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Abstract

Participatory Budgeting (PB) is currently practiced in more than a dozen of American cities. It is indicated by the White House as best practice in civic engagement and by scholars as a new wave of democratic innovation. With the enthusiastic spread of PB in the US, it is imperative to continuously integrate reflective learning to sustain and enhance its impact. In this paper, I share learning drawn from the practice of PB at the Toronto Community Housing (TCH), highlighting a host of communicative and procedural challenges, hindering the growth of collaborative partnerships among the management, staff and the tenants. I demonstrate that the stakeholders have developed differing perspectives and multiple experiences with regard to tenant participation, and in consequence, participation has been molded into a rather confusing format. The weakest link, I argue, has been a lack of deliberation on a participatory vision: what it is that PB and tenant participation must achieve.

Author Biography

Behrang Foroughi is an Assistant Professor at the Arizona State University where he teaches in the areas of Community Leadership, Social Innovation, and International Development. His community development research and practice involves working with nomadic and indigenous communities, non-profit leaders and social activists in the Middle East and North America.

Keywords

Participatory Budgeting, Tenant Participation, Deliberative Democracy, Participatory Governance, Toronto Community Housing, Public Housing Management

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Introduction

Participatory budgeting (PB) is currently practiced in more than a dozen of American cities. It is indicated by the White House as best practice in civic engagement and by scholars a new wave of democratic innovation (Pape & Lerner, 2016). Through enabling people's input in public budget allocation, PB sponsors active participation of individuals in the development of programs and projects that affect their communities. There has been a view that upholds more engaged citizenry in place-based, community-driven development results in stronger forms of democracy (Gilman, 2016). That is, expanding participatory practices at local level revitalizes democracy by increasing local deliberation and partnerships, building democratic capacities among individuals, and advancing policy outcomes and program effectiveness (Barber, 1984/2003; English & Mayo, 2012; Fung & Wright, 2003; Mansbridge, 1999; Pape & Lerner, 2016; Pateman, 1970/1999).

Prior to the first experiment of PB in America—Chicago's 49th ward in 2009—within the North American context, PB has been practiced since 2001 at the Toronto Community Housing (TCH) in Canada (Lerner & Secondo, 2012). With the enthusiastic spread of PB in America, it is imperative to continuously integrate reflective learning to sustain and enhance its social impact. This paper is such effort, sharing the learning from the field—documenting varying perceptions of participation amongst tenants, staff, and management and how differing viewpoints on what participation is and should be affect the culture and practice of PB. This paper is a result of several months of direct engagement with PB-related events, community council meetings, and over 100 hours of interviews with tenants, staff, and management in PB formative years at TCH.

Tenant Participation and Participatory Budgeting at Toronto Community Housing

TCH houses over 164,000 tenants, six percent of the city's population, with a large number of refugees and new immigrants. TCH is mandated to provide quality housing, services, and communities where tenants experience a sense of social inclusion (TCH, 2006). To this effect, the organization incorporated a community-based governance structure, entitled the Tenant Participation System (TPS). TPS is a partnership between management, staff, and tenants in each designated community housing. Within each community tenant representatives participate in community councils and the citywide PB, allocating scarce capital dollars in areas with the highest impact on tenants' lives. At the community councils, the manager and staff develop local business plans and allocate

resources in partnership with tenant representatives. Each community council develops an accountability framework to allow tenants, through their representatives, to maintain accountability for TCH on decisions made and issues that need to be addressed. Although formats of tenant participation in each community council have varied over the years, but PB has remained one significant hallmark of tenant participation in community expenditure management. Since 2001 when tenants allocated \$9 million, PB has provided tenants an opportunity to decide how to spend capital funds to improve their communities. The total PB budget has varied over the years. In 2015, it was \$8 million and it has been \$5 million for 2016.

