Our Money, Our Decision

Participatory Budgeting Takes Root in New York City

By DONATA SECONDO & JOSH LERNER

"PB comes down to us," Morgan declared. "We are like a family now. Everyone is watching, and we will succeed." Over the past two hours, this community leader in Brooklyn's Flatbush area had helped lead dozens of neighbors through a "participatory budgeting" (PB) meeting, to decide how to spend more than $1 million from the city budget. Though the money came from the city, the power behind this experiment in democracy came from hundreds of community organizers and activists.

Participatory Budgeting was launched in October 2011 in New York City (PBNYC)—the largest PB process in the US. A joint initiative of four New York City Council Members and dozens of organizations, it allows New Yorkers across the city to decide directly how to spend millions of taxpayer dollars. By bringing together diverse partners to design and implement the participatory process, PBNYC has emerged as a model for bottom-up, community-based governance. And by coordinating this work across four council districts, it shows how to scale up local democratic processes, while still maintaining community control.

Importing Democracy from Brazil

Participatory budgeting is a democratic process in which community members directly decide how to spend part of a public budget. It generally involves a series of meetings in which community members and budget delegates identify spending priorities, deliberate on these priorities, develop spending proposals, and vote on which proposals to implement.

In 1989, the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre launched the first full PB process. Since then, up to 50,000 people per year have decided how to spend up to a fifth of the city
budget. As a result, funds have been dramatically redirected toward slums and low-income communities. For example, in 1989, only 49 percent of the population had basic sanitation service. After eight years of PB, 98 percent of households had water, and 85 percent were served by the sewage system.

PB was soon adopted throughout Brazil, then quickly spread elsewhere in Latin America. In the past decade, it has become popular in Europe, Africa, and Asia, reaching over 1,200 cities by 2007. Several countries have passed laws requiring local governments to use PB, and the United Nations and World Bank have named it a best practice of democratic governance. Though most common in municipal budgets, PB has also worked for states, counties, schools, housing authorities, and community associations.

Six main benefits account for PB’s popularity. It deepens democracy, increases transparency, and promotes greater efficiency, increasing citizens’ trust in government. It educates people about democracy and spending, and promotes social justice by leveling the playing field and directing resources to communities in need. Lastly, it helps build community, bringing neighbors together in pursuit of common goals.

In 2009, our organization, The Participatory Budgeting Project (PBP), helped Alderman Joe Moore implement the first PB process in the US, in Chicago's 49th Ward. Each year since then, residents have decided how to spend over $1 million in ward discretionary funds. They have praised the opportunity to take ownership over the budget and win concrete improvements for their neighborhood. But the 49th Ward process has struggled to engage low-income people, youth, and other marginalized communities. The turnout demographics have resembled those of typical public meetings and local elections, more than the diverse participation common in Latin American PB. With PB limited to one district, organizers have lacked the resources and capacity to engage those community members who face the greatest obstacles to participation.

Take Two: New York City

As in Chicago, New York City Council Members have their own discretionary funds. Each of the city’s 51 Council Members (who each represent about 160,000 people) generally receives $3-11 million in capital funds and $200,000 to over $1 million in expense funds. The capital funds are spent on physical improvements to public spaces, while expense funds are used for social services and educational or cultural programs.

The discretionary funding process has been sharply criticized for lacking transparency and meaningful opportunities for participation. The Council Speaker decides how much each district gets, using her own criteria. While Council Members may consult with local groups on how to allocate these funds, ordinary citizens are rarely included. As a result, few residents understand how the budget works, and even fewer have a say in how it is spent.

Though the City’s 59 Community Boards offer a space for budget participation, they have little power. The Boards propose local spending priorities to the Mayor,
but most of their requests go unfunded. Their role in the budget process is strictly advisory. Often, they are also disconnected from and inaccessible to the population they represent. Few New Yorkers know about the Boards, and even fewer participate in them. Could PB offer residents a more meaningful seat at the budget table?

In Fall 2010, we asked this question at two public events in New York. Alderman Moore spoke about the Chicago PB experience, and New York City Council Members Brad Lander, Jumaane Williams, and Melissa Mark-Viverito responded.

