **Continuous governance arrangements**
 - New England Town Meetings – open to all citizens and have legislative powers.
 - Lille community councils – 50% councillors; 25% local associations; 25% directly-elected citizens.
 - Chicago Community Policing – monthly open meetings in 285 neighbourhoods – establish priorities, action plans and reviews.
- **One-off governance arrangements**
 - Citizens' juries etc. where citizens are chosen randomly.
 - Petitions – can require particular number of signatures and/or be limited to certain types of 'challenges'.

Lessons

- The design of any neighbourhood governance arrangement must answer the question ‘why should I participate?’
- Citizens need to believe their participation will make a difference – too often there is no clear relationship between engagement and decision.
- Open forums tend to attract most active citizens (not necessarily a problem) – unless carefully designed to create incentives for more widespread participation (e.g. PB).
- If not open then direct elections tend to be favoured – election fixation?
- Alternatives to elections?
 - Sortition – random selection
 - Appointment – selection by interview (used by Birmingham Race Action Partnership to engage previously unengaged).
- Need for capacity building – ability of citizens to engage effectively in local ‘partnership’ bodies is often limited when compared to councillors and other representatives who have bureaucratic support and political experience.
- Successful innovations demonstrate imagination and risk-taking.