The annual PB process at TCH comprises of three phases. In the first phase, TCH holds brainstorming workshops to identify issues and priorities in each building or housing complex from May to June of each year. During these workshops, tenant representatives and resident leaders identify and prioritize capital needs not covered under the current budget; all residents are encouraged to attend these workshops. During the second phase from July to August, tenant representatives rank priorities and select top projects through a deliberative and democratic process; top projects ultimately move forward at an allocation meeting. Additionally, residents choose one voting delegate and one alternate delegate to represent their community at the allocation meeting. An Inter-Community Housing Unit Group, a citywide forum of delegates, compiles all submissions. Delegates from all communities attend allocation meetings in phase three. Here, they present proposals, the associated costs, projected community health impacts and the urgency of each project. Delegates then vote for projects to receive funding. Although all residents are welcome to attend allocation meetings, only delegates are allowed to cast votes. It is noteworthy to recognize the extensive planning that takes place before PB activities begin in TCH communities. A joint monitoring committee reviews the PB process to ensure that it is transparent and allows for strong communication between residents and staff during the process.

In the following sections, reading between the lines of participation, I present a host of challenges that we must address to further build trust, accountability and effective decision making necessary to nurture PB and democratic governance (Pape & Lerner, 2016).

Reading Between the Lines of Participation

In this section, the analysis focuses on the notion of participation and the morphology of its practice at the TCH. The TPS and PB were developed to build and maintain a sense of community and a cooperative spirit among tenants, staff

and management to co-create solutions to local housing concerns. Although the organization reiterates these goals in various ways, it is misleading to assume that a clear consensus exists on the implications of these goals and the means by which they are to be attained. A multiplicity of perceptions, assumptions and expectations of participation amongst tenant representatives, staff, and managers exists. As one of the managers clarified, the participation was “so undefined; tenants got it and defined it how they wanted to.” And here I will discuss how staff and managers, too, have approached and applied participation from varying perspectives.

The lack of common understanding regarding the concept of tenant participation creates contested expectations of various types and degrees. Such lack of clarity affects the coherence and outcome of tenant participation and PB. For example, some perceive PB as a liberating and empowering tool for tenants, while others view it solely as a management strategy to channel, and sometimes abort, the tenants’ complaints. I argue these perceptions hinder effective processes of collaboration, as they are ever present, yet rarely examined.

Frontline Staff

One major challenge I found early on involves the attitude and desire of frontline staff to engage with tenant participation and view tenant representatives as legitimate partners in decision-making. As evidenced by the following comments shared by three managers, frontline staff preferred to remain distant from the people and communities they serve.

We have this problem here, the un-preparedness of staff to do participation, I do not know how to build the capacity in them to understand and feel that this is a better way. Do not be afraid of the conflicts [with tenants].

It [the problem of staff] is definitely a huge challenge; it is part of the resistant. They are the front... one of my staff [who was unwilling to accept participation as a principle] is on leave so I am happy now... It is lots of stress, [it is] a huge issue.

What is common among the staff is that they say “you keep cutting back, cutting back and then giving money to tenants to make decisions for. Or staff have discussed [amongst themselves] that tenants have not been able to manage their life very well; that is why some of them find their lives in the social housing and now they have to manage 9 million dollars!

From this and many similar comments, and in conjunction with my own observations and personal conversations with tenants and staff, I argue that there was a lack of willingness on behalf of front-line staff to treat tenants as equal partners or even accept their presence in the community decision-making processes. Tenants were viewed as incapable of effective participation. In consequence, inviting them to partake in the managerial and budgeting processes was perceived as “a waste of time and money”. This attitude impedes the growth of a participatory culture within collaborative initiatives involving tenants. The following remarks by two managers further highlight the tension between the main two stakeholders, front-line staff and tenants:

You have to say people whose job is to monitor them [the tenants] to let them have a say; staff would say, ‘What? These are the people who I watch every day; now you are telling me that I cannot tell them what to do.’ The challenge is huge in the context of society as well as the housing and the social service delivery. This is not just a project; this is a life change... It is like having homeless people have a say in determining what food they want to have or what type of programs they prefer to have, you would have the same problem with the homelessness sector staff.

