



What makes participatory experiences successful?

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What makes participatory experiences successful? There is still no answer to such an old question, notwithstanding the past years of democratic governance experimentation in Latin-American post-transition scenario, European Union, and other regions all over the world. Despite many unsuccessful and successful experiences, one thing is certain: building democratic governance institutions that deepen democracy in a sustainable manner is still a challenge.

It is well known that successful experiences do not only depend on several conditions, but the very idea of success needs to be clarified and defined in a measurable way. It is possible to address this challenge—measuring the outcomes and reach of citizen participation—by focusing on **priority inversion in policy-making processes**, that is the capacity of participatory governance to challenge status quo, making policies more inclusive and redistributive. This is the question that drives Chance to Sustain Project's team research in Brazil. Although it is an ongoing research, it is possible to draw a few lessons about building successful participatory experience based on our preliminary findings.

Chance to Sustain in Brazil belongs to a new generation of research which analyzes participatory experiences in innovative manners. An important shift is analyzing participatory spaces embedded in broader democratic governance structures. In the 1990's and early 2000's it was usual to focus research on one specific participatory institution and on one single case—for instance, participatory budgeting, or health councils. However, **there is a growing perception among scholars and policy makers that participatory spaces must not be understood as isolated devices**. Conversely, factors that may promote priority inversion in policy making could not only be located within the participatory spaces themselves (including their actors and internal dynamics), but within the democratic governance structure as a whole. The research analyses three participatory governance structures at municipal level: Salvador, Rio de Janeiro and Guarulhos.

So far, our research shows, indeed, that **democratic governance structure affects the capabilities of priority inversion of specific participatory institutions**.

Some lessons

First of all, the success of participatory space depends heavily on the place it occupies in the democratic governance structure to which it belongs. Therefore, if a government is committed to foster participatory governance, it must also build a management model that integrates participatory spaces within the regular process of policy making in a systematic – i.e. not isolated – way. The lesson would be: **participatory spaces must be built in strong connection with**



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Chance2Sustain examines how governments and citizens in cities with differing patterns of economic growth and socio-spatial inequality make use of participatory (or integrated) spatial knowledge management to direct urban governance towards more sustainable development.

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the administrative structure that manages specific policy making processes within government, defining clearly the 'paths' through which demands and collective decisions made within participatory spaces can reach and shape policy. One crucial implication is the need of involving in the participatory space every office that may have a stake during negotiation and planning processes. This means essentially to provide transparency not only along the public policy cycle, but also to set clearly the rules that define participation and its' reach shaping policy making.

As long as governments are committed to build a new management model oriented towards participation, there are at least two key elements for the success and sustainability of participatory spaces: processing demands and being responsive to them. Nevertheless, dialogue is also crucial for negotiating with the community. **Convincing managers and building capacity among them for dealing with participation as a useful and powerful input in policy making** should enhance chances for stable participatory experiences.

An interesting example is the city of Guarulhos, in the metropolitan region of Sao Paulo, which, in our research, is a best case. Guarulhos' municipal government has adopted participation as its management 'brand'. This means that although Participatory Budgeting (PB) is the flagship of the government, openness to civil society through participatory channels is a broader feature of PT local government that involves several government agencies. Thus it is not restricted to the PB or Policy Councils. The relationship with civil society is intense and permanently promoted by the government. In contrast, Rio de Janeiro and Salvador have few participatory experiences, ruling parties are not committed to foster civil society capability for policy influence and their participatory governance structures are weaker.

Although at a preliminary stage of analysis, this case comparison suggests that **priority inversion is more effective when the local democratic governance structure is more developed and active**. Here 'developed' is taken as an increase in the number of participatory instances and the diversification of the institutional contexts in which they are implemented. 'Active' is understood as the use of these instances by stakeholders, especially by those typically under-represented in political decision-making spheres. Therefore, as local successful experiences seem to depend on the effectiveness and development of the democratic governance structure, it is plausible to argue that no participatory technology per se ensures participatory experiences' success if it is not connected to democratic governance structures as a whole and the commitment of ruling government to promote participation.

However, **it is still necessary to address the mechanisms that lead to more active and developed governance** structures when there is convergence in the historical agenda of local ruling parties and local civil societies. While scholars quite often assume that ideology is the key factor, our preliminary findings point at the rationale of different stakeholders as a variable that need to be grasped. The political return that the government will gain by implementing citizen participation seems, so far, a crucial variable, even though it is not the only one, as well as the rationale of the activists that engage with participatory spaces.

On the one hand, if our preliminary evidence is right, it could lead to hypothetically assume that policy priority inversion within participatory spaces tends to increase when participatory governance policies are contextually linked to high political returns. In Guarulho's successful experiences, governments play an important role in guaranteeing that participation is a key issue on the political agenda, inside and outside of government. On the other hand, active governance structures also improve the effectiveness of priority inversion. Literature points out that participatory experiences are more likely to be successful when implemented in cities or policy domains with strong associative traditions. Brazilian experiences show that **government has a crucial role in mobilizing communities and civil society to participate**. It also plays an important role in enhancing capacity building for participants so their demands become more concrete and their proposals stronger. This helps governance structures to be more active, which in turn makes priority inversion more effective. Of course mobilizing civil society stakeholders does not guarantee the continuity and sustainability of participatory experiences if those experiences lose credibility. Participatory processes may be very tiring and costly for participants (and for governments). If it does not lead to clear or perceived outcomes, the continuity and sustainability of the experience could be threatened.