

# REAL RESPONSIBILITY

## A masterclass in participatory budgets from a world expert

Dr Allegretti is a senior researcher at Coimbra University and is currently working at the World Bank



Interview : Dr Allegretti

### 1. Dr Allegretti, why are you at the World Bank now?

A pertinent question, since my background has closer links to social movements and the World Social Forum. I encountered the World Bank in 2008, when I was invited to train local authorities in South Africa and Senegal. I realised then how important international institutions are to extending PBs and cross-pollinating quality examples. I like the World Bank's double approach: on one side it supplies knowledge to institutions, and on the other it meets the demands of civil society by supporting bottom-up engagement with local public service problems.

### 2. Participatory Budgeting (PB) is about directly involving local people in making decisions on the spending and priorities for a defined public budget. Could you explain how this works in practice?

I'll try - even though that's a big question, given that there are some 1,400 PB experiences around the world, according to a 2010 report. Despite this plurality, all PBs apply 5 core principles. These are: explicit discussion of budgets; the involvement of local administrative power; regular meetings; public deliberation within specific forums; and finally accountability and feed-back on decisions and output.

Within these principles, different processes can be used to build relationships with citizens. For instance, if you plan to use the Internet as method for voting on spending priorities, think about what your goals are. If you aim - like Swedish PBs - to develop social ties among citizens, it's better not to use the web. Similarly, if you want to foster socially inclusive decision-making, you must facilitate workshops for small groups of citizens to attend. The coherence between goals and means is what make PBs successful, but it's important to recognize that specific techniques are essential for creating their secondary benefits.

### 2. How do PBs bring communities closer to the decision-making process?

Every phase of the process can use different organizational models, provided that the collective action strengthens the sustainability of the experience and the citizen-institution relationships. For example, almost all Brazilian and Spanish PBs establish their "rules" with the citizens and amend them every year to progressively better the process. People consider this to be a guarantee of not being trapped in bureaucratic pitfalls created by others.

The central idea of PB is that of learning by doing, rather than involving people superficially through consultation. When people are just consulted on "what they feel they need", they tend to produce a long list of jumbled priorities, and then wait for elected officials to decide which ideas to use and which to ignore. People don't feel "co-responsible" when someone else makes decisions for them, and - regardless of the final funding decision - they often feel frustrated that their high expectations have not been fully met. The result is that they lose interest in consultation processes.

PB, on the other hand, champions the equation "satisfaction = results - expectations", so that people can feel represented by decisions. Because of the transparency of PB decision-making, people go home after a PB public meeting knowing exactly which priorities were approved; their expectations will be realistic, and when the decisions are implemented they will be satisfied.

### 4. Aren't people too busy to attend meetings?

Yes and no. We live in an atomized, individualistic society, and work increasingly dominates our time; it's not easy for people to make time for discussing collective matters if not strongly motivated to do so. More and more, PBs' organisers understand that people's time is precious, so they avoid demanding too much involvement. Thus, the number of key PB events

are reduced, and they also become informal, social gatherings rather than serious-grey political meetings. This social aspect is very important in a society that can foster loneliness.

### 5. Do you think women would benefit from a more inclusive way of allocating money? What is your experience of this? How do more disadvantaged groups benefit from PBs? How do you ensure a democratic process in establishing the priorities?

Supporting women's needs and empowerment through PB can be seen from various perspectives, although I have to admit that there is a lack of good research on the issue. There is a paradox I notice in many cases: women are very reserved components of PBs, but their presence is very effective. A study at the Center for Social Studies (CES) of Coimbra University - where I work - focuses on women's contribution to PB decision-making. Our preliminary results show that - even in Portugal, where society is still very patriarchal - the majority of priorities selected during PB sessions were proposed by women. Maybe this means that their proposals are more holistic, integrated, realistic and attractive; it has to be further analysed.

Studies in Brazil show that women represent the majority of participants in PBs, but, when popular delegates are elected for the process, the majority are always men. Even if quotas are imposed, it can be difficult to find women who accept such an onus. This is mainly because all the high-engagement roles are too time-consuming for many women, who are already assigned an unfair multiplicity of roles and tasks by society. Many PBs tried to break this asymmetry through women-friendly initiatives, for instance creating special meeting schedules, offering babysitting services, providing internet connections to those with little spare time, or creating thematic groups where participants can be more at ease.

