SUMMARY NOTE

Dispelling Myths about Participatory Budgeting across Levels of Government

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Based on an Informal Workshop of the OECD Network on Fiscal Relations across Levels of Government and Working Party of Parliamentary Budget Officials and Independent Fiscal Institutions

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■ Background

Distribution of political power across different actors is one of the main objectives of decentralisation as well as federalism since such distribution allows for more inclusive decision-making processes and policy outcomes that are closer to local preferences (*OECD Fiscal Federalism 2022*). In a context of declining trust and growing dissatisfaction with democratic institutions, there is a renewed interest in engaging with citizens as partners. Targeted approaches, such as participatory budgeting (PB), aspire to give a voice to politically excluded community members. However, do such "democratic innovations" succeed, or are they often captured by special interests?

PB initiatives can include questions of how to raise revenues (e.g. referendum on the Stockholm congestion charge) as well as how to set priorities for spending and the distribution of public funds among levels of government (e.g. Alberta referendum on fiscal equalisation). While either the executive or a legislative body can engage in a dialogue with citizens to filter and reconcile different views, finding the right institutional context and clear responsibilities for implementation are necessary to ensure PB do not in fact undermine the democratic process.

To date, participatory budgeting has primarily taken place at local levels, the closest level of government to citizens. However, there are a few PB initiatives aiming at the regional level (e.g. New York State and Poitou-Charentes for education) and even national levels (e.g. Portugal). This informal workshop analysed this phenomenon, gathered examples, as well as potential lessons on PB from a multilevel governance perspective, ranging from deliberative participation to the Swiss "direct democracy" model. It explored what motivates institutions to foster participation through PB, who takes part in these types of democratic innovation processes and how PB initiatives may succeed.

■ This Workshop

With this background, the purpose of the workshop was to better understand country experiences with participatory budgeting and related approaches to making fiscal policy-making more inclusive across levels of government.

■ Key questions

Speakers and discussion aimed to address the following questions:

1. *What is the typical scale and focus of Participatory Budgeting, and can or should its impact be strengthened?*
2. *Who participates in PB initiatives and why? Does it strengthen the democratic process, or the contrary?*
3. *Are there related approaches, e.g., through legislatures or referenda, that could be more effective?*

Dispelling myths about participatory budgeting across levels of government[1]

1. What is the typical focus and scale of participatory budgeting?

1. This document is intended to give a balanced overview of selected OECD experience with participatory budgeting and related efforts to engage with citizens around fiscal policy. It aims to capture the insights from an informal workshop that took place on 12 April 2022. Key participants were Jón Blondal (OECD), Paul Smoke (NYU), Marcia Godwin (University of La Verne), Jaroslaw Kantorowicz (Leiden University), Sun-Moon Jung (Dongguk University), Yves Sintomer (Université Paris 8), Mark Mahabir (Canadian Parliamentary Budget Office), Lars P. Feld (University of Freiburg) and Ernesto Ganuza (CSIC).

2. Since the early iterations of participatory budgeting (PB) initiatives in the late 1980's in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre (Melgar, 2014[1]), various PB projects have spread across other regions and countries, some with the support of international organisations (Shah, 2007[2]; OECD, 2020[3]). According to Professor Ganuza, whereas strengthening democracy was a main aim pursued in developing countries, the central objective of PB in developed countries is to close the gap between citizens and institutions.

3. Indeed, only 51% of the population in OECD member countries trust their governments, according to a recent survey. In addition, only 40% consider that they have a say in what their government does (OECD, 2022[4]). However, these averages mask unevenly distributed access to decision-making and political participation across population groups. Participation can be considered democratic "when every individual potentially affected by a decision has an equal opportunity to affect the decision" (Warren, 2002[5]). Along these lines, Professor Jung highlighted the importance of PB in involving citizens in budgetary decision-making.

4. To date, PB has primarily taken place at local levels, the closest level of government to citizens. However, there are a few PB initiatives aiming at the regional level (e.g. New York State and the former region of Poitou-Charentes, France, for education) and even the national level (e.g. Portugal). Sometimes, as in Korea, it is the central government that establishes the mandate to implement PB processes in lower levels of governments, with heterogeneous results depending the institutional context of each country. In this note and during the workshop, PB was considered in the broadest terms, to include various kinds of participatory processes – including fiscal referenda – in order to better understand their main features as well as the scope for enhancing participation and strengthening democratic institutions.

