Participatory Budgeting in Glasgow: An analysis of the Grant Scheme approach

Daniela Ribeiro Guarieiro (University of Glasgow)

Introduction

This is a short report about a study done in 2017 as part of a Master Degree in Public and Urban Policy at the University of Glasgow. The study analyses Glasgow's Participatory Budgeting (PB) approach called the Grant Scheme, which took place city-wide in 2016 and in 8 Wards in 2017.

PB is a well-known participatory method that obtained outstanding results regarding citizens' engagement, sense of community, promotion of social justice, decrease of inequalities, public service reform and the improvement of the image and trust on the government in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Those outcomes are the reason why it is advocated by international organizations worldwide as a best practice of urban governance. But in reality different PB approaches were adopted worldwide, and they lead to the achievement of different outcomes and in different intensities.

Therefore, the objective of this research is to understand why the Glasgow City Council adopted the Grant Scheme approach, what will be its impacts on communities and its possible outcomes, according to citizens' perceptions. This will enable this research to find out more about the Grant Scheme approach and gather knowledge of how the process can be improved in Glasgow.

Methodology

I did semi-structured interviews with one Glasgow City Council officer and 10 citizens or members from community groups that had taken part in the participatory budgeting events in Glasgow. I used an interview guide to do the interviews according to the research objectives. Besides, I also attended two of those events in January 2017, one in Easterhouse and the other in Govan, where I collected materials and perceived the atmosphere and feelings, seeing how the events worked and who took part.

This study was approved by the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee before the collection of any data or the recruitment of any participants.

Key Findings

The analysis of the interviews and materials led to the following findings regarding PB:

1. The reason for choosing The Grant Scheme approach:

      The Grant Scheme approach was adopted because of the lack of time and resources to deliver the PB event on the timescale requested by the Scottish Government. It was chosen because it is simple, deliberative, could be replicated through the 21 Area Partnerships and it is known to be successful in other cities within the UK.

2. Objectives and indicators of success:

      Although Glasgow City Council (GCC) does not have any clear and official objectives as they are still being discussed and refined, there is a supposition that objectives will probably be to increase participation, increase transparency on how decisions about grants are made within the Area Partnerships (AP), increase citizens' confidence in the democratic process, facilitate dialogue and deliberation between Council, APs and citizens to co-produce solutions on problems that communities experience and build capacity and change people's perception about participatory events.

      Based on these supposed objectives, it is possible to affirm that the current PB process will not deliver most of them. It will increase participation, as it already tripled the amount of people involved in participatory events and received 17% of applications from new groups and organizations who had never applied to Area Partnership Grants. But it will not increase transparency on how decisions about grants are made within the Area Partnerships, as most of the money for Community Grants is still made by a small group of people with criteria and priorities that may not reflect what the community needs and prioritizes. It will only be able to increase citizens' confidence in the democratic process if the voting system improves, becoming fairer on people's perception, otherwise it will decrease their confidence in democracy as it is seen as biased because people voted with vested interests. Lastly, it will only facilitate dialogue and deliberation between Council, APs and citizens to co-produce solutions on problems that communities experience if there is previous discussion between citizens and government about what are these problems. Only after the discussion, there can be the proposition of projects to be funded by PB and the voting to choose which projects will receive the money. Another suggestion that could be incorporated if GCC wants to achieve this last objective would be to involve Community Planning Partners, Thriving

Places and other community groups in the development and delivery of the Community Budgeting, as a means to use PB to tackle high-level problems that communities experience.

It will also only partially achieve the Scottish Government's objectives with PB. It will be able to deliver the objective of strengthening communities and increase citizen participation, but will not achieve the objectives of promoting public service reform or improving public trust on the government, as it did not change people's perception of the government.

Interestingly, citizens' perception of PB objectives were varied, with some having perceptions similar to GCC's objectives and with some seeing it as a tool to improve councillors image. This shows that GCC needs to improve communication regarding what is PB and what are its objectives, so that people have a better understanding of the process and what its aims are. This would also produce better informed voting for projects.

3. Challenges faced when implementing PB:

There was a mismatch of communications and expectations between Glasgow City Council and the Area Partnerships about the responsibilities of each regarding the PB events, which resulted in only one third of the AP properly running and actually participating on the events. The APs that were more involved probably had higher citizen participation and engagement rates.

Interviewees felt that there should be more promotion of the event, in particular to the general public, as GCC is missing a chance of engaging people by making them know that it is not about just distributing money, but finding out what is going on in your area and influencing its development. The council cannot take for granted that e-mails, social media and posters will be sufficient to make the general public take part on the events and it should consider informing people what is PB and what are its objectives, in order to attract other people than those who have links with the organizations who are bidding for money.

Another problem pointed was the time scale from knowing the event, applying and presenting. This shows how the short time did not allow for a preparation for the event, not only for community groups to prepare themselves and for the general public to learn about it, but also to include discussion, debate and to provide information to citizens regarding what was the objective of the event.

4. Perceptions of the process and of its outcomes:

The perception of the process is positive, particularly because of its importance to grassroots organizations and small community groups. It made people feel they had a voice and allowed "grassroots groups to make a difference", which is essential to empower disadvantaged communities and excluded groups, consequently challenging the status quo

Interviewees also mentioned they think PB was able to strengthen the sense of community, as it helped increase people's knowledge about what is going on in their area, established a direct connection between their participation on PB and improvement in their areas as a result from the community projects, and the possibility of knowing other local people and projects.

It also made people feel closer to the city council, once many local area councilors and City Council officers were at the events and this allowed people and organizations to meet and make links with them.

Citizens also perceived the process as not fair, because of the voting system and the criteria for allowing organizations to participate. For the interviewees, it seemed that voting system was biased in favor of organizations that were able to bring more people to vote for them instead of what were the needs and priorities of the communities. The lack of discussion between citizens before the voting took place was also pointed as a flaw of the process, once it could lead to more informed decision-making. The debate and discussion part of PB is important to achieve the social justice and public learning outcomes as it allows citizens to evaluate the social needs of a proposed project.

It was also perceived that the criteria for allowing organizations to make bids and propose projects were flawed for allowing for-profit organizations and organizations that did not work in the areas where they were asking for money to participate, as their projects would not benefit the community. Some also criticize that the Community Budgeting was being used to cover Glasgow's core budget gap in relation to Schools and Parks.

In general, people think the projects that were funded through PB will have an immediate impact in the areas, notably because they were varied and targeted different groups. But the impact will be limited because the amount of money does not tackle high level issues or long-term solutions.

Conclusion

The PB process in Glasgow has been able to increase citizen engagement, strengthen the sense of community, strengthen democracy, as it built new links between citizens and the

government, and impact people's lives and communities. But to enhance those outcomes GCC needs to expand the promotion of PB to the general public, provide citizens with information about projects and objectives before the event, and improve the voting system and the criteria that allow projects to participate on PB.

It is necessary that the council and the APs involve citizens and communities in the development and delivery of the events, in particular if it aims on improving outcomes and avoiding a decrease of citizens' confidence in the democratic process.

Future Research

- Interview Area Partnerships to find out their commitment and perception regarding PB.
- Deepen the knowledge about different Grant Scheme events in order to find out how the ones that are considered successful are designed and how they differ between themselves. It is relevant to Literature that, within the same approach, the way it is implemented and ran can result in different outcomes and different perceptions of the process, as happened in Glasgow with the perceptions from the market scheme event, with stalls, opposed to the regular event, where people presented for 3 minutes to an audience.