Examples of the latter case exist in several African rural village PBs, where groups of women – as well as of young people, ethnic minorities or the elderly – have been created, with the objective of challenging the cultural exclusions at work in society. As the European project “INCLUIR: PB as a mean of fighting social and territorial exclusion” demonstrated, inclusiveness can't be reached unless specific measures help fulfil this goal. If we consider the “republican way” of approaching PB – i.e. putting different citizens all together in a single assembly, and supposing that this increases the level of democracy - we may discover that all the injustices and asymmetries of society have been reproduced in that room. To challenge exclusion we must create means to empower the disadvantaged.

### 6. What do you think should be the attitude of progressive parties in Europe on PBs?

I think they should support PB experiences, and remember that they aren't just for facilitating government in a period of scarcity - even if they can serve for that too! They should also remember that PBs are meant to redistribute powers in society, create more civic awareness of the complexities of governance, and raise civil influence on public institutions.

I realize that this isn't an easy task. In fact, I think that parties (and all power structures) are inert; they do not relinquish power easily and mistrust anything that could threaten their autonomy. That's why I believe more in people: all the interesting PB experiences I know of owe their survival to people who believed in them and fought against their colleagues and parties to make it a sustainable process for citizens to engage with.

### 7. What do you see looking at the UK?

I see a battlefield of contradictions - I'll try to explain.

When I last came to the UK I noticed a wave of enthusiasm for home-grown versions of PB, which were often based on participatory grant-making and implemented many different methods. All of the projects shared a common aim: fostering community decision-making to distribute public funds. Whilst other countries used the PB concept to create a break from old methods, my impression in the UK is that PB gives new shape to existing community

development practices. That also explains why the name “PB” is not much used as a primary definition, and names like “U-Choose”, “U-decide” are preferred.

Though I think that PBs are a positive challenge to the UK's traditional political culture, the mushrooming of over 40 almost-PBs creates three risks. The first risk is that reserves of money will become insignificant and unable to implement strategy beyond a superficial level. The second risk involves using PBs to outsource problem-solving to communities without challenging the political culture of institutions.

The third and biggest risk I see is that the expanding myth of the “Big Society” - and its counter-twin the “Good Society” - is being used to fill gaps caused by spending cuts. What will this army of volunteers, that the government rhetoric evokes, do? It seems that the smaller charities that coordinate volunteer commitments are despairing over the cuts. After all, volunteers need training and support, and if they don't receive it they can simply leave.

Imagining an effective participatory culture free of costs is very childish, and it will result in frustration and interrupted projects. For communities to benefit from PBs, they must feature investment in training, even if they are intended to manage scarce resources. I hope that the UK National Association of Local Councils (NALC) conference's PB meetings this autumn will be able to clarify this point to those in government that dream of delivering state functions to volunteers without carefully organising, training, motivating and coordinating them.

### 3. In the UK the Conservatives are making enormous cuts to councils and public services. How do you see it from your experience since PB was pioneered in Porto Alegre? When do PBs work?

Unfortunately the UK situation is not unique. Except rare cases (like Brazil), we are helping many countries with strong cuts at a local level, whilst central government bureaucracy escapes them. Undoubtedly, PBs can help to manage scarcity, but they can't serve as an emollient for reduced local public spending. They were never intended to; they were conceived as a way to revitalise citizen-institution relationships through re-politicising the budget, not as a tool to serve institutions' interests. □

## About the Fabian Society

The Fabian Society has played a central role for more than a century in the development of political ideas and public policy on the left of centre. Analysing the key challenges facing the UK and the rest of the industrialised world in a changing society and global economy, the society's programme aims to explore the political ideas and the policy reforms which will define progressive politics in the new century. The society is unique among think-tanks in being a democratically-constituted membership organisation. It is affiliated to the Labour Party but is editorially and organisationally independent. Associate membership of the Fabian Society is open to all, regardless of political persuasion. The Society has approx 7000 members of which around 2000 are women.

To join, visit our website [www.fabians.org.uk](http://www.fabians.org.uk) or contact membership officer Giles Wright on 020 7227 4904 or [giles.wright@fabian-society.org.uk](mailto:giles.wright@fabian-society.org.uk)

## About the Fabian Women's Network

The Fabian Women's Network was launched in January 2005 and is run by a committee of volunteers. It is part of the voluntary section of the Fabian Society, alongside local Societies and the Young Fabians. The Fabian Women's Network aims to bring people together to:

- ▶ Create a thriving network for social and political change.
- ▶ Connect Fabian networks with Fabian Women Parliamentarians.
- ▶ Provide new ways in which women from all backgrounds and sectors can engage in topical policy debate.

The Network has held a number of high profile receptions and policy discussions and regularly works with voluntary sector organisations on areas including women and pensions, women and work and family related policy. Speakers at events have included Cabinet Ministers, Ministers, representatives from leading charities or agencies, business, academics and media. □