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[1] This document is based on proceedings of the informal workshop "Dispelling myths about participatory budgeting across levels of government" which took place on 12 April 2022, jointly organised by the Network on Fiscal Relations and the Working Party of Parliamentary Budget Officials and Independent Fiscal Institutions (PBO Working Party). This summary was drafted by Andoni Montes Nebreda (Fiscal Network), under the supervision of Sean Dougherty (Head of Secretariat, Fiscal Network) and Lisa von Trapp (Lead, PBO Working Party).

Box 1. Main takeaways from the informal workshop

- Participatory budgeting (PB) aims to improve institutional transparency and efficiency, and give voice to under-represented groups, who have traditionally been excluded from decision-making processes, whether because they are less likely to vote, or because they are underrepresented in formal institutions and public service.
- Most PB exercises have taken place at the local level to allocate small-scale public funds to capital investment projects.
- Due to its small-scale, there have been questions as to PB's actual impact, although there is some evidence that it has contributed to budget transparency and even efficiency.
- PB processes have evolved from in-person set-ups to hybrid or online set-ups, allowing for broader participation, but at the cost of less deliberation. This trend has advanced during pandemic and may reverse in the coming years. At the same time, the outcome of PB processes are increasingly directive.
- The design and implementation of PB processes needs to avoid participation biases, and confirmation tendencies.

1.1. Focus

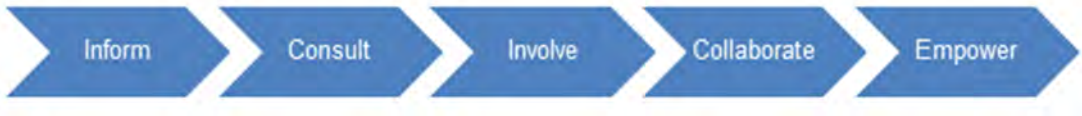
5. As described by Professor Sintomer, there are many different kinds of participatory processes, which differ in terms of goals (both declared and non-declared) and scope. Regarding the latter, there are various elements that allow classification of PB experiences, such as the following:

- *Revenue or expenditure side*: in most cases, citizens help to set expenditure priorities and/or participate in the allocation of a small public fund for *ad hoc* projects. By contrast, very few PB experiences have been recorded in which citizens contribute to the revenue-side of budgeting. Some related exceptions may be found, for example, in Switzerland (explained in detail by Professor Feld) with its system of direct democracy, the referendum on the congestion charges in Stockholm, the vote on the federal equalisation programme held in Alberta (Canada) in 2021, or through US state votes on bond issues and constraining the base of property taxes (e.g. Proposition 15 in California).
- *Policy area*: despite most experiences now being focused on small urban initiatives, such as public infrastructure endowment (e.g. sports centres, playgrounds, bike lines), the first Latin American experiences were related to social expenditure areas, such as poverty relief policies or plans to address socioeconomic deprivation and exclusion within specific neighbourhoods (Bräutigam, 2004[6]).
- *Type of expenditure*: most PB processes target capital expenditure. As remarked by Professor Smoke, they do so without paying much attention to current expenditure needs generated by newly built public infrastructure, and do not usually provide information to PB participants in this regard.

1.2. Process

6. As noted by Professor Kantorowicz, the design of the process is a determinant in shaping citizens' attitudes towards PB (van der Does and Kantorowicz, 2021[7]). Although each PB initiative is different, Professor Godwin highlighted typical steps (**Figure 1**). In PB processes in which participation is limited to submitting, or voting on, a proposal, open information campaigns are carried out and the potential participant base is broader. In Korea, participatory budgeting initiatives go further. Through Citizens' Budget Schools or seminars, participants are taught the basics of public accounting and budgeting so that they can make more informed decisions (Jung, 2021[8]; Röcke et al., 2020[9]).

Figure 1. Steps in the participation process



7. While first experiences were based on face-to-face neighbourhood meetings, as described by Professor Kantorowicz, the use of technology means that many PB initiatives increasingly include online elements. While this shift may broaden the base of potential participants, excessive reliance on online-only processes could lessen the deliberative aspects and the network-building effect provided by in-person approaches. At the same time, according to Professor Sintomer, PB initiatives have become more likely to be more directive on decision-making, which may work in favour of legitimising them and building positive sentiment among citizens.

