

Participatory Budgeting in the city of Recife, Brazil - the world's most participative public agency?

Received via Governance International

Published On: 20 November 2015

Organisation: Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) and Third Sector Research Centre (TSRC)

Country: Brazil

Level of government: Local government

Sector: Economic affairs

Type: Financial Resources, Public Service

Launched in: 2002

Overall development time: 3 year(s)

Link to the innovation's website

Like this innovation

0 persons like this innovation

Description

The example of Brazil has inspired participatory budgeting exercises around the world since the 1980s. Indeed, the PB movement has spread to over 140 cities across the country, with particularly famous examples in Sao Paolo, Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre (although the latter was much diluted after the change in political control in 2004).

Now it seems a new generation of PB approaches has arisen and, once again, Brazil is in the lead. The Prefeitura (City Council) of Recife, a city of over 1 million residents in the state of Pernambuco, in the northeast of Brazil, has recently won the Reinhard Mohn Prize, organized by the Bertelsmann Foundation in Germany, as the world's most participative public agency.

In this case study, we give a flavor of why it has impressed both international experts and also citizens – not only its own citizens but also the 11400 German citizens who, as part of the process to determine the winner of the Reinhard Mohn Prize, voted it their number one example of public participation in the world that could be imported and applied in Germany. (This was a follow-up to the 1993 Bertelsmann prize for the most efficient local authority in the world, shared by Christchurch (NZ) and Phoenix, Arizona).

Why the innovation was developed

- While the roots of participatory budgeting in Recife go back to the struggles against the Brazilian dictatorship in the 1960s and 1970s, it first began to be practised in the late 1980s and 1990s, as in other parts of Brazil.
-

Objectives

Develop staff capacity, Enhance public trust, Enhance transparency, Improve efficiency, Improve user satisfaction, Increase citizen engagement

- The main purposes which the City Council of Recife originally had in mind when designing and running PB were to give people a belief that they can play an important role in the co-management of the city and in the decisions which influence their quality of life;
 - To increase the perceived democratic legitimacy of the City Council by demonstrating that its actions are in line with what local people really want;
 - To find better ways to meet the needs and priorities of local people.
-

Main beneficiaries

Civil Society, General population, Government bodies, Government staff

- Residents of Recife
- Prefeitura (City Council) of Recife

Results

Effectiveness

- Over 7.5% of the population are now involved in the PB process. The process is sustainable and part of the city's fabric - indeed, it is unlikely that it could now be dropped by any of the political parties. However, the approach is continually tweaked in order to keep it interesting and to keep participation levels up.
 - The projects undertaken through PB have had major effects on the quality of life of local people – consequently, there has been great feedback, with many testimonials and favourable comments to the mayor and the City Council.
 - The main challenge now in the PB process is to increase the speed of project implementation . Already, the average time taken to implement projects has fallen to under three years but the target is now two years.
-

Service quality

Responsiveness:

- Over the 10 years of PB in Recife, all choices made by citizens in respect of project priorities have been respected – this has built credibility with citizens. Interestingly, over time it has been recognized that the choices made by citizens are now similar (sometimes even better than) those made by 'technical experts' in the City Council.
- An example of the 'common wisdom' exhibited by citizens of the 'morros' (hills) is that there was no technical agreement by the city's engineers on the best way of building a paved road system linking the hills, so this became a project in the PB process, where people voted for the parts of the road system which were most important. These were eventually joined up and the approach was seen to have been a very effective way of working out the best solution.
- A critically important outcome of the PB process is that people have the chance to be heard – particularly people who were previously excluded socially and politically. Now more than 100,000 people participate in the process every year (those attending forums and those voting online). Participation in the favelas is often intense, as they feel they have the most to gain in influencing the city's budget decisions.

Development

Design

The current system of Orcamento Participativo (OP), which literally means 'participatory budgeting', dates back to 2001, with the advent of a new political administration in Recife, based on a coalition of three left-oriented parties, led by mayor João Paulo de Lima e Silva. This coalition believed at the beginning of the electoral campaign that it faced an uphill battle to gain power, so it adopted a clear commitment to PB in its joint manifesto and then campaigned vigorously to make this commitment convincing, under a Director of Participatory Budgeting (Secretario do Orcamento Participativo) João da Costa.

Its subsequent victory in the election was believed by the coalition to be due, in significant part, to the popularity of its commitment to PB. It therefore set up a structure to implement PB quickly. The PB process has operated every year since then. Since 2009, João da Costa Bezerra Filho has been mayor of the City Council.