The problem [with frontline staff] is attitude and perception. Behind the counter they hold power and there is no power on the other side of the counter. They don’t get it, I have discussion about it; they don’t get it... they don’t care and they’re rude, they’re racist. Every day I have a complaint. They work hard, but it is their attitude.

There, I argue, are three main reasons explaining frontline staff members’ skewed perception of tenant participation in PB and the general TPS. First, PB was introduced when staff witnessed massive budget cuts resulting from the amalgamation of public housing in Toronto. In a conversation with one of the TCH’s program managers, she explained that staff had always been instructed to efficiently utilize resources. She further added that in relation to PB, staff often felt the TCH assigned the presumably incapable and inexperienced tenants to participate in housing expenditure management, and this was problematic in an era of fiscal imbalances while demanding results-based performance. Tenant participation and improved administrative and managerial efficiency were perceived as mutually exclusive. Second, the implementation of the PB was initially sketched and planned by the TCH organizational leaders and a group of tenant activists, without frontline staff representation. Staff were then asked to engage with a participatory process without being initially included in the

deliberations and the design of the PB. This lack of inclusion, I argue, was another reason for the development of an unenthusiastic attitude towards PB. Third, other issues related to the social welfare environment in which the staff interacted with tenants on unequal terms contributed to the aforementioned perspectives. Staff determined tenants' rents, and demanded the arrears and was allowed to scrutinize tenants' daily expenses. In this pre-existing context of zero-sum power relations, PB called for power sharing between staff and tenants. Neither tenants nor staff was accustomed to working as partners.

The question of staff is indeed an important one. Staff members are in constant contact with tenant population for the very tangible matters of their every day lives. As more staff authentically accommodate the participatory process, tenant-led initiatives are more likely to flourish.

Community Housing Managers

Drawing from interviews and personal observation, I present four prevalent perceptions that drive the participatory agenda among managers. First and foremost, the managers and the head office coordinators emphasized the benefit of participation in providing a foundation for information sharing between tenants and management. It is perceived as a mutually beneficial situation as both parties gain useful information from this process. The tenant representatives inform the management of existing problems and the management informs them of policies and programs. The second of four perceptions of participation is that it provides an opportunity for tenants to take some degree of ownership over their place of residence, which consequently serves three main goals: reducing the housing expenditures, increasing community safety, and enhancing policy efficiency. Third, participation is perceived as an accountability framework. While some managers perceive tenants as the "loyal opposition to the manager," or "the party in opposition," others view them as part of the management team, whereby their collaborative role with management is held accountable to the general tenant population. The fourth perception is that participation provides learning opportunities for tenant representatives to practice leadership, formal decision-making, and community planning, which they would not have received otherwise. As one manager highlighted, "They get to exercise some decision-making ability around spending money"; "residents get experiences, like [learning] how to sit on the board and how to manage a session."¹

¹ On learning through PB see Lerner (2010) and Schgurensky (2013), and for an elaborated account on tenants' informal learning through TPS and PB see Foroughi (2013).

