



# Participatory budgets in Europe

Between efficiency and growing local democracy

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by Giovanni Allegretti & Carsten Herzberg

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## Introduction

Over the last 6 years, the diffusion of decentralised co-operation and the efforts of the *Movement for a different Globalisation* to spread awareness of some experiences in the democratisation of urban management in Latin American cities have promoted the birth of the first experiences of Participatory Budgets (PB) in Europe. These are experiments to involve citizens in the construction of spending priorities for the local administrations through the organisation of annual cycles of public meetings (open but regulated) and the predisposition of other tools for supporting the gradual improvement of co-shared choices to be officially inserted in planning documents (Budget Plans and Public Works and Services Plans).

Over the last 15 years – especially following the fame acquired by experiences such as that of the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre – many international institutions (*in primis* UNDP, Habitat and the World Bank) have contributed to spreading awareness about the most significant Latin American experiences. The European Union has even funded exchange and emulation projects, launching a Network (No. 9 of the URB-AL cooperation Programme) entirely dedicated to the issue of Participatory Budgets. The mutual learning during the programmes of dialogue and equal co-operation between cities was the main factor that allowed '*the return of the caravels*'. That is the 'disembarkation' and the taking root on European soil of creative innovations linked to urban management that saw the light in cities in the Global South, stimulated by a 'virtuous rethinking' of land management models often borrowed from Old World Countries, during and after the periods of colonisation.

These (mainly Latin-American) practices have centred on the utilisation of 'urban conflict' - rather than on the search for 'social peace' - interpreting it as a source of creative solutions, capable of drawing on the wealth of the different stratifications in cities without mortifying them through homologating approaches. In this way, they have tried to put different sectors of society into dialogue with each other, and to involve 'antagonistic' movements in the experimentation with innovative management policies for transforming land use. This was to ensure that, along with the offer of opening up the institutional powers to joint decision making with residents, enough real responsibility would be taken by the different strata of society in the experimentation with social, economic and environmental policies centred on the aims of sustainability. This also avoided the re-emergence, in relations between local institutions and civil society, of that aspect of 'asymmetry' that characterises 'vertical subsidiarity', that is the relations of reciprocal complementarity between local authorities, provinces, regions, states and supranational institutions.

With the globalisation of problems usually comes a correspondent 'localisation of solutions'. With the decentralisation of responsibilities, however, there is rarely a parallel decentralisation of resources and decision-making powers to deal with them. The result is that resorting to outsourcing, and above all to the externalisation of social responsibilities, becomes the rule. Rarely are decisions on land-use changes and public policies shared with civil society, however. To the contrary, the mechanisms of privatisation tend to leave larger and larger margins of power to those that end up managing 'common assets' (that once were also 'public assets', in both ownership and management terms).

Many examples of Participatory Budgets have pointed instead to an inversion of the mechanism. Local Authorities make the first move, offering citizens spaces for government and decision-making,

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and in exchange try to obtain the commitment of residents and their organisations to undertaking innovative policies centred on new forms of responsibility towards the common 'assets' of an area.

Two main reflections underpinned this approach, which gave life to a real urban political movement centred around the World Local Authorities Forum for Social Inclusion:

- The first is that **the objective of sustainability** is not reached only through actions aimed at realising its principles (the reduction of the ecological footprint, land saving, the precautionary principle, energy saving, closure of natural cycles, protection of biodiversity and socio-diversity, etc). It requires citizens to consciously adhere to those principles, as many actions **require a definite change of culture and lifestyle**;
- The second concerns '**good governance**'. Despite the fact that many South American states find themselves subject to the impositions of structural adjustment, and that cities are compelled to adopt decentralised transparency and reorganisation procedures aimed at the attainment of financial accountability, stability and credibility, 'good governance' has not been 'pivotal' to the practices of Participatory Budgets. On the contrary, in most cases the adoption of participatory routes has not been 'the end', but a means by which to spread a culture of democratic alternatives to those traditional forms of 'governance', which the sociologist Boaventura De Sousa Santos considers responsible for forms of democracy that are ever less 'intensive', and serious threats to the 'demo-diversity' of the planet.

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This text shall try to briefly examine some features of the rooting of Participatory Budget practices in Europe, concentrating on a few countries marked by an even greater number of urban experiments. The excursus proposed – that is just the resume of a broader research funded by TNI to be published in Italian<sup>1</sup> – can only be a work in progress, given that in Europe we are often in a non-advanced phase of dynamic experiments subject to rapid and, often, consistent changes.

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<sup>1</sup> The Italian version constitutes the 'core' of a more detailed book, to be published in January 2005 by EDIESSE, whose title is: "*Bilanci Partecipativi in Europa. Nuove democrazie nel vecchio continente*". It also contains a description of other countries' experiences (like Belgium, Portugal and a more detailed paragraph about recent attention to participatory budgeting in eastern Europe).

## The Participatory Budget in a panorama of ongoing transformation

In a framework of 'asymmetrical subsidiarity' increasingly marked by the phenomena of the growth and articulation of the role and structure of cities, the tendential growth of decision-making tends to ally itself almost naturally with the creation of space for the direct participation of citizens in decision-making. Involving citizens in discussion about choice is almost a necessary product of the *crisis of thought and of sole rationality*. Differentiated answers are required to address the growing complexity of social demands, to cope with the need for continuous cuts in public investment (especially in the most 'sensitive' areas of intervention), and to rebuild the trust of citizens in politics.

A factor motivating the opening up of local government towards participative forms is also the push given by the *privatistic* conceptions characteristic of the New Public Management school, which has tended to favour a new consideration of the role of citizens-customers-consumers, especially in relation to the utilization of monopolistic services where the 'exit' option (in other words, going elsewhere) is not practicable.

This 'instrumental' and 'reductionist' interpretation of participation does not necessarily coincide with giving a supporting role to residents during the definitive acceptance of decisions. Often, rather, it is only an attempt to build, on single issues, that consensus which is indispensable for compensating for ever more fragile electoral legitimacy, for tempering protests and conflicts arising from 'top-down' options for local areas and for covering the failure of State and market to respond to the vital needs of a significant proportion of citizens, especially in peripheral or developing countries.

