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Social participation and local development. Citizen policies and citizen participation: participatory budgets

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ARTICLE SECTION

Social participation and local development. Citizen policies and citizen participation: participatory budgets

Abstract: Today, almost certainly, no one doubts the necessary complementarity between the two central concepts of this article: social participation and local development. Although this has not always been the case, since the new European directives and after more than twenty years of strategic regional development plans, the articulation between social participation and the development of municipal programs to improve the living conditions of their Citizens, we can now say that it is self-evident. Through a tour of the reference standards, our objective is to carry out a documentary analysis of the most significant policies in the European and Spanish sphere, focusing on the potentialities that the participation strategy has for local development in general and, especially emphasis, in the increase of participatory democracy and, therefore, in the expansion of the participation of social actors in the decision-making of the plans necessary to resolve their felt demands. To carry out this specific analysis, we will focus on participatory budgeting in one case, then systematize our own research experience (2012-2018). We have concluded that dynamization processes are necessary to successfully conduct any experience around participatory budgets.

Key words: participatory democracy, strategic planning, social policies, social praxis.

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IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

1. La participación social debe involucrar a la sociedad, en la construcción del desarrollo local sostenible.
2. La participación constituye una vía para que los ciudadanos compartan las decisiones que les afectan.
3. Los presupuestos participativos son una herramienta clave para la participación y la gestión del municipio.
4. Los presupuestos participativos suponen una oportunidad de cambio para el desarrollo estratégico de los municipios.

1. Social participation must involve society in the construction of sustainable local development.
2. Participation is a way for citizens to share in the decisions that affect them.
3. Participatory budgets are a key tool for the participation and management of the municipality.
4. Participatory budgeting is an opportunity for change for the strategic development of municipalities.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT¹

1. Introduction and justification

Our perspective on local development is framed from a social vision and no less important for the future of the term. For us, it is precisely the social orientation of local development that emerges most strongly in the current scenario, due to the social conditions dragged by the currently existing polycrisis, derived from the impacts of a pandemic unparalleled in modern times. In turn, the connotation and meaning coined to the term is given by the power that it gives to the processes that are forged from the bottom up; that is, counting on the social participation of all those concerned in a given territory (Méndez and Pérez-Cosín, 2016).

The democratic disaffection that prevails today feeds too much on apathy, disenchantment, reluctance, decadence, demotivation, and the growing mistrust of the more traditional and prevailing forms, methods, and styles of governing (Herrera et al., 2016). There is no doubt that the scenario of the municipalities has unlimited potential for the full revitalization of democratic processes and they have to respond to the growing social complexities of the current world and the diverse ways in which it arises (Pastor, 2016).

2. Objectives, methodology and techniques

We are committed to justifying the strategy of the budgets from another rationality beyond social control, finding arguments in the base of citizen training that runs through the entire process. In this way, we consider that our specific objectives provide evidence to demonstrate that participatory budgets are the vehicle for dynamization, they are the stimulus to remove citizens from the accelerated process of individualization that makes them turn their backs on social life. That is why participatory budgets must be the trigger to collectively live a process of empowerment that, without dismissing the fact that the decisions made in relation to the execution of part of the municipal investment are effective, greater emphasis will be placed on the return to social life as a factor for deepening real democracy.

The methodology that has been used throughout the entire process is eminently participatory. A type of constructive-interpretative qualitative research was followed, within which a systematization of participatory experiences was carried out that has allowed deepening the categorical constructs analyzed. Documentary research (Valles, 1999) and content analysis (Ruiz-Olabuénaga, 1999) were used as methods. In this way, new areas of intelligibility were generated from the proposed model.

The main objective of this strategy is to promote the direct participation of citizens in order to place public investment demands and needs at the center of attention. Once these investment demands have been projected through the mechanisms established in the self-regulation (collectively agreed operating rule), they will be included in the city's annual budget and the commitments achieved will be monitored. Although, as Sousa (1999) points out, we can accept that at the base of participatory budgets we find a series of principles or constants, such as the fact that it is a participatory process open to all citizens.

¹ Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

3. Results and discussion

After six years of participatory action-research (2012-2018) in various municipalities of the Valencia metropolitan area and after carrying out a praxiological systematization (Montagud and Pérez-Cosín, 2015) of our field experience, the categories of qualitative analysis are detailed. that help us to place the results and their discussion at the exact chronological moment in which the participatory action research (PAR) was carried out.

Table 1. Categories of analysis according to specific objectives

Category	Goal
General design of the strategy	Stimulate to get out of individualization
Engine Group	Experience collective empowerment
Participatory dynamics	Experience collective empowerment
Learning spaces	Delve into real democracy
Technical leadership	Stimulate to get out of individualization
View the achievement	Delve into real democracy
Plan the change	Delve into real democracy

Source: self-made.

We must take into consideration the constitution of a group capable of supporting the initiative and committing to the process. As can be deduced from the competencies that we attribute to the members of this group, it is inevitable that, either previously or in parallel, they are provided with additional information and training so that they can exercise the role that we have assigned them.

The subject deserves to be treated with special care, since as we have been defending throughout this reflection, it is not only about making decisions, it is about learning in the course of the decision-making process. Let us not forget that participation in a learning process, -you learn to participate- and, to participate you learn by participating, that is why once the strategy that gives meaning to participation is facilitated (we participate to make a decision about what spend part of the budget), the scenario for its application must be taken care of (Llena and Parceriza, 2008). Multipurpose spaces, with the capacity to hold large forums where conclusions are presented to large groups, spaces for working in small groups, audio-visual media that speed up work and give quality to presentations, spaces that are sufficiently socially identified, comfortable in terms of lighting and hearing etc. Having this type of spaces for participation is an indicator institutional projection on the issue at hand and a revealer of the weight that the community gives to training aspects, the basis of the success of participatory budgets.

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A strong and unequivocal leadership is necessary to allow participatory budgets to cross-cut other practices and other municipal departments and can be seen as a break with the fragmented and cellular model with which they are traditionally managed in local corporations. Based on our experience, we are committed to considering the department of citizen participation as the optimal structure to manage participatory budgets. As we have been able to verify in other experiences (Seville, Barcelona, Gijón, etc.), a municipal structure that centralizes participation is positioned with greater capacity to permeate the organization as a whole and carry out a transversal action that eliminates susceptibilities and false protagonism of other departments and municipal areas, implying from the sum of synergies in the social profitability of the actions.

Visualizing the achievement of our participation is stimulating, justifies the effort and, above all, legitimizes the role of committed citizens. The execution of the participatory budget must be clearly identified so that citizens identify the achievement with the strategy, in the same way that the citizens who have participated in the process must have at the end of it some type of accreditation that guarantees them as involved citizens and committed. Faced with the reality stated above, participatory budgets represent an opportunity for change that will certainly not occur automatically. On the contrary, if it occurs, it will be the result of a whole methodologically orchestrated process that must be part of the global municipal strategic plan.

4. Conclusions

In short, it is about considering the local corporation as a functional unit of planning, action, evaluation and change, in which it is inevitable to place itself in a permanent process of technical, political and social training, therefore considering the intervention socio-educational as an essential part of the strategic plan. When we refer to research on citizen participation, we believe that they should go one step further and, in addition to quantifying participation, they should also be aimed at evaluating its quality, since increasing quality would increase levels of satisfaction for the participants. We have no doubt that this type of process would contribute to the consolidation of participation. In this sense, it should also be investigated whether participation improves public policies in its various stages, and in what sense it does so, to verify that we are not wasting resources and efforts in vain. Without evaluation of participation, we cannot design public policies for sustainable local development.