

“The development of participatory budgeting in the UK”

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Abstract

For several years, participatory budgeting processes in the UK could be counted at one or two hands, some of the first examples being Bradford (2004), Sunderland (2005), London-Harrow (2005), and Newcastle (2006). Since July 2007, when Hazel Blears (the newly appointed Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government) announced that within 5 years every local authority should have set up a participatory budgeting (PB) process, the situation changed dramatically. If the declaration of the Community Secretary will be realised, the UK would be the first country in the world where PB has been systematically introduced in every local authority. How did the development of PB from a very “grassroots”-phenomenon to the national policy agenda happen? Who are the actors that promote the idea and practice of PB? Where the idea of PB in the UK does originally comes from?

Like in Italy, Spain, and France, the principle source of inspiration for PB in the UK was Brazil. Unlike in the southern European countries, however, the driving force for implementing PB in the UK have not been (left-wing) political parties, but NGOs and people working within the broad domain of neighbourhood renewal and community development. They saw PB as a promising process which could provide a more systematic and comprehensive approach towards issues of (community) participation, improvement of service delivery and the “renewal” of deprived neighbourhoods – topics which are, and have been, in the centre of the Blair/Brown reform agendas. The recent orientation of central government to issues of “community empowerment” (rather than focussing mainly on forms of consumer-participation as in the first years of New Labour) and area-based approaches provided an advantageous ground for PB.

The diffusion of this participatory process went through roughly three periods: the first one (between 1999/2000 and the end of 2003) during which PB was a very local issue, hardly known by anyone not interested in issues of community empowerment and participatory democracy; the second phase of 2004 to 2006 which was characterized by the organization of pilot projects and a growing networking and diffusion activity within the UK through conferences, workshops, local and national working groups, an E-Bulletin on PB etc.; and the third phase of a national “breakthrough” since the end of 2006 when PB was for the first time mentioned in a national policy paper on issues of community empowerment, and thereafter taken up by Hazel Blears. It certainly played a role in this regard that Blears’ constituency is Salford, a city which has a long tradition of community participation and where the first pilot projects about PB have been carried out by one of the central “diffusion actors” in the UK, an NGO called the PB Unit.

Through, individually taken, very small actions (the organization of pilot projects and workshops, the production of DVDs about these pilot projects, meetings of idea exchange and

learning), but which have been carried out continuously throughout a couple of years, the idea of PB slowly spread throughout the country. This development was supported by the fact that PB was not only supported and developed “on the ground” (by NGOs, local officers etc), but that some of its promoters had a position in national institutions (such as the Audit Commission or the Department for Communities and Local Government), so that they could use their influence to promote PB at this level. The story of PB in the UK is a story of transfers of knowledge, of learning from pilot projects, of a growing network of committed individuals who constantly pushed for the development of this participatory process.