8. The last step of the PB process is decision-making on the projects or budgetary measures that will be adopted. After deliberation, there are two possible ways to proceed. Frequently, a city council or mayor's office takes the final decision following citizen input. Alternatively, when the process is binding, then a popular vote will determine the outcome. Both approaches allow for technical examinations in order to ensure that proposals fit within the law, are feasible and do not involve serious risks for other policies' success. Nevertheless, finding the right balance between citizen's decision-making power and technical prescriptions is important to preserve the meaning of PB, and avoid damaging participants' attitudes towards the process, which could discourage future participation.

9. Finally, particular attention should be paid to the governmental body that takes the leading role during the various steps of PB. According to previous experiences explained by experts, such as Professors Kantorowicz, Godwin and Jung, participatory budgeting initiatives have often been executive-led. This is in part due to the local nature of most PB projects where there may not be a legislative body. However, it may also be linked to PB's personal leadership ties. A very strong identification between incumbents and PB initiatives could put the continuity of the project at risk if they fail to get re-elected (e.g. Cordoba, Spain). Increased participation of the legislative branch has been pointed out as a way to preserve PB from changes by the ruling party (Melgar, 2014[1]).

10. Following this rationale, in Canada, the legislature holds pre-budget consultations, as explained by Mark Mahabir, where citizens' views on the federal budget are provided during open hearings in the capital and the provinces. Their feedback is then assembled into a report sent by the parliament to the government. However, the focus of the topics covered and the share of proposals incorporated in the final report are often dependent on the political composition of the parliament. Inversely to this *ex ante* approach, the Dutch Parliament's V-100 initiative, engages 100 citizens in the *ex post* scrutiny of national budget and contributes to the accountability function of the parliament (OECD, 2022[4]).

1.3. Small-scale initiatives

11. Only a small amount of public funds are allocated through these participatory processes. As remarked by Professor Paul Smoke, most of the time, it is just few hundred thousand or a few million dollars or euros that are in play, which represents a tiny share of the expenditure of a large city (**Table 1**). The small-scale of most PB projects is not necessarily a negative point. However, in line with Professor Smoke's view, it may lead to scepticism about the size of the real impact PB can have. Consequently, some could argue that it serves as a signalling tool, rather than a transformative instrument. Nevertheless, as raised by Professor Sintomer, when targeting specific policy areas, such as environmental policy, even a small amount of PB allocations could be part of broader moves towards more meaningful change.

Table 1. How much money is involved in Participatory Budgeting?

Place	Level of government	Amount
Scheveningse Parkwijlen, The Hague (NLD)	Local (neighbourhood)	50 000 EUR
Cambridge (USA)	Local	1 million USD
New York (USA)	Local	35 million USD (2019)
Paris (France)	Local	5% of investment = 1% of total budget (2017)
Portugal	National	5 million EUR

Source: OECD (2022[4]), City of the Hague, City Council of NYC, City of Paris, Portuguese Government.

2. Who participates in participatory budgeting initiatives and why?

12. Changing demographics, tensions related to immigration or migration, political polarisation, social exclusion and discrimination represent new challenges to effectively achieve inclusive citizen participation (OECD, 2022[4]). PB aims to engage citizens into decision-making processes, often with a particular focus on minority groups, which have traditionally been denied access. This includes politically excluded groups due to gender, education attainment level or ethnicity (van der Does and Kantorowicz, 2022[10]). Inequality of participation has been extensively researched by academics regarding electoral turnout, concluding that the least educated and lower income groups are much less likely to vote (Denny and Doyle, 2008[11]; Leighley and Nagler, 1992[12]).

13. Subjective as well as objective factors and characteristics influence the composition of participant groups. For instance, according to Prats and Meunier (2021[13])**,** citizens that consider that they have a better ability to understand political processes are more likely to participate. This indicates that self-awareness and self-confidence in one's knowledge, skills and abilities, which are not evenly distributed among population groups, could be one of the channels to address in order to cope with inequalities in political participation. In Korea, training is provided through the Korean Citizens Budget Schools.

