

IDEAS ON PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Which factors determine the success of civic participation? What can institutions do? How important are Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in the processes of e-democracy?

Tiago Peixoto, a Phd researcher at the European University Institute (EUI), Florence, with a Masters degree in Organized Collective Action, works on online participatory budgeting (e-participatory budgeting), a form of local citizen participation mediated by the use of new technologies.

“Participatory budgeting promotes transparency in institutions, better allocation of resources, innovative solutions for investments in cities, and even reduces tax evasion. Moreover, participatory budgeting fosters the building and consolidation of a sense of the common good amongst citizens. In an online participatory budgeting the government exploits this opportunity to open the doors to other citizens, not only by organizing face-to-face meetings, but also allowing for remote participation, through the Internet or mobile phones”.

The example of Brazil

Brazil offers some of the oldest and most famous experiences of participatory budgeting. The traditional (offline) participatory budgeting began in 1989 in the city of Porto Alegre, and was implemented in Belo Horizonte in 1993. In the case of the latter, participation was based on public meetings and topics broken down by districts, where citizens discussed local needs and priorities for budget allocation. During these meetings, technical, legal and financial support was provided by municipal officials. The priorities defined by citizens were then



included in the city budget and approved by the City Council. Over the years, citizens followed up the implementation of works and services.

“This type of initiative had great success - says Tiago - but participation levels were extremely low. Belo Horizonte, for example, allowed citizens to decide on the allocation of a budget of nearly US \$ 43 million, but the overall participation level was, on average, only 1,5% of the population. This low participation rate was mainly due to the ‘Costs of participation’ that the citizens were faced with, for example, the cost of the bus fare needed to reach meetings, not to mention the intangible costs in terms of time, attention and willingness to overcome the fare of speaking in public etc.”

This is where the online participatory budgeting comes in: *“With the use of ICT the number of participants in the process has increased over 6 times, reaching 10% of the population. And in the case of this e-participatory budgeting, the budget available for allocation was much smaller: US \$ 11 million. Since the 2006 e-participatory budgeting an increase in participation in the face-to-face meetings of the traditional participatory budgeting has also been identified. This is probably an effect of the online participatory budgeting as online participation may function as an entry point to the face-to-face process”.*

But how does the new method work? *“During a period of 42 days citizens can vote online for what they find most useful or interesting in terms of public works for each of the nine districts of the city. When doing so, they provide the number of their personal electoral code, which prevents multiple voting from a single user. During the election period the city also provides citizens with a set of means to attenuate the effects of the digital divide, and to promote participation against the digital divide, promote participation across different social classes: for instance, a bus with Internet access and trained personnel to assist users with online voting is deployed”.* We must not forget that an online participatory budgeting has its limitations: *“There are difficulties in dealing with millions of online forum posts for instance, which leads to low deliberation and does not replace the benefits of face-to-face discussions. In the US, for example, in*



some cases people are asked to vote and comment online on the ideas posted by users. But by listing them as 'most popular ideas' people tend to comment and vote on the ideas that appear as being rated higher, meaning the result is not entirely reliable. It generates the risk of a snowball effect where there is little relationship between the quality of an idea and the amount of votes or comments it has received".

Critical issues and possible solutions

"An interesting way to involve citizens would be to quantify their participation in terms of value - proposes Tiago - Suppose an administration makes € 250.000 available in a city with 2000 inhabitants. Online one can see the relationship between participation and budget allocation: the first vote will correspond to a value of € 250.000, the second will correspond to € 125.000, and so on. In this way, citizens may actually realize how important their individual participation is". Involving citizens is not enough, however: "In order to retain the participants of a participatory process in the long term, it is also crucial to provide feedback, that is, to communicate the results".

The use of mobile phones would be an additional means of participation, for example in a continent like Africa where there is still great difficulty in gaining access to the Internet. For this reason, in 2008 in Nairobi, Ushahidi was created, a digital platform that monitors events and aggregates the information provided by users. *"This initiative provides a platform for information to be sent by users via SMS, to generate online maps that geo-reference the information provided".* Created in order to monitor an emergency situation (the conflicts in Kenya following the 2007 elections), the platform today is a widely used tool for gathering information about the most pressing issues in Ghana, South Africa, Malawi, Uganda and Brazil, to give a few examples. *"The system is also effective because it uses cell phones, reaching broader audiences even amongst the poor sections of the population. Anyone can send information to Ushahidi via a simple text message sent*



from a mobile phone. This information is then inserted in a map". A simple system that can be used by local government to encourage civic participation.

A second example of telephony usage comes from the Brazilian town of Ipatinga. "Here in 2005 they chose the telephone as a tool for participation: the administration sent 2.950 SMS to citizens and made 30,000 phone calls to the target public, as part of a strong information campaign to invite citizens to decision making meetings. Nobody could say they did not know what was going on! Using voice-based systems together with text messaging provided a service to the public which was also accessible to the illiterate. Furthermore, research suggests that sending text messages or making phone calls is more effective in terms of mobilization and cheaper than making an advertisement on television".

Finally, a stereotype to be questioned regards the excluding effects of using technology: "Limiting participation to a meeting that happens at a certain time and certain place means lots of people cannot be present. However, if you provide alternative means of participation through information and communication technologies, you can potentially involve more participants: even the mother who only has free time in the evening after dinner. Besides, a virtual vote should have no less relevance. The important thing is to participate".