It is precisely in these countries that practices have begun to develop that can broaden, restructure and enrich the experiences of simple consultation with citizens already in use since the '70s in some European cities. The multiplicity of channels through which the experiments have received attention on the old continent has been at the root of the different perceptions of the experiences in the different countries. This multiplicity is also responsible for the different 'prevalences' (as regards political or technical issues, communication mechanisms, aspects of institutional modernisation or those linked to the ability to fight social exclusion) that the first critical emulations in Europe have shown.

In Europe, in particular, Participatory Budgets have gained a central place in discussions on decentralisation, on governance and on the reform of relations between local contexts and 'global flows'. It has also allowed us to rediscover, develop and enrich 'organic experiences' developed independently in different parts of Europe, creating dialogue between them and sometimes 'hybridising them' constructively with the management practices and routes tested in some countries of the Global South.

To date, there is no universal way of describing Participatory Budgets. This is also because there are no reputable models, but only different families of experiments. The name is not an indispensable factor either. Its potential is to create a 'space' governed by regulations to protect the equal access of every citizen to decision-making on spending priorities in a local authority, without reserving access only for the strongest economic-social organisations, as was always the case with traditional forms of 'planning' and 'negotiation' experienced in many countries since the Second World War.

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From this viewpoint, the Participatory Budget can become 'the place' to try and rebuild - over time and collectively - the concept of 'common assets', transforming social tensions into 'shared projects' within spaces self-managed by civil society but marked by very healthy dialogue with the institutions concerned. Amongst its objectives (on its own or through associations) may be the ethical growth of the institutions, an increase in the civic spirit of residents and in their ability to maturely interpret the complexity of the local area, as well as the rebalancing of the distortions generated by the market society, the extension of 'rights to the city' to all who inhabit it and the spreading of forms of 'negotiated solidarity' (Abers, 2000) that allow the fair redistribution of public resources in favour of the most culturally, socially and economically disadvantaged categories.

## France

The republican tradition of the French has always been dominated by the idea that elected members represent the general will of the citizens in the best possible way. From this perspective, it was in high places that official policy took a stand on "proximity democracy". In 2002, the "Vaillant" Law obliged the creation of District Councils in all cities with over 80,000 inhabitants. In the majority of cases, their role is merely advisory and they are linked closely to city institutions. They are not considered autonomous spaces for the self-organisation of residents. Furthermore, they deal with micro-local issues concerning the management of transport, housing, urban planning, safety, use of public spaces, etc. In some places, 'district portfolios' have introduced more 'solid', but not more radical, forms of joint management at the micro-local scale. Citizens, gathered in open assemblies or through meetings of representatives, may decide upon apportioning a sum of money (usually marginal and often subject to the careful consideration of the District Councils) towards infrastructural investments or for specific local projects.

***Participatory budgeting's potential lies in its capacity to create a 'space' governed by regulations, which protects equal access by every citizen to decision-making on spending priorities in a local authority, rather than reserving access only for the strongest social-economic organisations, as was the case with traditional forms of 'planning' and 'negotiation' applied in many countries since the Second World War.***

In this context, the Participatory Budget has been presented as a strong political-ideological project promoted by some parties of the Parliamentary Left, in the effort to halt the local haemorrhaging of votes through a concrete struggle against traditional 'centralism'. The point of reference is Porto Alegre that - in times of neo-liberalism – has become the symbol of a possible alternative way to govern a place. Its experience has spread through a series of movements and associations in the social network, particularly the international network DRD - *Démocratiser Radicalement la Démocratie*.

Synoptically, the French cases show three general objectives:

- **The enhancement of public management and 'local governance'** through the integration of daily experiences in local politics and the promotion of horizontal links between social actors.

- The **transformation of social relations**. Participatory Budgets often find especially fertile ground in cities that have a high incidence of the most disadvantaged social strata (particularly in the metropolitan area of Paris). The objective of social dialogue here is to create consensus and – at the same time – to strengthen conviviality, solidarity and to defuse social tensions through constructive use of ‘conflict’.
- The third objective directly refers to the issue of **participatory democracy**, trying to underline the difference with the simple ‘proximity politics’ characteristic of the traditional republican approach. What is lacking, however, is a true recognition of the role of participating residents as joint decision-makers.

Where the Participatory Budget refers to the experience of Porto Alegre, participation often tends to be directed towards investments in the urban area, discussed during local assemblies held in the various districts and in the complementary theme meetings held on issues of transport, social issues, education, the environment etc. Another trait linking the different French experiences is the fact that participation is founded mostly on the creation of open assemblies. At the micro-local level, citizens may make some decisions about district funds, but at the higher level of municipal budgets, discussions are only consultative. The official acceptance of requests depends, above all, on political will.

In **Saint Denis** (pop. 85,000) since 2001, there have been theme meetings concerning the main planks of strategic development and – today – some ‘budget workshops’ where delegated citizens articulate the proposals of 14 districts and examine them in depth. When it is time to vote on the budget at the City Council, the session is interrupted in order to allow the results of the Participatory Budget to be presented.

In **Bobigny** (pop. 45,000) since 2002, there have been efforts to integrate the Participatory Budget into a widespread system of participation, centred on the cycle of public meetings called “*Let’s talk frankly*”. Six Citizens’ Initiative Committees lump the districts together, and have the right of veto at the City Council. For any issues relating to resources and public responsibilities, they can also present their own projects. For evaluating the realisation of the proposals of residents, there are different routes of participation the most important of which is an Observation Post for Commitments, through which the administration gives direct voice to the civil society organisations.

The experience of **Morsang-sur-Orge** (pop. 19,500) is the most radical to date. It took shape in 1998 with the creation of the ‘District portfolios’ and in 2001 five citizens’ workshops were set up, each tackling budget issues. Meetings are open to all residents and decisions are made by everyone present. Elected councillors who participate in the assemblies play the role of mediator between the citizens and the administration, but do not have voting rights. Before the adoption of the budget by the City Council, the entire population is consulted on the proposals emerging from the workshops.