14. How participants in PB are selected determines to a large extent whether political participation is made more inclusive. Four different types of PB processes can be defined according to this approach:

- *Self or no selection*: all citizens/groups can take part on meetings and decisions. It implies a self-selection bias risk, according to which excluded groups are less likely to participate.
- *Randomly selected participants*: often emerges as the best alternative to ensure equal access to participation. However, it needs to be complemented by mechanisms, such as incentives and/or compensation, to ensure that the excluded can take part, as low-income citizens could have less time to devote to civic engagement activities.
- *Selected by the government*: it can be a good alternative if participants are represented according to stratified grouping weights. Nevertheless, it raises discretionary-bias risks.
- *Selected by other neighbours*: consistent with the pro-democracy argument to support PB, but can jeopardize the process if elected participants representation is not diverse enough (OECD, 2022[4]).

In addition to the participative approach chosen for PB, when looking to draw a more inclusive design of PB frameworks, other choices that indirectly affect the capacity to participate should also be considered. For instance, whether the process is fully online or not. As previously mentioned, despite allowing a broad participants' base, online processes also entail the risk of excluding population groups whose access to technology and the internet are lower such as the elderly and low-income households. The existence of a healthy civic framework is also of key importance to allow for more inclusive PB to take place. In achieving the latter, education is of first order. Precisely, both formal and informal civic and citizenship training is

correlated with higher participation (Schulz et al., 2018[14]). Additionally, the presence of a strong and well-developed group of associations, community groups and even social or economic organisations can contribute to engage the excluded in policymaking through participative democracy.

15. However, according to Professor Ganuza for Cordoba, the role given to various associations has to be carefully analysed. While giving them too prominent of a role could bias the deliberation process (OECD, 2019[15]), excluding them could lead to political economy issues that would potentially undermine PB due to lack of popular support. Setting requirements that balance association roles and influence, can help to address this issue.

16. The link between participation and attitudes towards PB are an important element for institutions to consider in order to improve its political feasibility. According to data for the Netherlands presented by Professor Kantorowicz, although there are differences across population groups regarding the perceived usefulness and design of PB. Nevertheless, this research shows that the outcome is more important than the process in shaping attitudes towards PB.

3. Does PB strengthen the democratic process?

17. As pointed out by Jón Blondal, there are both vocal proponents and sceptics for PB. For instance, PB can even serve to undermine legislative bodies. In line with the latter view, Professor Ganuza made the point that participation is not necessarily good only because citizens are involved. Similarly, Professor Feld argued that although political outcomes reached through deliberative democracy may get closer to voters' preferences, this does not imply that they will be better.

18. For successful outcomes, a pre-existing institutional framework that makes PB effective is needed (Ganuza, Baiocchi and Summers, 2016[16]). Notably, the administrative capacity to set-up, organise and deliver processes emerge as key issues. Similarly, previous work by the OECD emphasises the importance of a healthy civic space for citizen participation (OECD, 2022[4]).

19. Among the advantages of adopting PB are informational gains. Just as the case for decentralisation is supported by more accurate information of SNGs on citizens' preferences and needs (Oates, 2005[17]), PB can reinforce that channel by generating connections and strengthening synergies between institutions and voters. Efficiency gains from better information works in both directions. On the one hand, from the point of view of the government, it will be in a better position to match citizens' needs. And, on the other hand, from voters' perspective, as mentioned by Professor Smoke, increased transparency allows citizens to better oversee government's fiscal performance, track implementation, and hold incumbents accountable. At the same time, according to Golfrank (2002[18]), more decentralisation can facilitate the introduction of PB processes.

20. Professor Sun-Moon Jung, by using the Korean example, argued that PB can serve two distinct but interconnected needs:

- Quality of democracy
  - Resource allocation
  - Poverty alleviation
- Government efficiency
  - Fiscal sustainability
  - Cost efficiency

21. Evidence from Korean municipalities suggests that there may be three channels through which PB can enhance government efficiency (Jung, 2021[8]):

- *Fiscal transparency*: formal channels to obtain accessible fiscal information and provides face-to-face interactions with government officials.
- *Bottom-up monitoring*:, PB programmes as strong and well-targeted learning tools on budgetary issues for citizens.

- *Collective actions*: provides a venue for citizens to engage with civic group and build community networks.

