Is this participatory budgeting?

Some lessons learned from the 2013 and 2014 Blantyre process

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This case study is the sixth in a series of short case studies conducted in 2013/2014 as part of a research collaboration between the Centre for Community Organization and Development (CCODE), the Federation of the Rural and Urban Poor, the Urban Research Institute (URI), and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU). The objective of the series is to document and analyze some existing practices on participatory urban planning and informal settlement upgrading in Malawi. The studies emphasize lessons learned and aims to explore planning in a wider governance context. This specific case study from Blantyre focuses on the Participatory Budgeting processes conducted in 2013 and 2014.

Blantyre is the oldest urban centre in Malawi and its commercial capital. Following the national population census the city had a population of 661,256 in 2008. Today Blantyre is estimated to have reached over one million inhabitants (UNDESA 2011). The city covers an area of 220 square kilometers and has the highest population...
The medium and high income classes are the only ones with access to serviced land in Blantyre. Consequently, over 65 per cent of the population live in densely populated informal settlements where they struggle with issues as access to water, electricity, sanitation, health services, education, and security (UN Habitat 2011).
To address some of the issues experienced by people in the city, the Blantyre City Council initiated a participatory budget process in 2013. Participatory budgeting is seen as increasing popular participation following up on the Constitution and the decentralization process as envisaged in the 1998 Local Government Act.

Participatory budgeting was pioneered by Porto Alegre in Brazil in 1989 and has been promoted as good practice for including marginalized groups in decision making. It has also been replicated successfully in a range of other places. The objective of participatory budgeting is to give the citizens opportunities to present demands and priorities for their areas and through discussions and negotiations influence the city’s budget allocation (UN Habitat 2007). In Porto Alegre the participatory budgeting resulted in improved public welfare services for the people and improved project implementation.

**Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre**

*(based on Bhatnagar et al. undated)*

Participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre involves three parallel streams of meetings: neighborhood assemblies, “thematic” assemblies, and meetings of delegates for citywide coordinating sessions. These meetings continue throughout the year.

The city government presents their accounts from the previous year and investment plan for the current year, as decided in the previous year’s meetings. Then a debate starts for the next year. The debates continue for nine months, and each district gives two sets of rankings, one set for requirements within the district and the other set for efforts which affect the whole city. A public debate decides the criteria for allocating investment budget among districts. These criteria can be population, an index of poverty, a measure of shortages (such as a lack of pavement or the lack of a school), the assigned priorities, and so on. Priority is given to progressive distribution of the resources, regardless of individual representatives’ demands, so that poorer areas receive more funding than the well-off ones. In different cities in Brazil the share of participatory budgeting of total budget allocations have varied from 17 to 50 % increasing over time. Sometimes thematic committees are also formed to substitute the more area based representation.
In Blantyre the process started with a participatory budget meeting called by the City Council in 2013. This first round received critique from civil society actors for not being an actual participatory budgeting process. Even though the meeting was announced in the newspapers, there was no systematic representation from the various city areas. Furthermore, the plans presented were not based on community priorities, but were mainly developed by the city bureaucrats.

The participants also did not receive any documents in advance so it was difficult for people to comment on specific budget posts. Participants therefore felt ill-prepared to contribute with constructive comments out over some minor interventions representing the areas and interests of those present.

In 2014 the civil society actors had hoped that the critique from the previous year’s process had been taken into account. However, the meeting proceeded much the same way and did not improve on bottom-up planning, systematic representation, information sharing and preparations, or follow-up. Furthermore, the meeting did not report on what had been performed compared to what was stipulated in the previous year’s budget meeting.
Blantyre did not have Community Development Committees (community level representation) in place at the time of the study. The City Council therefore had a meeting with the Members of Parliament (MPs) to give input to the budget. This was seen by community representatives as problematic in several ways. One is that no minutes were presented from this meeting. Another is that the MPs did not participate at the public meeting. Third, several community members felt that MPs are too far removed from priorities made in communities, and worried that projects might be distributed according to party political lines.

“MPs just do things themselves without asking the people. We came to the [participatory budgeting] meeting but we were just invited to hear what was already done. I don’t think MPs can know what is going on in the villages. They only talk to people from their party. They can give us a shirt when we want trousers. The MPs cannot contribute anything, because they cannot know what needs to be done without approaching people.”

