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Self-help or public housing? Lessons from co-managed slum upgrading via participatory budget

Ana Paula Pimentel Walker

Urban and Regional Planning, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, 2000 Bonisteel Blvd, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2069, USA

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ABSTRACT

What can the Participatory Budget (PB) teach us about slum upgrading in the cities of the Global South? This article describes the process of slum upgrading via PB in Porto Alegre, Brazil. Participatory budgeting (PB) is a renowned mechanism of resource allocation that transfers decision-making power over the capital expenditure portion of the municipal budget from the City Council to public assemblies. However, the impact of PB on municipal service delivery in general and housing in particular is understudied.

Ethnographic findings are based on slum upgrading process via PB in an informal settlement in the East District of Porto Alegre. Fieldwork included 16 interviews with residents who had been PB delegates, PB councilors, municipal architects, lawyers, and the social worker involved in the slum upgrading project of Vila Radiante, East District. Furthermore, analysis of district-level expenditures on public works required for slum upgrading as well as analysis of site plans informed the conclusions.

The Porto Alegre PB demonstrates that slum dwellers' involvement in all stages of the slum upgrading process, from resource allocation to service delivery, contributed to the effective distribution of housing and basic infrastructure. Slum dwellers are a heterogeneous group with diverse housing needs. Housing via PB addresses this diversity and provides an alternative to the dichotomist debate in international planning between, on one hand, slum clearance followed by public housing projects and, on the other, the promotion of assisted self-help housing through programs of land tenure and basic infrastructure provision.

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1. Introduction

What can the Participatory Budget (PB) teach us about slum upgrading in the cities of the Global South? In this article I describe the process of informal settlement upgrading via PB in Porto Alegre, Brazil and argue for the importance of co-management between city officials and residents of informal settlements.¹ My case study demonstrates that residents' involvement in all stages of the slum upgrading process, from resource allocation to service delivery, contributed to more tailored and effective delivery of housing and basic infrastructure.

E-mail address: appiment@umich.edu.

¹ I use the term informal settlement and informal housing to describe self-built housing that is located in either squatter settlements or illegal subdivisions. In Brazil, illegal subdivisions are characterized by the presence of a subdivider who does not follow important legal requirements for land parceling. Thus, illegal subdivisions vary substantially in their degree of illegality and infrastructure (Fernandes, 1997: 20). Unlike squatter settlements, the plots in an illegal subdivision are at least rudimentarily marked out, therefore the settlements tend to be better planned regarding alley and roadway demarcations. I use the terms slum and squatter settlement indistinguishably.

The PB is a mechanism of resource allocation that transfers decision-making power over the capital expenditure portion of the municipal budget from the city council to public assemblies. Porto Alegre was a worldwide pioneer in envisioning and implementing this idea. The Porto Alegre innovation has been acclaimed for lessening clientelism (Abers, 1998), promoting redistributive justice (e.g. Santos, 2005) and increasing government accountability (Wampler, 2007). However, the impact of the PB on municipal service delivery in general and housing in particular has been understudied. This article evaluates the impact of PB as a mechanism for the delivery of public housing and slum upgrading.

Residents of informal settlements were the social group that gained most visibility, political space, and resources from the PB process (Pimentel Walker, 2013). Public housing, slum upgrading, street pavement, and basic sanitation figured among the top selected priorities in Porto Alegre's budgetary assemblies. Porto Alegre districts with a higher percentage of households in squatter and illegal settlements received greater amount of per capita investment in the period of 1992–2000 than the legal neighborhoods (Marquetti, 2003). This was an outstanding turn in political empowerment for people living in informal housing. Participatory

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Budget recognized slum dwellers' right to participate in local politics and receive the benefits of government support.

The PB provides practical and flexible solutions to improve the lives of those living in informal settlements. Concretely, my findings demonstrate that the seemingly incompatible policies of slum upgrading on one hand, and slum clearance followed by public housing provision on the other hand, can be reconciled as long as budgetary allocations and site plans are prepared by the residents of informal settlements in consultation with architects and planners rather than by planners alone. Given its bottom-up design, slum upgrading via PB acknowledges and addresses the diverse housing needs of those residing in these areas. Even municipalities that do not plan to implement a citywide PB program could incorporate some of its mechanisms into their housing and planning departments. The lessons learned from PB in terms of slum upgrading are worth documenting and reflecting upon.

This article is based on field work for my master's thesis (December 2004–February 2005) and for my doctoral dissertation (July 2009–March 2011). I have been visiting Porto Alegre on a yearly basis for a decade and observed how residents of informal settlements in three large city districts (one downtown and two at the outskirts of the city) have placed demands for sanitation, street pavement, storm drainage, and housing through the PB. This article analyzes the findings from an informal settlement in the East District, which I call Vila Radiante.² In Vila Radiante, I interviewed 16 residents who had been delegates of the PB. At the time this number included all residents who had served at this volunteer position. These interviews were audio recorded, and I transcribed and translated all interviews. The shortest individual interview lasted 40 min and the longest, 6 h. I interviewed councilors of the PB for the East District, the two architects working on the project, the municipal attorney for the housing department, and the social worker involved in the slum upgrading project. The research design also included analysis of the trends in funded priorities by the Porto Alegre's capital investments plan from 1989 to 2010.