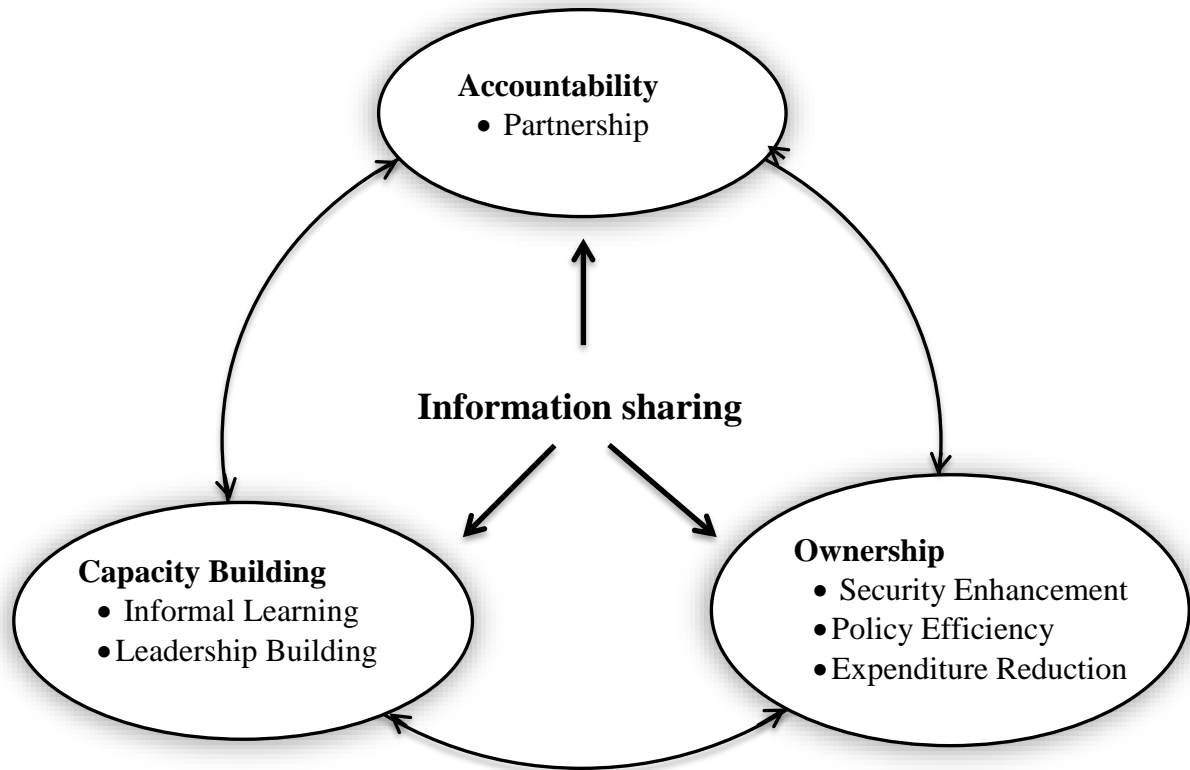


Figure 1: An illustration of tenant participation as understood and rationalized by community housing managers

In sum, as illustrated in Figure 1, the general logic and perception of participation among managers is that higher rates of information-sharing deliver more relevant and appropriate housing services to tenants, which in turn result in greater tenant satisfaction, increased accountability to tenants, and stronger partnerships. Additionally, these processes enhance feelings of community ownership, learning, quality of communication and information sharing, thereby establishing more effective partnerships.

Tenant Representatives

I found a common perspective suggested by several tenant representatives that managers and staff invite and encourage participation only when they deem it appropriate. And that is to accommodate staff shortage and also gather buy-in

from the general tenant population to the policies and procedures they have already planned for.

I think it is downloading of the staff works and responsibilities onto tenants... TCH tries to use us as tenant liaisons. They call it tenant participation we call it "can you do something for our work, please?"

You know all these hours we put save them lots of dollars. Bringing information to the management is an unpaid job. We provide lots of good information for the management.

This tenant participation is good for the TCH to make out of us a human shield against what they want to fight for. They come up with proposals and we believe we should say yes to those proposals. This is how things are delivered to us.

It is supposed to be tenant driven, but it's not [been] so. At council meetings, [there is] very little space, they bring their own agenda which is another thing I don't consider [that] tenant participation because they have their own stuff that they want to deal with first and then there is a little point in the agenda for [all the other] eleven tenant representatives and then if you have something to bring, you bring it there.