Implementation

Tools used:

- Recife is divided into 6 regions, each of which has 3 'micro-regions'. The area-based discussions in PB take place in these 18 micro-regions. There are four basic processes involved in the Recife PB:
 - A. Generating proposals for the most important projects or service changes to consider for the next year.
 - B. Getting citizens to vote on these, so that the priorities can be established
 - C. Refining these priority projects/service changes, so that they are more practical and cost-effective.
 - D. Monitoring the implementation of the agreed (and refined) priority projects.
-

Diffusion

- There are now 60 local associations bringing people together in the PB process, covering old people, young people, and many other groups – recently a new group of LGBTs has emerged.
 - Actually, PB has become the main social mechanism for many activities of the city government – every time there is need for dialogue and new ways of doing things, it is natural to do it through the PB structures and processes.
 - In many communities, for example, where there has been serious violence, the staff involved in PB are the only part of the council which can operate effectively. Consequently, due to its credibility with and access to communities, PB has taken on extra tasks.
 - Although some other cities in the region of Pernambuco, such as Olinda, Jaboatão and Cabo de Santo Agostinho have somewhat similar approaches to PB, there is not really a connection – their methodologies are adapted to suit local circumstances. The state is large, with significant socio-economic and cultural differences, and PB involves political decisions on how best to help local people to participate. However, the state of Pernambuco itself now has a PB process, which ties in with and partly finances some PB projects in Recife.
-

Challenges and solutions

- Leading politicians in the new government recognized that there would be scepticism about whether this new PB programme would really be implemented.
- The new administration therefore committed itself to the principles of: Transparency – so that people could see what had been agreed and what was being done; Co-management – so that people felt involved in the process from beginning to end; Universal right to engage – everyone had a vote in the process; Implementing agreed actions – so that the community had tangible outcomes that made their involvement worthwhile.
- Of course, such ambitious objectives and principles run the danger of raising expectations. As the mayor, João da Costa, commented in an interview with Governance International: "At first, when they saw what we were trying to do, they thought we were mad!"
- In order to stop people expecting too much, it was essential that people themselves became involved in the prioritization process – in fighting for their ideas of what was MOST needed, people realized quickly that not everything was possible. This reinforced understanding that the main role of government is to make choices.
- By sharing these choices with the population, responsibility for the choices made was also shared. This meant that it was no longer possible for people simply to blame the government for things that were done – and not done. In this way, people were encouraged to co-govern with the administration, and to understand the role that both played in making choices for the city.

Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned

- Over the decade of implementing PB in Recife, it has become more than a policy – it is now a cultural process, embedded deep within the ways in which local people think and relate to the City Council.
 - On the other hand, the City Council has had to be careful in how it manages the process. In 2006 there was a change in approach, putting more emphasis on people in local forums, so that two projects would be proposed from each group of ten people and 10 projects would be chosen in each microregion for prioritization. This was more focused than the previous system, and made fewer demands on City Hall staff.
 - Citizens have also been learning as the process has evolved – solidarity has grown, as some groups have come together to support each other (“You vote for my school, I’ll vote for your roadworks”), as a proposal has a much higher chance of being chosen if two groups agree on it.
-

Conditions for success

- While expectations have risen over time, the involvement of local people in the prioritization process has ensured that they remain realistic about what can be achieved and what is less likely to be possible.
 - Politicians have changed their attitude to PB over time. In the beginning, many local politicians were against it – they saw it as taking away some of their power, since getting local projects into the city budget has always been central to local politics. However, most politicians have gradually come to realize that they have to go along with something which is now very popular. Consequently, even if they are not enthusiastic, they now tolerate it.
 - In any case, things have changed - people no longer accept the idea that local politicians are the only way for their ideas to be represented, they now expect to play a role themselves. Of course, many local politicians complain that they were elected, unlike members of the public.
-

Other information

Some politicians have already changed with the times, mobilising support in their micro-region to vote for the things which they as politicians want – the mayor suggests that only the clever politicians have been doing this so far, and they know very well, since he used to organise the PB system himself, that he can see clearly what they are up to! Other interviewees suggest that perhaps a majority of politicians, from all political parties, now recognize the need to get involved in PB.

For the future, ways are being considered to ensure that local people understand better what is happening and what is possible under PB – and to help people enjoy the meetings and have more fun in the process than currently.

Finally, there is a desire to make more use in the process of the people who have been involved in the past, so that staff costs can be reduced and the process can be made more efficient.