A particular experience shows how the Participatory Budget does not have to be reserved only for local authorities, but is an idea and a strength that can be applied in different situations. This is seen in the case of OPAC in **Poitiers**, a public agency that manages all social buildings (7500 lodgings). Since 2002, the organisation has been demanding that it should be the tenants that decide part of the investment projects (17%). There are also six Local Planning Councils made up of an equal number of agency members and tenants.

Even though the dialogue between delegated democracy and routes of direct democracy is still not totally smooth everywhere, in France the Participatory Budgets structure allows forms of deliberation where decision-making power is shared between citizens and the municipality. This is thanks to representative bodies which gather a small number of delegated participants to examine and detail arguments and requests to be put to larger assemblies. Over time, in cities like Bobigny and Morsang-sur-Orge, some independent Observation posts have been set up to imitate the example of similar structures developing in Cameroon for a few years now. They guarantee increased autonomy for citizens in controlling the efforts of institutions to carry out the proposals of residents, that residents can follow throughout the entire course of approval and realisation, reporting and explaining any delays in appropriate independent newspapers. In France, some administrations guarantee the opening up of organisational structures specifically to follow participatory routes. Sometimes citizens are even consulted on the setting up of the rules governing the participatory processes.

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To date, one of the biggest problems has been the low number of participants, particularly at the district scale in relation to the urban area. It is still not possible to profit from participation in the debates on the entire Council budget as people have still not managed to give it a precise function, especially in relation to the entire urban territory. Furthermore, the procedures for the prioritisation of proposals are often confused, and this can weaken the credibility of the process.

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## Germany

Germany represents to date the European country in which there have been the greatest number of experiences of Participatory Budgets (between fifteen and twenty according to the interpretation chosen). It is, furthermore, the place where experiments have lasted the longest and where there has been the greatest number of wide-ranging political coalitions promoting them.

The context in which the first experiences took root was characterised by the progressive loss of the social legitimacy of political parties, afflicted by falling membership and the growth of electoral abstention. Reunification pushed many of the sixteen *Länder* to open up the regulatory framework to more active involvement by residents in the formation of political decisions. The various 'Constitutions of the Councils' (*Süddeutsche Ratsverfassung*) made it possible to directly elect mayors, to liberalise the preferences given to the municipal councillors, to introduce popular initiative laws (*Bürgerbegehren*) and the referendum (*Bürgerentscheid*). The idea of the "*Bürgerengagement*" (the engagement of citizens through associationism or direct involvement in public services) had been growing in importance and diffusion, meanwhile, often taking the form of volunteer work by residents for the benefit of the council and the local community. The purpose was to optimise the use of public resources and to contribute to restoring the hopeless economic situation of German cities, many of which are provisionally administered by the *Länder* because they weren't able to balance accounts and achieve financial equilibrium.

The influence of the financial crisis closely linked the development of Participatory Budgets to the

modernisation of local public administration. Transparency became the dominant objective. The need to make residents true participants in public decisions, especially through the consultation of citizens as 'consumers', was secondary almost everywhere, however. In Germany, the provision of information on the origin of resources and public expenditures plays a primary role, whilst discussion on investments is less central.

These are 'cut off' processes that view the Participatory Budget therefore not so much as a decision-making body, but as an instrument to provide extra grounds for the optimisation of decisions by the City Councils. From this perspective, the most frequent reference point for the German experiences is not the city of Porto Alegre, but rather that of Christchurch, New Zealand, winner of an international prize in 1993 for being a model of 'good governance'.

A similar framework explains why the main actors in the Participatory Budget in Germany are the municipal foundations and organisations that work on the issue of the institutional modernisation. The greatest and most visible effort at national level is that of the Bertelsmann Foundation, set up by the famous media group. Together with the Hans Böckler Trade Union Foundation and the KGSt Local Government Research Institute ("cities of the future") in 1998, it launched a preliminary Participatory Budget pilot project that included six cities, concentrated in the area near the Black Forest. In 2000, the Bertelsmann Foundation started up a second pilot project, together with the North Rhine Westfalia *Land*, centred on six different cities.

In this case, the existence of a resolution passed by the City Council, promoted with incentives offered by a public institution at the supra-municipal level, became an indispensable condition for legitimising the setting up of the Participatory Budget. Unlike in other countries, the Participatory Budget was still not central to the interest of civil society, nor was it characterised as a political project owned and carried forward by individual parties. The situation began to change after a representative of the Council of Porto Alegre and a member of the association *Solidariedade* (made up of popular representatives of Participatory Budgets from the same city) undertook an information tour of more than eighteen German cities. From then on, Participatory Budgets were introduced by popular German organisations and movements in an increasing number of cities. Today in Berlin, all political parties have started to dialogue in order to prepare a motion on the organising of a Participatory Budget at the scale of the Berlin *Land*, starting from experiments in a few of its districts. The result is still 'open' and the model has still to be built.

The organisation of the Participatory Budget in the German cases generally tends to be split into three stages. In the first, the information stage, citizens receive the necessary information about the city's revenue and expenditures, with detailed explanations of local taxes, of transfers from superordinate institutions and of how inflexible expenditures (personnel, ordinary management) restrict an increase of resources under the item 'investments'. The second phase consists of citizen consultations, which usually take place during public assemblies, with the help of questionnaires often also available on the Internet. The third stage concerns reporting following the voting on the budget at the City Council. The Participatory Budget usually corresponds to an organisation set up by the administration (often only by the Councillorship for Finance or for the Budget) and is considered a sort of supplementary route to traditional policies. Within these three stages, the different models applied in reality have a certain degree of creativity.

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In **Vlotho** (pop. 20,533), school pupils were involved in an integrated project aimed at working out the budget policy, and the vast majority of their suggestions were adopted, albeit not bindingly. In **Groß-Umstadt** (pop. 21,620), the Participatory Budget is integrated into the financing of the Local Agenda 21 projects. In **Emsdetten** (pop. 35,000) since 2001, the administration organises a public seminar, whose participants (about a hundred of them) are chosen by a draw. At every stand, participants can obtain information on taxes and management costs, and can make proposals on increases to taxes or cuts to expenditure. The Administration may choose whether or not to take on the suggestions, but in the budget reporting phase must explain why they have taken on popular proposals. All political parties represented in the Municipal Council must accompany any rejections of proposals with comments and notes.