2. Slum upgrading via participatory budget: an alternative housing policy for informal settlements

In the international planning and development literature since the 1960s, we encounter two opposing policies towards informal settlements. One recommends total eradication of informal housing in favor of the provision of public housing (e.g. Burgess, 1978), while another recommends the fostering of self-help housing through the provision of basic infrastructure and land titling programs (e.g. Turner, 1978). Slum upgrading and self-help housing approaches prevailed the debate and dominated planning practice and policy recommendations until it became clear that these approaches could not meet housing demand. As a result, the debate shifted from an almost exclusive focus on social housing (either public housing or self-help) to city-wide approaches towards comprehensive planning, local economic development, and innovative urban governance with the goal of providing more holistic solutions to the needs of informal settlement residents (Bredenoord & van Lindert, 2010: 280). The city of Porto Alegre, Brazil was a pioneer in terms of urban governance launching the PB program in the 1990s. Participatory Budget sprang to other municipalities in Brazil and worldwide (Cabannes, 2004; Wampler & Hartz-Karp, 2012). Slum upgrading played an important role in the success of the program in Porto Alegre (Pimentel Walker, 2013). However, the potential of slum upgrading via PB has not been addressed.

² Vila Radiante is a fictitious name and pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the interviewed.

The transition from planning for slum clearance along with public housing to planning for slum upgrading reflect in part the transition from modernist and developmentalist city planning towards models of decentralized urban development dominated by private sector planning and public-private partnerships. International planning debates and funding policies for housing take place in connection with national housing policies and debates in both developed and developing countries. For instance, in Brazil until the 1970s the federal government addressed the problem of squatter settlements (also known as the —housing deficit problem) through programs of squatter settlement eradication and provision of large, low cost public housing projects (Bonduki, 1994). Then, in the 1980s and 1990s, the focus of housing policy shifted towards assisted self-help housing and slum upgrading projects. This change in Brazilian housing policy is associated with the circulation of funding, training, and knowledge from multilateral international institutions and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) (Benmergui, 2009).

During the 1990s and half of 2000s Porto Alegre's municipal housing department followed the national and international trend from squatter settlement removal and public housing provision to land tenure security and squatter settlement upgrading. However, since the late 2000s Brazilian federal government enacted slum upgrading projects through the Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento (PAC), the Growth Acceleration Program, which was immediately followed by the financing of low- and middle-income housing through the program Minha Casa, Minha Vida (MCMV), My House, My Life (Denaldi, 2013: 45). Slum upgrading financed by PAC failed to include community participation (Lara, 2013). Thus, as the paradigms of slum upgrading and new low-income housing projects co-exist in Brazil, it is important to further explore the lessons of on-site slum upgrading and housing via PB.

The PB is a volunteer mechanism currently adopted by 351 out of the 5570 Brazilian municipalities. Brazil's 2001 Federal City Statute made participatory master plans mandatory for municipalities with more than 20 thousand inhabitants. In addition, the City Statute proposes the use of various urban planning tools to expedite the process of land regularization (Friendly, 2013: 165; Macedo, 2008: 162). However, the role of PB as a mechanism of land regularization and slum upgrading has not been recognized at the federal level.

Recent research analyzed 253 Brazilian cities with over 100,000 inhabitants that adopted PB and compared them to similar cities without PB (Touchton & Wampler, 2014). The findings reveal that cities adopting PB for at least eight years spend 23 percent more of their budget on sanitation and health and have a 19 percent greater reduction in infant mortality rates than cities without PB. Having PB by itself generates improvements over those municipalities without PB. However, having a mayor from the Workers' Party, the political party most closely associated with PB, along with PB, produces even stronger outcomes (Touchton & Wampler, 2014: 1444). This evidence corroborates findings from ethnographic case studies that document a decline in the quality and quantity of PB process and outcomes after the departure of leftist political parties from city government (Junge, 2012; Pimentel Walker, 2015).

In terms of municipal housing policy and provision, Porto Alegre's PB pragmatically addresses some of the concerns of each previous planning development approach to informal housing. The slum clearance followed by resettlement into new public housing projects became unpopular with the decline of the welfare state and there is little political will to invest in such projects (Ward, 1982: 9). Indeed, in the wake of John Turner's (1972, 1978) then groundbreaking work rejecting public housing and advocating freedom for slum dwellers to build their own housing, much literature has focused on how governments can provide residents with the tools needed for upgrading their homes. Analysts such as

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