

Tuesday, 18 April – Participatory Budgeting

Speakers: Daniel Chavez (TNI), Joop Hofman (de Rode Wouw) and Micheale Hordijk (UvA)

Together with NIMD and ISS, SID-NL organized a debate on 21st of March on the topic of participatory budgeting. This debate is part of the spring series focussed on doing democracy differently. At local levels we see new initiatives popping up everywhere which aim to change politics by organizing communities differently. Typical examples are participatory budgeting initiatives from Latin American cities: how have these experiences spread over the world? And are these viable alternatives for doing democracy? Three experts shared their experiences from Lima, Porto Alegre, Montevideo, and Deventer on how citizens can directly participate in defining their community budgets.

When discussing a widely used concept like participatory budgeting, it is important to set out what we consider participatory budgeting to be. What do the different guests define as participatory budgeting? And does this differ depending on the place in the world where it is implemented?

Joop Hofman

Participatory budgeting is the process of decision making with a lot of people included. This can be done on different scales and this is what we see throughout the Netherlands. Since three years, eight cities in the Netherlands are really practising participatory budgeting and ten cities are trying it out. He sees the emergence of new networks in which people are coming together. Sometimes hundreds of citizens are getting together to decide on how money should be spend. The whole process, according to Joop Hofman, is not as much about the money as it is about the Netherlands reinventing democracy. He uses Antwerp as an example where power was given from the city council to the lower class neighbourhoods. This empowerment of citizens is not yet as present in the Netherlands where participatory budgeting takes on a form of advising participation, which is different than decision participation.

Daniel Chavez

Participatory budgeting originated in Brazil and was developed by a worker's party as a political project aimed at radicalising democracy and deepening social justice. Although he has dedicated a great part of his academic career to participatory budgeting, Daniel now has a whole different view on this issue, stating that it has lost most its original emancipatory potential and now has become a mere managerial technology mostly promoted by mainstream development institutions, including conservative local governments. The prevailing form of participatory budgeting is a 'pasteurised' or light version that has lost its original radical profile, and most of the consultants working in the field are no longer worried about the social justice and political dimensions. Participatory budgeting was never fully inclusive, but in recent years the processes developed in many cities around the world tend to focus on a rather narrow segment of the population, with greater participation of the middle class and lesser inclusion of marginalised social groups. Who is included and who is not depends on

Micheala Hordijk

Participatory budgeting spreads in many forms. The most important feature of participatory budgeting is the process of decision making power that is transferred from the authorities to the citizens. The money on which citizens get a say needs to be a significant part of the budget, otherwise is it meaningless. Furthermore, she stated that participatory budgeting only works if it is part of a wider political radical project. It has to address the idea of transformational society in some direction. Michaela witnessed participatory budgeting in Porte Alegre and was part of the movement that brought participatory budgeting to Peru. In Lima, the law requires all municipalities to include participatory budgeting, an innovative aspect here is that it needs to be part of a wider perspective on why you choose certain projects. A lot of different cases can be found in Peru, from very low percentage of money available to citizens to 100% of budget/investments that can be used by the projects citizens decided on. What is unique about Peru is that the process is also about transparency. This helps to reduce the fear of corruption.

Is participatory budgeting a viable option for doing democracy differently?

Joop explained what he thinks is necessary to have a successful participatory budgeting project: the people need make the agenda and organize the meetings. The most important fact is that people are in the lead, governments only provide the money for the projects. It is not as much about the money, but about the people being in charge. Daniel disagreed on this and stated that money does matter: when the resources allocated to participatory budgeting are negligible or tied to ordinary projects or public works that the local government should implement with or without participation, participatory budgeting becomes irrelevant. The methodology of participatory budgeting has lost the deliberative dimension; originally, it used to be based on popular assemblies, but nowadays individual participation is prioritised, being limited to the possibility of citizens voting on a set of proposals for small municipal investments in local projects. The social dimension has also been lost, as there is no space to prioritise the needs of the poorer neighbourhoods. Michaela calls for a new form of participatory budgeting in which the spirit is reclaimed. Participatory budgeting can help in doing democracy differently because it moves away from political parties. Parties are often incapable to leave their political agenda behind when they are looking at issues