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In **Rheinstetten** (pop. about 20,000) since 2000, citizens may choose out of a list of nineteen services which shall appear in the informational pamphlets of the Participatory Budget that are published, along with a small glossary of budget language, at public meetings in the different wards of the city and at an information point situated in the public market. The consultation phase is carried out with the help of a questionnaire, also distributed in schools, which asks citizens for views in order to understand the degree of satisfaction with public services and to collect proposals for improvement in order to reduce expenditure. Citizens are also given the opportunity to pass resolutions on investment projects. Following the vote on the budget at the City Council, there is a budget report information session open to the public.

In **Esslingen** (pop. 92,000), the city has set up Internet centres in the districts, where anyone can be trained in the use of computers. On the basis of this initiative, in 2003 the city launched an Internet discussion on the budget. The process was split into two phases: the first opened up the discussion, while the second concentrated the debate on what emerged as the main issues of interest (energy saving, reduction of personnel, investments, taxes, etc.). A professional moderator was employed to establish links between the citizens and the relevant department of the administration. The process also included the possibility of an online 'chat' with the Mayor and the Councillor for Finance.

One certainty that emerges from a comparative analysis of the German cases is that relations between the City Councils and the participants in these types of direct democracy are not easy. The Councils tend to perceive Participatory Budgets as a competitor rather than an excellent source of data for improving the decision-making processes. Citizens remain full of doubts on the real impacts of their proposals, given that they are usually unaware of why some of their suggestions were taken on board and not others. This may lead to frustration and lower the degree of mobilisation. On the other hand, Councils and Committees have a tendency to practice 'selective hearing' towards citizens' proposals, rather than follow the prioritisation guidelines given by residents. In terms of transparen-

cy, progress has been made, but information often remains superficial and 'discretionary'. What is lacking is training of citizens which would allow them to exercise real and conscious control over the institutions.

Until now, Participatory Budgets in Germany seem to be dominated by the administrations. The process does not appear to be a halfway house between institutions and society, therefore, but rather a new public space where exchange can be 'opened up' while a strong asymmetry persists among the subjects that use it. The Participatory Budget seems to be an increasingly fashionable fad. It remains to be seen whether it can make budget cuts (almost inescapable in the current economic and financial situation) fairer or whether it will be transformed only into a tool with which to legitimise the austerity plan of the government, without interfering with its contents or the distribution of the 'readjustments'.

Eastern Europe is watching the German approach with seemingly increasing interest today. Here, due also to the impositions of international financial institutions and 'donors', the issue of modernisation of the administrative apparatus is increasingly talked about and can be linked to the struggle against corruption in public institutions. (It is precisely in this way moreover, also thanks to the efforts of international associations such as Transparency International, that the issue of Participatory Budgets is attracting the attention of some Asian countries such as India, Korea and Indonesia.) Recently in St Petersburg, the institute Strategy, which promotes research in the field of human and political sciences, launched the initiative "Transparent Budgets", in collaboration with partners in various Russian cities and with the support of the Ford Foundation.

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## Spain

Spain is the country that perhaps most closely resembles the Latin American context and has the most exchanges with it, thanks to language and recent history. The long dictatorial regime in Spain altered the relationship between residents and local institutions, making it necessary to have a gradual rebuilding of trust in delegated democracy.

While the City Councils that nominate the Mayor and the Council are currently elected everywhere on party 'block' lists, the possibility for participation in decisions by residents are varied and manifold. On the basis of a general regulation that spells out some guidelines, cities have the possibility of adopting their own rules on participation, in fact. One of the first cities to use these was Barcelona in 1986. During the '90s, sector councils were created in many other cities promoted as places for consultation on individual issues. They do not offer any autonomy to civil society, however, since they are presided over by a member of the City Council.

In 2003, Law 57 for the modernisation of the State updated the basic regulations on participation, forcing the large cities to identify local districts and to use new representative bodies to promote the participation of citizens in the management of the city. Within this dynamic framework, the first experiences of Participatory Budgets have developed since 2000, with the greatest spread in Catalonia and Andalusia. The debate on Participatory Budgets is as politicised as it is in France and Italy, but there is also a great deal of interest in the modernisation of the administrative machine that,

amongst others, is supported by the Bofill Foundation, the Independent University of Barcelona and the Catalan regional administration.

The peculiarity of the Spanish models of Participatory Budgets is their reference to 'associative democracy'. In various cities, the associations, especially neighbourhood associations, are indeed the only legal participants in the processes. The organisational rules are usually clearly pre-established. Several models are supported by their own regulations, generally jointly created by the council and citizens, that decree the functions of every actor, the methods for organising and managing assemblies and even formulae for the territorial distribution of resources destined for investment. Often these regulations are approved by the City Council, so that they risk being rather inflexible instruments given the rapid changes required by the changing consciousness of residents participating in the processes. The paths of these models run according to different phases, the first of which consists of general information provision and presentation of projects, and leads to the elaboration by a few popular delegates of a list of priorities.

Today in Spain, there are dozens of experiences of Participatory Budgets. Among the first were those of **Rubí** and **St. Feliu de Llobregat** (in the metropolitan area of Barcelona), where the Participatory Budget went along with other processes of citizen participation, particularly those of an urban planning nature), using new methods such as technical matrices constructed with residents. Citizens were chosen by a draw to take part in popular commissions focusing on some issues that impacted considerably on the budget. These experiences were of short duration due to a political change. Other cities like **Seville** (pop. 700.000), are gradually beginning to experiment with forms of Participatory Budgets, however.

In **Sabadell** (pop. 185,000), the Participatory Budget started in 2000. The process, set up with the help of the University of Barcelona, is split up into three stages. In the first one, a participatory diagnostic process is set up to identify the most important issues and to sensitise inhabitants to participation. The second phase consists of starting up a "citizens' workshop" in which, using the EASW methodology (European Awareness Scenario Workshop), 'visions of the future' can be worked out on the different issues. The actions needed to reach the objectives are subsequently identified and a list of investment proposals adopted. In the third phase, the strategy is applied on the scale of the seven districts in order to evaluate the impact of the investments on every district and define some specific investments for their neighbourhoods. The strategy is monitored by an "accompaniment commission" made up of representatives of the municipal administration and citizens.

