
Whittling down the Potential of Participatory Budgeting ?

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From the first day in power, the Porto Alegre Mayor's Office has tried to blame everything that has gone wrong in the city on the former administration. If anyone tries to point out a problem the Mayor's Office comes up with the same old excuses: "The former administration were the ones who did it"; or "it all boils down to a mere ideological dispute". If there is, for instance, some dispute involving the election for Participatory Budget (PB) council members in some neighborhood, the city government puts the blame on "external forces" trying to spread discord among community members and "destroy PB". Really, the only force currently operating in some communities is the so-called "governance team" – a group of government agents – partly made up by former council members – who currently hold positions in the government or in outsourced service providing companies that seek to work out "partnerships" with specific community leaders. They aim to gain support for the government by providing small services or some sort of contract with the government. All this is achieved without the PB's regional forums' or managing councils' approval. When society, as represented in participatory actions, does not please the government, it simply seeks to create other "participatory spaces" for the part of "society" that pleases it. That is how the old tries to gain the upper hand on the new: by corrupting it.

"PB is still alive!", The government repeatedly and publicly claims, as if it is trying to convince itself. There are doubts about the validity of its statement, the most serious of which have been pointed out by participatory budgeting council members themselves. How can one defend the idea that PB still exists, they say, if 1) The decisions made by people do not translate into more resources being allocated in the Investment Plan?; 2) The neighborhoods that haven't prioritized certain themes receive more of those resources than those that prioritize them?; and 3) When it comes to implementation, the city government cherry-picks initiatives that suit its needs without paying any attention to the priority scales that are voted on in each neighborhood and without setting up collective management teams to preside over the public works?

It is at this point that the good Samaritans appear, whether naively or not, to say that yes, they were consulted in a meeting. They only forget to mention it wasn't a PB meeting, but a Municipal Governance Department one, for which there was no established agenda, minutes or venue. Invariably, such meetings can only be attended by those invited. Strangely enough, the Governance Department operates in a sort of institutional limbo. It is the government who decide as they please whether some issue falls within the scope of Governance. There really is an external force in operation in the communities: the well-known cronyism trying to neutralize Participatory Budgeting as a possible means for popular power and self-determination. Mr. Mayor has recently affirmed that his administration has maintained the former government's average investment level. Once more, the past haunts the administration. The argument is not only fallacious, but badly put. It is certainly true that the former administration (2002/2004) did not fare well in terms of PB (investments dropped to 7 per cent of the budget and execution of planned works stagnated at 70 per cent). But what can be said of the execution level of the last three annual investment plans at 33 per cent? What about the 2008 Investment Plan that allocates a mere one per cent of the budget to PB, which amounts to less than one-tenth of the investments proposed by the Annual Budget Law?

At every PB assembly meeting we witness a new dance of numbers. Unlike last year, when the government's promises were so consistent that they could have been taped and played at each assembly meeting, this year the Mayor seemed to doubt his own



figures. On some occasions, it was said that there were 575 works and services planned. On other occasions the figure jumped 957, just to drop to 907 sometime later. The same applies to infrastructure works and services executed by the current administration. The cabballistic number 611 was repeatedly mentioned but sometimes it referred to both public works and services and at other times to only works. At one occasion, it was said that more than half the figures involved works and services carried out by the former administration – a persistent ominous ghost. On another occasion, it was declared that the total amount of resources allocated to finishing projects initiated during the previous administration amounted to 80 per cent.

It would be a easy for the government to publish a calculation which the average second-grader could understand. They could publish a list of the 611 infrastructure works and services and identify the region or the theme they belong to, as well as the stage in the Investment Plan where they originally appeared. Why don't they publish it? What are they afraid of? If they did so, it would be possible to know how much unfinished work was left by the previous administration and what is being completed by the current one. That would constitute a republican and dignified attitude. Maybe the residents of poor neighborhoods would discover the greatest irony in the history of participatory budgeting: that the neighborhoods that received the biggest volume of resources may have been those who never or hardly ever participated in PB like Floresta, Higienópolis, Moinhos de Vento, Auxiliadora, Mont Serrat, Bela Vista, and Três Figueiras.

Let's do a mathematical exercise by using the figures produced by the government itself. On December 31st 2004 there were 966 planned infrastructure works and services that had either started and not been completed or were still on the drawing board (info collected by CIDADE). It is easy to go about the rest of the calculation. All that is needed is to add the official figure relating to new demands included in the 2005-2008 period ($302 + 214 + 219 + 185 = 920$) and deduct what was executed in terms of these Investment Plans ($115 + 105 + 21 + 0 = 241$). If the current administration insists that it accomplished 611, but we know that 241 of those relate to the 2005-2008 Plans (at least that is what can be found on the internet site), there would remain, hypothetically, 370 infrastructure works and services to be deducted from the previous liability (611 minus 241). That is true if we take it for granted that those works and services were really accomplished, for such a list has never been shown to the public. It is only in the 2006 Investment Plan that 66 works and services that were part of Investment Plans prior to 2005 were included to be executed by the current administration, of which only 21 were effectively performed. Thus, we have a total of 262 demands that were effectively met by the current Administration as of March 2008. The government has also said that 190 infrastructure works and services will be finished in 2008 based on another non-existent list. We tried to check this figure on their web site, but that proved to be impossible. On the Mayor's Offices' web site work that has been officially approved and given a protocol number is labeled as "in process". If we take into account the amount of demands carried out in the last three Investment Plans, which reached an average 33 per cent, according to information given by the Town Hall itself, we could estimate there are still over 63 infrastructure works and services to be carried out by the end of 2008. In other words, the amount of infrastructure works and services that are running behind schedule will have increased by the end of the Mayor's term. In the figures provided by the government's PR staff, even the addition calculation is incorrect. In an accurate calculation based on official PB monitoring reports of infrastructure works and services available on the City Hall's website, the amount of



outstanding demands by the end of 2008 may reach 1561 (a 62 percent rise in relation to the end of 2004), without considering 63 works and services that might be finished and 190 that the government claims are underway. Of course, all these constantly changing figures would not be necessary if Participatory Budgeting data were really transparent.

Yes, PB is really alive but as a parody, for it is constantly haunted by the past and manipulated by the current administration in a mix of philanthropic glamour and cold political calculation.

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