The above comments suggest that an overwhelming attention within councils and other participatory spaces is paid to policies addressing the management and organization's interests. The immediate negative consequence involves dispiriting tenant representatives. As one of the managers indicated, "The best tenants are the ones who are frustrated and leave."

The development of relationships of trust and mutual respect between tenants and management is crucial to co-operative endeavors such as PB. Tenant participation depends upon their belief in the validity and worthiness of the process, hinging on their trust of staff and management. Therefore, it is imperative to further deliberate on agenda setting and facilitation of councils and other venues of tenant-involved decision-making.

Tenant Participation and Election of Representatives

As the main format of tenant participation and PB, TCH authorities developed a geographically defined representation structure with community councils. The adoption of this representation model reflects the findings in previous section that

the participation is, first and foremost, perceived as an information sharing exercise within feasibly managed areas, each labeled as one community housing. In each community housing, TPS begins with a competitive election, and then relies on the participation of elected tenant representatives. Prior to elections, each manager dedicates resources to heighten tenants' presence in both the pre-election processes of community meetings and candidate nominations, as well as tenants presence on election days. Brochures and posters are distributed to inform tenants of the opportunities available for them through the TPS. All-candidates community meetings are held to discuss visions and priorities for the community.

The fact that community participation is tied to a competitive election has fragmented some communities. In one community, 15 candidates were competing for five positions. Throughout the pre-election meetings these 15 tenants, spanning almost all major ethnic backgrounds of tenants living in this community, collaboratively engaged in analyzing local needs and community affairs. However, the election process privileged five of them, four from a same religion and a specific ethnic background, over others. Soon after, the collaboration amongst them ceased to exist. In this case, I observed the dismissal of enthusiasm, energy and wisdom within a group of diverse members simply due to the structural design of participation. In another case, reports indicated the sense of community was seriously jeopardized when two candidates from two different lingual backgrounds, but originally from one country, competed for the one council position. As one manager explained, the election is a positive factor for inviting passionate tenant candidates and mobilizing the community for tenant election. However, it tends to fragment the community along ethnic and other lines of cleavage: "It seems that people only had this contest, because they did not like the person not because of the greater good of the community... It was strategic initiative to get together against one another."

Elections are perceived as instruments to assign legitimate decision-making power to a group of tenant representatives. As such, formal elections do not imply participation, collaboration and partnership. Rather, they signify competition, control and power over others. Assigning elections as the major component and as a means of convening participation promotes competition by reinforcing social imbalances and reproducing relationships of unequal power sharing within communities. Ethnic, religious, gender and regional identity divisions are likely to emerge within individual councils. As one of the managers explained, "We rushed too much in getting results and not understanding the underlying motives. There was over focus on how many elections and how many acclamations and the number of candidates."

The formal tenant participation begins through the work of the councils. In some communities tenant representatives feel that they belong to one community. However, in most cases, tenant representatives live miles apart and were not previously associated with one another. It then becomes the management's job to hold the group together as one community. I have observed council meetings where managers repeatedly reminded representatives that they were part of one community. Push for belonging to one singular community is to reach consensus and establish harmony and oneness. This idea of being members of one community with common concerns has become consciously and forcefully instilled into the councils. Due to the tacit notion of homogeneity associated with the concept of community, the practice of participation deterred the debating of differences at the council. As one manager explained, "we want them to feel part of a community in this grid that TCH manufactured."

The competitive nature of elections affects council dynamics. Councils are described as forums dominated by power struggles and driven by stronger personalities. "Councils are difficult, in every council I had, this was always the case that there were one or two stronger persons who dominate the council," explained a manager. Another manager also added, "the rest of them [tenant representatives] start to feel disenfranchised, they [stronger personalities] do intimidate others, put others down and lead the council to emotional outburst."