**Albacete** (pop. 150,000) sets great store by its 600 plus strong structure of associations. Since 2000, residents may make proposals on projects and services through Assemblies open to all citizens. A Participation Council, made up of representatives of the different sector associations (neighbourhood, culture, education, ecology, migrants etc.), then negotiates the projects to be created with the Council, taking account of budget resources and technical-legal feasibility. Five qualitative criteria are used to classify the proposals: equality policy; quality of administrative services; sustainability of economic development; attention to young people and education; urban and housing infrastructure.

In **Córdoba** (pop. 300,000), the citizens make decisions on investment projects within the limits of

set resources defined by the municipal councillors. There are three levels of participation (neighbourhood, district and city) split into a series of assemblies, and criteria are set for the ranking of residents' proposals on social issues. The citizens and the Neighbourhood Associations determine the investments just as they determine the criteria for ranking at the level of both neighbourhood and district. Popular delegates subsequently elected in the assemblies draw up a list of proposals applying these criteria. During the third phase, the list is put to the district assembly for approval. Similarly, each district elects two representatives to work out the list of citizens' projects, respecting the available budget limits and the ranking of projects by the districts. The municipal administration offers technical assistance for appraising the feasibility of projects. Furthermore, both the delegates and the popular representatives receive training. Surrounding Córdoba and Sevilla are other cities that have experiences of Participatory Budgets underway. These include **Puente Genil** and **Las Cabezas de San Juan**.

The organisational logic of the processes started in Spain has brought to light two forms of tensions. The first concerns the connection between the individual participants and the associations, and another occurs between the neighbourhood and district levels. At the scale of the neighbourhood, the mobilisation of individuals appears to be more intense, and tends to create an atomisation of investments that does not promote the acquisition of 'real weight' by residents in decisions about the resources of the city as a whole. Proposals easily surpass financial capacity. Furthermore, socially disadvantaged groups tend to participate little or gain little advantage from investments.

In Córdoba, people have tried to overcome this problem by applying some 'social' criteria for the distribution of resources, giving greater scores to proposals which 'positively discrimination' in favour of the weakest groups. In France, on the other hand, there is little control over the commitments the administrations have to take on in relation to decisions coming out of the Participatory Budgets process. People often therefore do not know the degree to which projects consensually agreed have been accomplished. As a result, proposals are often repeated or contradicted, and the trust of residents in the institutions is slow to rebuild.

The main advantage of the Spanish routes to Participatory Budgets is represented by the strong political will of the councils to make available the means for organising participation. In Córdoba, for example, there is a team indirectly linked to other public services with the objective of organising the Participatory Budget in the most effective way possible. It also includes officials responsible for international relations. This guarantees the reinforcement of links to other experiences and the progressive construction of a group inside the Council responsible for the process, its monitoring, the results and the indispensable transformations required.

*The long dictatorial regime in Spain has altered the relationship between residents and local institutions, making it necessary to gradually rebuild citizen trust in delegated democracy.*

## Italy

It was during the '60s that the issue of participation entered forcefully into the Italian political debate. Factory councils, educational councils and experiences of participatory urban planning were important social phenomena that – from the subsequent decade – also began to permeate into the body of legislation. Neighbourhood Councils, created in terms of Law 278/76 'froze' and ratified the many and varied informal experiences born over the previous 20 years, stultifying their ability to truly represent local participation initiatives. The political crisis of the '90s allowed municipal constitutions to differentiate themselves, especially after the change to the electoral law of 1993 that led to direct mayoral elections.

The Consolidated Act for Local Authorities of 2000 gave a boost to the multiplication at the local level of specific instruments to transform participation from a *symbolic resource* to an *instrumental resource*. The city of Rome – the first in Italy – transformed its wards into 'municipalities', with a certain level of autonomy in decision-making on some sectors of expenditure and a directly elected chairperson for executive councils. In the last decade, however, the possibility for citizens to intervene in the administrative procedure and to stipulate contracts, agreements and conventions between private individuals and administrations began to introduce distortions in the concept of participation. This was often reduced to a simple 'negotiation' between strong players, and participation has sometimes been confused with administrative actions increasingly outsourced to the private sector.

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This is the framework for the first Italian experiments in Participatory Budgets, which go against the stream by interpreting participation as a right of citizens to impact on options of general interest. Awareness of the Latin American experiences 'exploded' with the first World Social Forum in 2001 through widespread campaigns promoted by non-governmental organisations, associations, social forums and by a few parties of the Parliamentary Left (particularly *Rifondazione Comunista*). After the 2001 council elections, many municipalities (over twenty, including Naples, Venice and Rome) formalised an interest in the adoption of forms of Participatory Budgets, nominating a City Councillor delegated to the experiment by the Mayor. In reality, only a few cities have matched this 'formalised pledge' with any concrete innovations in processes of constructing municipal budgets. This situation somewhat reflects the extremely politicised (and, in some cases, decidedly ideological) way in which the Participatory Budget has taken root in the Italian imagination. It has often represented an expendable 'fashion' in electoral planning or an instrument of negotiation between political parties or in relations between parties and society. At best, some administrations have adopted it as a 'potential horizon' for the future, limiting themselves to innovations that may serve as preconditions for the testing of Participatory Budgets one day.

In various municipalities, for example, the main budget items are published in simplified form, legible for everyone, in annual booklets. In others, Internet sites or magazines have been set up that offer information on the phases of construction of public works, and in still others, open assemblies have been created to present the Council budgets (once approved). This has also meant drawing on traditions that have been widespread for some decades now in many medium-to-small settlements.

The debate on Participatory Budgeting has developed in parallel to that on Social Budgets (which measure the effects in social terms of public policies, or of the organisation of labour in companies,

associations or social co-operatives). Even for the academic world until 2003, the principle point of reference was the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre. The actual creation of a few concrete processes in that country began a processes of emulation and exchange within Italy. This was also promoted by the birth of the national association *Rete del Nuovo Municipio* (Network for the New Municipality (ARNM)), which puts social organisations, universities and administrations interested in participatory local management into the dialogue with each other.