22. Other benefits from PB mentioned by the experts during the workshop are: *i*) the need to explicitly state the whole costs of proposed projects, *ii*) improved transparency and administrative modernisation, *iii*) potential usefulness to foster targeted policies, for instance greening of cities, and/or *iv*) minority group engagement into the democratic decision-making process.

23. However, although frequently neglected, there are also potential risks emerging from PB. First, incumbents can use PB to confirm previously made decisions, as a way to improve their legitimacy. The same argument has been made for other participatory tools, such as referendums or public consultation. Swiss-type pre-defined participation channels could help in avoiding this issue. In fact, according to Professor Feld, Swiss rules for popular initiatives, referendums and participatory democracy in general, even if they differ across cantons, are very clear on when and in which situations these democratic innovation tools must be used, lowering the risk of arbitrary misuse.

24. Fiscal referendums and popular initiatives are the two most widely used participatory mechanisms in Switzerland. On the one hand, the former can be mandatory or optional, depending on the spending threshold set. Although not all Swiss cantons legal frameworks' foresee both kinds of fiscal referendums, most do so for at least one. As it could be expected, spending thresholds that oblige cantons to hold mandatory referendums are higher than those that allow for optional referendums. On the other hand, popular initiatives can propose new statutes or constitutional amendment. In both cases, a certain number of signatures needs to be gathered in order to launch the process. Wide differences are recorded across cantons to this respect too, with lower signature requirements for statutory initiatives than for constitutional ones (Feld and Matsusaka, 2003[19]).

25. Second, as remarked by Professor Sintomer, PB means that non-elected citizens get to take decisions on public budgeting. This weakness could be mitigated through citizen election or selection systems to help avoid bias in the composition of participants (OECD, 2020[3]; OECD, 2021[20]). Third, if PB processes are poorly designed, they may develop in parallel instead of on a complementary basis to the institutional political process. In this context, the lack of conversation between citizens and institutions would prevent some of the previously presented benefits from being realised.

26. Finally, as raised by Professor Smoke, decisions taken through PB could generate spillovers, not only to other jurisdictions, but also through to other policy areas. On the one hand, regarding the former, it is clear in the literature that a typical SNGs' decision function only considers costs and benefits within their own jurisdiction to take their policy choices. This generates known "side-effects" or externalities on neighbouring jurisdictions. Following this rationale, it is even less likely that PB participants deliberate and decide considering the existence of inter-jurisdictional spillovers, which could worsen this phenomenon, although, given the small amounts of funds usually involved, the impact could be negligible.

27. On the other hand, policy choices in a specific area could introduce consequences for others. While governments and legislative bodies are supposed to follow a broader cross-sectoral approach, this is less likely to be the case for PB participants, particularly when they do not receive training or lack information. For instance, broader environmental consequences from commonly taken PB decisions on local public infrastructure could be neglected.

28. This final issue could emerge more often when revenue-side decisions are made. As Professor Feld explained the US experience where requiring voters' approval to increase taxation decreased the level of public expenditure in comparison to states where citizens' approval was not required.in recent decades. This could be followed by an increased inequality in the access to local public services, which often involve healthcare or education. Consistently, more recent evidence have shown that fiscal referendums in Switzerland have lowered public revenue and expenditure. Concretely, according to this research, mandatory referendums reduced government spending by 19% for the median canton during

the 1980-1998 period (Feld and Matsusaka, 2003[19]). Consequently, he suggested that participation could reduce the need to issue bonds, could lead to a decrease in tax evasion and may induce income distribution policies to be more targeted.

29. In any case, involvement of citizens' in decisions on how revenue is raised entails some risks, as citizens may lack awareness or be unable to accurately estimate the amount of taxes they pay and to position themselves in the income distribution curve (Fernández-Albertos and Kuo, 2015[21]), since they tend to perceive what they pay as lower than it actually is, and to be located higher in the income distribution than they actually are. As these misperceptions bias their choices for fiscal policy, if citizens can directly decide on revenue policy, they should receive extensive data in advance so they can adopt well-informed positions.

30. To conclude, participatory approaches can make institutions more inclusive, by getting input from groups that are often excluded from the political process, but this depends on how they are designed and implemented. To date, based on the discussion at the informal workshop, the small scale of the usually subnational PB projects offer useful lessons about risks to avoid as well as potential benefits.

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