Another subtle, yet important, point to establish is that when elected as members of the council, some tenant representatives tend to distance themselves from other tenants and further associate themselves with the management. This is evident in their indifferent attitude towards communicating with other tenants and their dispirited response to tenants calling for attention to their individual problems. As a tenant representative explained: "All of a sudden the tenant reps think that they are the employees... There is no real info[rmation] sharing [between the representatives and the tenants]." And as one manager explained: "I say [to the tenant representatives that] this is the expectation that you go back to the tenants, [but] it rarely happens. I call for a [general tenant] meeting and they [tenant representatives] piggy pack for the meeting. They do not take the initiative to do it themselves." Tenant representatives would rather be recognized as legitimate points of reference in their community. I have observed tenant representatives argue that inquiries should be referred to them rather than tenants: "do not go to them [tenants], come to me [their representative]", replied a tenant representative to a manager when asked about a proposal.

Here, I briefly discussed some of the challenges associated with the design and structure of participation. These hosts of challenges tend to limit the scope of

participation and have fragmented communities along various lines of cleavage. This may fade tenant enthusiasm for community engagement through the formal channels of participation.

PB and the Emerging Roles and Responsibilities for Public Service

Although tenant participation in general and PB in particular are outlined by the TCH, one must not assume that participation is objectively understood and practiced based on a collectively agreed upon framework. I demonstrated that staff and management have developed differing perspectives and multiple experiences with regard to the concept of participation. I referred to a major host of communicative and procedural challenges, hindering the growth of collaborative partnerships with tenants. In consequence, participation has been molded into a rather confusing format for at least some tenants, staff and managers alike. Also, I demonstrated that TPS tends to bureaucratize participation in the form of councils and thus renders it prone to such faults as slowing the pace of innovation, stratifying the communities into hierarchical structures and reinforcing existing power imbalances within the social fabric of the communities. To put it rather bluntly, the weakest link, I argue, has been a lack of deliberation on a participatory vision within TCH and its housing communities: *what it is that PB and tenant participation must achieve.*

The TCH's move to institutionalize a community-centered management plan is based on a value system that respects and includes tenant involvement in the process of housing management. Tenant participation and more specifically PB is based on a value-laden process without which the organization would have been reduced to a simple landlord, "Tenant involvement is the cornerstone of this corporation. I don't think that there could be any other way. If this corporation was only a landlord, we wouldn't be useful to the City. Anyone can manage buildings, but helping people to be proud in their communities is what we aim to do," said a program director.

It is through tenant participation and PB that the TCH intends to integrate local politics and community into the realm of administration and bureaucracy. With this come new roles and responsibilities for staff, management and tenants; and success depends on bridging the gap between the culture of professional management and the culture of citizen engagement (Nalbandian, 2005). Connecting responsibilities is an effort to recognize how public management embeds public values and acknowledges the role government can play in building communities and strengthening democracies. Nalbandian argues that at a time when the value of government is being questioned, it is government's new roles in

building communities and enabling local democracy that can strengthen the legitimacy of professional government staff in the eyes of the citizenry. At TCH, staff and management are the hosts and conveners of participation. They play a key role in developing collaborative relationships with tenants who used to be their formal clients and recipients of services for which they had no say. What becomes highly evident is that facilitating PB requires a shift in the values, roles and responsibilities of conventional public service. Rather than control, this calls for property managers and staff to lead by stepping back and complementing managerial efficiency and formal accountability by instilling political sensitivity, responsiveness to community values, and social equity into the practice of public service (Nalbandian, 2007).

Finally, through research, we must further our understanding of the power dynamics between staff and tenants and how their relationships and interactions constitute and characterize the spaces of participation within PB and beyond. And, now that participation is finding its way to layers of public expenditure management and local governance, it is imperative to assess the preparedness of public servants for their new roles as conveners, communicators, and social facilitators rather than blunt bureaucrats (Nalbandian, 2007). Alongside the implementation of such participatory initiatives there needs to be strategies for human resource development for such public domains of participatory action.

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