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## A Brief Reflection on the Brazilian Participatory Experience

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# A Brief Reflection on the Brazilian Participatory Experience

## **Abstract**

The article highlights Brazilian participatory experiences such as the participatory budget and the policy councils and conferences. Based on research done by the author on daily routines and policy impacts of these forums, it is argued that there is still a long way before fulfilling normative expectations. In light of these challenges, reflections about how to move forward in the future are presented.

## **Keywords**

Citizen participation, democratic innovation, accountability, health councils, participatory democracy, participatory budget, policy conferences, civil society, citizenship

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Brazil is home to several participatory innovations. Over the past 25 years, initiatives such as participatory budgeting, which began in Porto Alegre (Brazil) in 1989, and policy councils and conferences have been launched throughout the country in small cities and large metropolitan areas. Although these initiatives are promising, they have faced political challenges such as sustaining citizen engagement in these participatory mechanisms, through which citizens are expected to deliberate and negotiate over priorities and the distribution of public resources.

There are many expected benefits of participatory innovations. Participatory mechanisms may help not only by making decisions and policies more likely to meet citizen's needs, but also by holding the state accountable and limiting the predatory behavior of the political, bureaucratic and economic elites. Reducing the costs involved in the political mobilization process encourages the poorest and most marginalized people to participate. Additionally, it is easier for ordinary citizens to influence a decision made in their own neighborhood than one made by the central government, and these citizens could base their participation on their own experience, rather than on external expertise.

Since 1989, near 400 of the 5,507 Brazilian municipalities have adopted the participatory budget process; more than 28,000 policy councils have been established for health policy, education, the environment, and other matters, and biannual policy conferences have been held regularly at the national, state and municipal level. In all cases citizens are invited to participate and among those that attend there is a process of nominating the councilors that will have the right to vote in the final decisions.<sup>1</sup>

The participatory budget assemblies facilitate scrutiny of governance performance, and they provide a space in which citizens deliberate and negotiate priorities on public investment. The final document of the participatory budget process is the plan of work and services; this plan is sent to the executive branch as an integral part of the budget, and then submitted to the legislature for review and a final vote. Policy councils provide forums in which citizens join service providers and public officials in defining public policies and overseeing their implementation. The policy conferences, by their turn, are responsible for deliberating over the "big themes" that should orient the policy agenda.

For many years we researched health councils that work in the neighborhoods, as well as at the municipal, state, and national levels. In our work we compared normative expectations to daily routines and explored possible policy impacts. Our results followed those described by a number of authors (Melo and Baiocchi 2006; Cornwall and Coelho 2007; Dagnino and Tatagiba 2007; Bebbington, Abramovay and Chiriboga 2008; Urbinatti and Warren 2008): in many situations there was absence of lively meetings and debates, while in several other the spaces were 'captured' by more organized groups. We also recognized and called attention to the impressive number of poorly facilitated meetings and the fact that there was no strong evidence that traditionally marginalized groups, who lacked political party connections or

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in the Municipality of São Paulo health councilors representing civil society reported themselves as representatives of popular health movements, health units, religious associations, neighbourhood associations, Unions, civil rights groups, participatory fora, homelessness movements, landless peasants movements, community or philanthropic groups, disabled persons associations, or as non-affiliated representatives (Coelho, 2006).

relationship with public managers, were being included in the process or accessing its distributive benefits.

Nevertheless, in some cases there was a convergence of mobilized citizens, committed public officials and well-facilitated discussions. Yet, even in these cases it was hard to find examples of innovative public policies being generated from information provided by civil society representatives or evidence that the discussions were making a difference in the policy process.

Despite all these shortcomings, our research showed that something new was going on. These participatory mechanisms helped bring policy makers and citizens closer. Poor and uneducated citizens were joining in the policy making process with intellectuals, wealthy citizens, and public officials. In these scenarios we expected that participation could help strengthen the policy debate and stakeholders network.

Today we feel less confident about the myriad of participatory mechanisms that have begun during the last twenty-five years because we do not see them growing and improving; they remain fragile. They make a difference, but it is hard to recognize them as fulfilling the normative expectations of participatory democracy. Their contribution to the development of a robust form of accountability is shy, citizens remain only weakly involved, and policy impacts are few.

This reality can be at least partially explained by the fact that politicians and public officials, once involved in the organization of participatory mechanisms, seek to guarantee the survival of their political network. In other words, unlike what was suggested by our normative assumptions, politicians and public officials involved in the creation and management of participatory spaces are more often motivated by the desire to maintain the status quo than to promote social change. In addition, there is difficulty in preparing and bringing together in a coherent way the recommendations produced by the myriad of existing participatory forums. More investment in this area would go some distance in helping to capitalize throughout other stages of the policy-making process the efforts of involving citizens, managers, researchers, service providers, and others in policy debates.

The latest Brazilian Constitution, written 25 years ago, was inspired by the idea that participation could make a difference. Today we have an impressive participatory structure and we still believe that participation can help democratize politics and policies. Nevertheless, the puzzle seems today much more complicated. It is becoming increasingly clear that we still have a lot to learn about the motivations and incentives that may lead politicians and public officials to compromise with changes in the status quo, as well as those that could stimulate citizens to articulate and communicate their concerns.

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