The three Council Members were intrigued, and in March 2011, they joined with their colleague Eric Ulrich to launch a collaborative process. Each Council Member committed to letting residents decide at least $1 million of their district's capital discretionary funds—a total of around $6 million city-wide.

In this bipartisan effort, Lander (D, 39th District in Brooklyn, including Park Slope, Kensington and Borough Park), Mark-Viverito (D, 8th District in East Harlem, parts of the Upper West Side and the South Bronx), Williams (D, 45th District in the Flatbush area of Brooklyn), are working across the aisle with Ulrich (R, 32nd District 32, Queens), who is piloting PB in The Rockaways. PBP agreed to serve as the lead technical assistance partner, and the Council Members invited Community Voices Heard, a community organizing group, to serve as the lead community partner.

Designing Participation from Below

To make the initiative participatory from the get-go, we formed a City-wide Steering Committee to help design and support the process. This committee brought together over forty organizations focused on good government, research, policy, community education, and organizing—as well as Community Boards and community-based groups from the four districts.

In July, PBP guided the Steering Committee through two participatory design workshops to map out the PB cycle, decide its rules, and agree on roles and responsibilities. Through popular education games, interactive exercises, and small group discussions, participants drafted the basic structure and rules for the process. While deliberation was not easy, the group always managed to transcend differences.

In between and after the workshops, participants reviewed and revised the rules. Based on these discussions and feedback, we developed a PBNYC Handbook. Each organization voted whether to adopt the Handbook. A few groups dropped out during these discussions, but all 41 that remained approved the Handbook.

Based on the plan developed by the Steering Committee, we next extended participation more deeply, by establishing a District Committee in each participating district. Composed of local organizations, institutions, and Community Boards, the District Committees were tasked with managing the PB process locally.
Once the District Committees were in place, the Council Member offices began working with them to organize the first public stage of PB—neighborhood assemblies. At these meetings, held in October and November 2011, community members brainstormed capital project ideas and selected volunteer budget delegates. Each district organized at least 5 assemblies, adding up to 27 total.

Starting in November, the delegates began meeting to develop their neighbors’ ideas into concrete project proposals. In February 2012, they are scheduled to present their proposals to the community in a second round of assemblies, and revise the proposals based on feedback. In March 2012, all residents of the districts 18 years or older will be invited to vote for their favorite projects. The projects that win the most votes will be submitted to the city for implementation, up until the million-dollar mark is reached.

Building and Supporting Community Power

Though it is too early to assess the full impact of PBNYC, the initial stages offer two lessons for community planning and organizing. First, participatory programs can raise more resources and support by inviting community leaders to write the rules of the game. Unlike most such programs—and most PB experiences—PBNYC began by engaging a broad Steering Committee in designing the participatory process. In most cities, PB is government-led. As much as people participate on the ground, the government usually plans and manages the process. Community members are sometimes invited to help revise the rules, but not to write them in the first place.

Letting the community decide how it will be able to participate is not easy, but it pays big dividends. The main challenge is deciding who will decide. In New York, there was no pre-existing representative body for the districts, so we created one. Once we did, the Steering Committee—and then the District Committees—began to inject resources into the process. They raised funds and in-kind contributions, and arranged for food, childcare, and translation—often donating goods and services themselves—to make meetings more accessible. They staffed assemblies, helped train facilitators, and did extensive community outreach. Hundreds of organizers across the city have already contributed thousands of volunteer hours. As Morgan declared at the start of this article, the District Committees and Steering Committee took ownership over the process and willed it to succeed.

The second key lesson is that, ironically, scaling up participatory processes can ground them more deeply in local communities. Coordinating PBNYC across four districts has provided local organizers with more resources. Unlike Chicago’s 49th Ward, PBNYC’s scope has enabled it to attract foundation funding, extensive media coverage, and a large team of researchers and videographers.

These resources have helped each district engage more people more deeply— including those who tend to participate the least.

Balancing power and responsibilities between the Council Members, the Steering Committee and four District Committees has at times been a challenge, with many cooks in a brand-new kitchen. But building up this infrastructure for community control has ultimately expanded the reach of PB. In New York, bottom-up design and implementation has given the community power over not only budget funds, but also the PB process itself. If more community members could gain the power to write the rules and the resources to carry them out, perhaps they could take back public control over public money—and even change the game of democracy.

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