(Interview community member informal settlement 02.04.2014)
Few if no final decisions were made during the meeting. Suggestions were rather met with assurances from the administration that they would take them into consideration when the final budget was developed. Since the participants have few ways to keep the administration accountable for the final allocations made, several of the participants interviewed felt frustrated. There was no funds envelope to be directly distributed through participatory budgeting as have been the case in Porto Alegre and processes elsewhere in Kenya and Tanzania.

The participatory budgeting process in Blantyre therefore had two major weaknesses: One was the way communities were represented, and the other how the process and meetings were implemented giving participants little influence on the actual budget allocations. The process in Blantyre therefore seemed more similar to a budget presentation meeting than a participatory budgeting process.

“People are complaining that the budget does not reflect community priorities.”

(Group discussion community representatives informal settlement 30.03.2014)
Although a budget presentation meeting is an important step towards more participatory governance it does not qualify to be called participatory budgeting. Issues of groundwork, representation, transparency, opportunities for impacting resource distribution and opportunities to hold the budget implementers accountable are essential criteria for participatory budgeting.

Participatory budgeting is therefore advised to first start with developing the systems for representation, criteria for distribution of resources, and clarifications on roles and responsibilities of the various actors throughout the budgeting process. The National Local Government Finance Committee in Malawi produced their Guidelines on Participatory Budgeting for Local Authorities in Malawi with technical and financial support from GIZ in April 2013. The guidelines are supposed to “serve as a reference document for Local Authorities to involve communities or their representatives in developing and implementing budgets. (p1)”
The participatory budgeting guidelines are very broad and lack many of the essential steps of participatory budgeting. As they stand now they encompass everything from partial once off consultations to actual participation of citizenry in budget allocations decisions. The guidelines suggest that participation should at a minimum take place through existing structures such as Urban Neighborhood Committees, Area Development Committees, Urban Executive Committees and Urban Council Consultative Fora. However, these structures were not in place at the community level in Blantyre and several other cities and towns. While the participatory budgeting process in Blantyre opened up for some direct participation from organizations and individuals, it did not meet the minimum criteria for representation as set out in the Guidelines.

Blantyre is now in 2015 reported to have Community Development Committees formed in all 23 wards and City Councillors in place. This provides an excellent opportunity to anchor the budget process in locally defined priorities. However, it would also be important to save some space for community representation through civil society as has proved crucial in participatory budgeting processes elsewhere.

And while inclusive representation is one important element, this paper has pointed out several other challenges with the participatory budgeting process in Blantyre that would need to be addressed if it is to be called truly participatory.

*Media interviewing after the Participatory Budgeting meeting in 2014 in Blantyre. Source: Hilde Refstie*
Participatory budgeting as a process can easily be manipulated, undemocratic, and divert attention from social justice issues if there are no set minimum criteria.

The process, if done properly, is expensive and the financial resources for Participatory Budgeting are limited.

Without a dedicated fund envelope open for redistribution criteria set by participants, the process will never be more than a budget consultation meeting.

The budgeting needs to be based on existing community planning processes and be developed during a series of meetings where the participants can hold the City Council and each other accountable for the decisions made.

Involving groups as the poorest of the poor and youth remains a challenge. Participatory budgeting therefore risks serving only a few influential groups.

It can be difficult to make priorities and decisions in a PB meeting, especially when several interventions are set up against each other. It is after all often a zero-sum game where some allocations needs to be prioritized at the cost of others.

The participatory budgeting process has to be seen in connection with larger issues as citywide and nationwide resource distribution and social justice.

The Local Councilors now in place presents an excellent opportunity to develop more thorough participatory budgeting processes.
SOURCES

- Interviews with community leaders and members in two informal settlements in Blantyre, the Federation of the Rural and Urban Poor, CCODE staff, Blantyre City Council officials, and Polytechnic University staff.

- Malawi Participatory Budgeting Guidelines

- Bhatnagar et. al: Participatory Budgeting in Brazil, The World Bank


- UN Habitat (2011): Malawi: Blantyre Urban Profile, UN Habitat

- UN Habitat (2007): Participatory Budgeting in Africa, a Training Companion for Anglophone Countries, Nairobi

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