In Italy today, there are around twenty very different experiences, which refer to Participatory Budgets. Many have a 'soft' character, but it makes no sense to demonise them as mere 'simulations of democracy' as some popular movements do. Some of the experiences were born hastily in 2003, in fact, but with the idea of promoting the evolution and progressive broadening of propositions. Many are continually structuring and reformulating themselves to allow a greater decision-making role for citizens. This is the case for some towns in the Milan area such as Vimercate (pop. 25,020), Trezzo d'Adda (pop. 11,600) and Inzago (pop. 8,920).

In the same area, we find **Pieve Emanuele** (pop. 18,000) where experiments in participatory processes have been developing gradually since '94, after years of urban planning folly, corruption scandals and arrests of administrators. Since 1998, the Council – as a way of regaining the trust of the citizens in the institutions - has worked towards the reconstruction of school buildings and relations with neighbouring districts and students in compulsory education (a crucial place in which to make future generations aware of active politics). The Participatory Budget was proposed in 2002 as an experimental and evolving three-year project (2003-2005). From the very start, it made explicitly reference to the Brazilian experiences. It is organised in two cycles. The first is composed of six district assemblies open to all which served to raise needs and desires through voting cards and strict time frames for verbal interventions. The second is dedicated to Participatory Planning Boards (*Tavoli di Progettazione Partecipata* or TPP), where administrators, technicians, social and economic organisations meet to find solutions to problems highlighted, identify sources of finance and assess problems of technical/regulatory feasibility. The Boards create a complete Operating Plan for every project the Council has to approve. 'Minor' suggestions made by citizens become recommendations for the relevant offices. The Council tries to transform them into small low cost pilot projects before the cycle ends (realised in a makeshift way or with cash surpluses) so as to increase the trust of citizens in the task of co-managing options.

The Participatory Budget – provided for in the Council Constitution, and having Regulations that allow rapid organisational changes – is accompanied by attentive monitoring of the participants who suggested interesting strategies for enriching the diversity of citizens involved. For example, the repetition of the same assemblies at different times, the construction of crèche spaces and other measures for 'gender budgeting' have allowed considerable growth in the presence of women, winning over the past resistance set by the 'masculinist' cultural edifice of the families that predominate locally. There is a set minimum quantity of requests from residents that the Council must accept each year. In the experimental three-year period, it must be gradually increased from 33% to 75% in 2005.

In **Grottammare** too (pop. 13,887), the oldest and most 'organic' of the Italian experiments, the process has been transformed over the past two years, hybridising successfully with similar others.

Until 2002, the many participants in the two cycles of annual assemblies in the neighbourhoods did not vote on decisions, limiting themselves to working with the Council to create a 'synthesis' of the requests. Since 2003, however, the Participatory Budget cycle provides for sets of assemblies preceded by feasibility and cost analyses done by Council technicians: one identifies needs and one makes joint decisions on budget priorities, through different voting cards and structured participatory procedures.

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A graded list of the priorities for the neighbourhood is made which the Council pledges to respect, guaranteeing the accomplishment of at least one priority per neighbourhood). The priorities for the town voted by the residents are actually an appraisal and reorganisation of the 'mandate plan' on the basis of which the Administration was elected. The organisation currently refers to a 'political agreement', which is currently undergoing a process of formalisation in the council constitution. For eleven years a municipal list called '*Solidarity and Participation*' has been managing the town, with an electoral consensuses of over 60% and growing constantly.

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A third interesting experience can be found in Rome in the 11th Municipality (pop. 138,949), split into eight homogenous areas. Since 2003, open Local Assemblies have been held to elect representatives, in the proportion of one representative for every fifteen persons present. In 2004, delegates (revocable and not successively re-electable) were transformed into simple spokespersons. It was noted that there was a phenomenon whereby citizens stopped participating once they had elected their delegate. The list of priorities proposed by the spokespersons in special Working Groups returns to a vote at the Local Assemblies in a second cycle of meetings. Currently, a formal decree for the process is being approved, which gives the regulations the 'certainty of law'. It has been difficult for the participatory route to be reflected in the technical structure of administrative decisions and public works decided o by the citizens are therefore often delayed.

Politically, the Italian Participatory Budget processes suffer a difficulty in escaping from the sphere of 'proclamations' and moving towards transformation into daily management practices. The widespread timidity towards experimenting before a 'law' is created on the issue becomes an obstacle to matching the will of individual administrators to that of the political coalitions that support them. A further critical point can be linked to the habit of fragmenting participation into a thousand different issues, which substantially weakens the process, leaving management on the sole basis of 'delegated' power unchanged. To date, citizens do not seem to be very attracted by participatory budgeting as an instrument of innovation. There has been an inability to communicate its reforming potential and rarely has participation surpassed the threshold of one to two percent of citizens. 'Mild' deliberative procedures were thus created precisely for this reason. They do not concentrate on moments of decision-making, but rather on common growth during debate.

## An open conclusion

A close examination of the varied European approaches and experiences confirms some of the results that emerge from the first comparative studies of Latin American experiences with Participatory Budgets (Torres/De Grazia, 2003; Avritzer/Navarro, 2002; Santos, 2002). One conclusion is that the outcome of an experiment with Participatory Budgeting always tends to be proportional to the presence of four fundamental factors:

- political will in support of the route;
- a high number of associations and the self-organising ability of the social networks;
- the coherence and refinement of the organisational 'design' elements of the process;
- the administrative and financial ability of the authority carrying out the experiments.

In different contexts, the 'dosage' of the four factors can change but an overall balance must be maintained such that every deficiency is compensated for.

The European experiences highlight a possible fifth key element for guaranteeing the success of participatory routes: the existence of a strong *need* at the basis of the experiments. In Latin America, the needs that cement the will to experiment are often social in nature: the need to rebalance economic gaps by constructing fairer procedures for the redistribution of land resources, for example. In Europe, the needs that have given a boost to the activation of Participatory Budgets tend to be political (especially in European Latin countries), or are to do with modernisation and the improvement of the efficiency of the public apparatus (especially in the North Eastern area).

An analysis 'from above' further reinforces the interpretation according to which Participatory Budgets are more a "*way of rethinking the connection between direct democracy and representative democracy*", than a mere model for undertaking the former. Despite this, a large part of the European political class continues to perceive Participatory Budgets as a hypothetical 'threat' to the legitimate sovereignty of institutions of representative democracy. There is also scepticism fed by many expressions of organised associationism: their 'distance' from the processes is caused, furthermore, by fear of losing the contractual power acquired in working with institutions over forty years during the growth of the European social fabric (trade unions, professional and sector associations, research institutes, issue networks and movements, NGOs, etc.)

Furthermore, the majority of European Participatory Budgets have been betting on the involvement of citizens as individuals; and organized associationism – sensing it was being pushed into the margins – often reacted corporatively, either taking no interest in or opposing the experiments. The organisational force of associationism and of the Third Sector (together with the habit of political delegation) could be a considerable 'brake' on processes similar to Participatory Budgets taking root. Changing the lobbyist or corporatist behaviours of organised associationism is not an easy task, however. It requires a cultural change that puts the associations 'at the service' of the participatory processes, rather than vice versa. It also requires a change in political culture, however, which is used to finding a strong ally in the Third Sector. This is due to the persistence of forms of clientelism and the habit of counting on forms of social involvement that only involve *planning* between actors invested with different forms of 'representation' from the various segments of society, pre-existing and external to the activation of participatory processes.

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The best comparative research conducted to date (Villasante/Garrido, 2003) shows that the Participatory Budget processes do not take off when they are conceived to be Forums or Associationist Councils. Two problems remain to be resolved, therefore, which more or less epitomise all the European experiences: how to invest in forms of communication and in rules of organisation that favour an increase in the response of citizens to convocations, and – at the same time – how not to lose the added value that the already organised social networks represent.

Every experience today is gradually providing the answers believed to be most suitable to the different contexts, but there is still a lot to do. The construction of Observatories on the Commitments of Participatory Budgets may be an interesting solution. In many countries of Mediterranean Europe, there continues to be a curious paradox: organised civil society has made a large contribution to the dissemination of the examples of Participatory Budgets tested in the Global South, but it often shies away from direct engagement in the processes put into action in some cities of the old world, and it leaves the Councils to take the lead role in their creation.

This problem should not take away from another widespread limitation in the European experience: the difficulty of involving the weakest parts of the social network in the public debate on budget priorities of the administrations. Unfortunately, to date, the only forms of 'positive discrimination' carried out during the Participatory Budget route seem to be those that benefit children and adolescents, categories that can be most easily involved through the co-operation of educational establishments. What is lacking are measures to support immigrants and disabled people (multilingual and/or Braille materials, sign language translators, meetings in places that have ramps and elevators, etc.) There are also few cases of reflection on weaker social groups in terms of 'gender'. Moreover, experiences of 'gender mainstreaming' are rare, as are instruments for 'gender' analysis of budgets and of the effects public policies can have in reinforcing inequalities between men and women or in discriminating against people with a different sexual orientation. Even technological instruments (email, votes via Internet, etc.) are often not used to build a true e-democracy, but end up reinforcing the digital divide and cultural and age differences (the case of Esslingen is an almost a unique experience, perhaps equal only to that of the small Spanish town of Jun).

In light of the problems of developing truly 'inclusive' forms of participation, it is extremely important that the workings between delegated democracy and instances of direct democracy do not result in 'erosions of responsibility in decision-making' on the part of the institutions. There is, in fact, the risk that decisions – left only to those present during the different phases of the Participatory Budget processes – may produce an increase in the exclusion of those who are not represented on those occasions.

Here, it is worth citing an extremely interesting European case: that tested in the Manchester area of England. The space that the Participatory Budget is carving for itself today in Salford Metropolitan Borough Council is partly the fruit of an operation led 'from the bottom up' by a few social organisations that have entered into direct contact – through international co-operation – with Brazilian practices of local democratisation. The NGO Community Pride, set up in April 1999 with the support of some church organisations and later Oxfam, has had a few exchanges with the Brazilian cities of Porto Alegre and Recife. Subsequently, in October 2000, it published the document '*A Citizens Budget*' for administrators in Manchester and Salford, organising training seminars for the local

authorities of the two cities and interested activists from civil society. A research post on the national budget was also set up. Meeting twice a week to analyse the situation of political distrust that had led to electoral turnouts of less than 20% by then. Stress was placed particularly on the need to re-orientate public investments towards the needs of marginalised social groups, which had been growing constantly over the last few decades of de-industrialisation. Today, the progressive opening up of Salford Council to experiments with Participatory Budgets is a sign of hope in the positive opportunities offered by 'hybridisation' and by exchange between practices tested in different continents. The method suggested by the resource distribution matrices, used in many Brazilian cities and re-proposed by the Community Pride project, is a brilliant example. It builds a mediation (made up of weightings and indicators) between the needs expressed by participating citizens and the objective needs of an area, that are considered no less important just because residents do not turn up to participatory sessions to flag them up.

*Organised civil society has made a large contribution to the dissemination of the examples of Participatory Budgets tested in the Global South, but it often shies away from direct engagement in the processes activated in some cities of the old world, and leaves the Councils to take the lead role in their creation.*

This route is important for various other reasons. Firstly because it deals with a plurality of different local needs. It does not leave the discretionary role of 'guarantor' of the equity of options only up to delegated politics. It allows the proposition or production of rules that guarantee citizens the right to build this equality of resource distribution. Secondly because the method proposed looks after a series of 'weak' interests that are difficult to involve directly in the process, such as the interests of future citizens to be born or to move there, and questions of the sustainability of the area. In this way, an experience that may appear to the casual observer to be more 'technicist' than those of other countries instead picks out the very 'heart' of the meaning of the experiences of Latin American Participatory Budgets. It also recovers the original sense of the principles of Agenda 21, that in Europe has often been lost in a mire of micro-experiments confined to the peripheral (and isolated) issues of local administrations.

The 'matrix' project elaborated by Community Pride also acquires the important role of being an innovative technical instrument for guaranteeing transparency in decision-making. It aims to halt a further weakness that emerges from many European experiences, especially those of the European Latin countries, namely the scant level of attention paid to the administrative reforms that should accompany the execution of Participatory Budgets in order to make the modernisation of the public machine a multiplier of the effects obtained. In the majority of cases, the opposite happens. The inability to act on reform of bureaucratic procedures and the poor level of commitment shown in promoting change in the culture of public officials translates into a large obstacle for success of the participatory route.

The structures do not manage to reflect in themselves the novelty of the means of reforming the socio-political culture, and the slowness in practically carrying out the choices made consensually creates disappointment for the citizens, thereby lowering the level of involvement in the Participatory Budget. They thus expose a central fact: that participation is not an independent variable, rather it

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is a hypersensitive phenomenon, whose success is strictly connected to the results it produces, and to the time frames in which it manages to produce them.

These limits certainly do not obscure the great value of processes that – even where they struggle to become spaces of joint-decision making for administrators and citizens – have the fundamental role of re-introducing the value of the skills of daily life and knowledge into local planning. And they do not do so considering users only as potential modernisers of public services, but by showing a strong level of faith in social intelligence. From perspective, Participatory Budgets allude to an interpretation of the principle of subsidiarity that turns that indicated at the beginning of this text 'on its head', suggesting that institutions must not remain *indifferent* to or *outside* of the initiatives and proposals that protect and support the general interest and are autonomously promoted by citizens and their organisations. Rather, they have an obligation to support their development.

Participatory Budgets therefore refer to a '*circular subsidiarity*', which underlines how state and society must collaborate permanently in order to achieve the common interest through a relationship based on co-operation and partnership 'with equal rights and responsibilities'. On this issue, the Active Citizenship Network (supported at the local level by movements such as the Italian *Cittadinanzattiva*) has carried out an important cultural battle, trying to bind the results of brave and 'provocative' local experiments with the establishment of the new European Constitution. It has suffered a temporary defeat, but the results of the various experiments remain, suggesting that the battle will continue.

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- [www.buergerhaushalt.de](http://www.buergerhaushalt.de)
- [www.ccc.govt.nz](http://www.ccc.govt.nz)
- [www.emsdetten.de](http://www.emsdetten.de)
- [www.rheinstetten.de](http://www.rheinstetten.de)
- [www.pievealegre.org](http://www.pievealegre.org)
- [www.comune.grottammare.ap.it](http://www.comune.grottammare.ap.it)
- [www.comune.vimercate.mi.it](http://www.comune.vimercate.mi.it)
- [www.comune.roma.it/municipioXI](http://www.comune.roma.it/municipioXI)
- [www.communitypride.org](http://www.communitypride.org)
- [www.bobigny.fr](http://www.bobigny.fr)
- [www.ville-morsang.fr](http://www.ville-morsang.fr)
- [www.ayuncordoba.es](http://www.ayuncordoba.es)
- [www.albacete.com](http://www.albacete.com)
- [www.cm-palmela.pt](http://www.cm-palmela.pt)
- [www.salford.gov.uk](http://www.salford.gov.uk)
- [www.presupuestosparticipativosdesevilla.org/index.php](http://www.presupuestosparticipativosdesevilla.org/index.php)

Participatory Budgeting experiments are blossoming all over Europe, inspired in large part by the fame of the success of Porto Alegre in Brazil and efforts to promote and emulate the process in Europe.

Amongst the objectives of the Participatory Budget may be the ethical development of institutions, an increase in civic spirit among residents, and an enhancement of citizens' ability to maturely interpret the complexity of administering a local area. It may also seek to address the distortions generated by the market society, extend 'rights to the city' to all who inhabit it, and to spread forms of "negotiated solidarity" which allows for the fair distribution of public resources in favour of the most culturally, socially and economically disadvantaged categories. Whereas in Latin America, the motive force for experimenting with Participatory Budgeting are often socio-economic in nature, in Europe, it tends to be either political (as in the case of Latin Europe) or to do with the need to modernise or improve the efficiency of the public apparatus (as in the case of North Eastern Europe).

Set against the context of neo-liberal economic policies, the financial crises of cities, intensifying urban conflict, struggles against privatisation and the deepening crisis of legitimacy of representative democracy, the briefing gives a rare and critical insight into different interpretations and experiences of Participatory Budgeting across Europe. Particular attention is paid to the cases of France, Germany, Spain and Italy, with the experience of Manchester in the UK being highlighted in the conclusion.

The author stresses Participatory Budgeting as a complement to representative democracy, noting that elected administrators, and organised associations like unions and employers' associations, tend to see it as a competitive process. At the same time, while organised civil society has actively contributed to the dissemination of the concept in Europe, it often shies away from direct engagement in the processes, leaving city councils to take the lead in creating them.

**Founded in 1974, TNI is an international network of activistscholars committed to critical analyses of the global problems of today and tomorrow. It aims to provide intellectual support to those movements concerned to steer the world in a democratic, equitable and environmentally sustainable direction.**

**The TNI New Politics Project aims at stimulating innovative thinking on questions of participatory democracy and progressive governance, and the identities and roles of social movements, civic coalitions and political parties operating from local to global levels in forging new democratic politics and policies. The project intends to develop an alternative political vision to that offered by mainstream political and development theories, while drawing lessons from and attempting to go beyond traditional social democratic and left models.**

**The project's distinctive starting point is a belief that, at this time of history, the vital innovations lie in practical experiments and experience. In a situation where no inherited orthodoxy provides adequate tools of strategic analysis, the only way to develop these tools is through interrogating, comparing and reflecting on the trials, errors and achievements of experience. This requires a systematic and international process. The programme hopes to stimulate such a process and in so doing to develop a truly global fellowship of committed and creative thinkers and activists.**

**The project supports writing from the front line of political innovation and arranges for these to be translated and published in a wide range of publications and through the Internet. It also organises seminars and workshops, and collaborates with other research centres, universities and civic organisations engaged in similar initiatives across the world.**

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**The Centre for Democratic Policy-making is a participatory think tank, which emerged from the socialist movement's efforts to engage ordinary people in policy discussions during the aftermath of the Miners' Strike in Britain in the mid-1980s. CDP undertakes hosts an annual school and co-ordinates participatory research groups which commission research and pamphlets on issues of democracy (including economic democracy). CDP holds the 'golden share' in Red Pepper magazine in the Britain, playing a custodial role on the Board of the magazine. See <http://www.activistnetwork.org.uk/CDP/>**