

**Executive summary of the DDP seminar on practices of participatory  
democracy**

**Wednesday, September 9, 2009**

**Dennis Hurley Hall, Diakonia**

**Presenters: Iain Bruce and Dr. Ash Narain Roy**

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Iain Bruce is a British journalist and film maker who has lived and worked extensively in Latin America. He has published two books with Pluto Press, namely, the Porto Alegre alternative: direct democracy in action (2004) and the Real Venezuela: making socialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (2009). He is currently working as an adviser to Telesur, the pan-Latin American news channel based in Caracas.

His presentation explored Participatory Budgeting in Brazil and compared it with the experience of Community Councils in Venezuela.

He contended that the Participatory Budget (PB) practised in Porto Alegre, Brazil, from 1989 until the beginning of this decade, and the current attempts in Venezuela to develop local Communal Councils into forms of communal government, are two of the most substantial experiences of participatory democracy that have emerged in Latin America during the last two decades of anti-neoliberal struggle. In many respects the latter was inspired by the former. Yet the two also involve very different approaches to different situations. In particular, they are based on quite distinct relationships between the space for citizen participation and the existing institutions of state.

The following set of questions framed his narrative:

- What is the relation between self-organised, community power and the processes of representative democracy?
- Where does political leadership, by parties or individuals, fit in between?
- Should direct democracy be autonomous, or regulated by law?

- Who really participates in participatory budgets, and what, exactly, is decided by who?
- Could there be, should there be, a connection with workplace democracy and the sphere of production?

### **Participatory Budgeting (PB)**

Iain indicated that there have been two versions of Participating Budgeting in Brazil: *a strong / substantive participatory democratic version and a weak / emasculated participatory democratic version*. Porto Alegre is an example of the former. He mentioned that the Porto Alegre participatory budget was developed by local community organisations and by the Brazilian workers party, PT, whose support base was firmly located in leftist and PT-oriented labour unions. The Brazilian PT was elected to mayoral office, in 1988, in direct opposition to national government and the priorities of the federal state. It campaigned on the ticket of participatory democracy.

He indicated that, whilst the PB in Porto Alegre took advantage of the loopholes in the Brazilian constitution, **it insisted on remaining autonomous and self-regulated**. He observed that it was **never "institutionalised" in law**. The Mayor managed the PB process, but devolved **full, sovereign, decision-making power over 100% of the local budget** to the masses – it wasn't a consultative process. Participation was guaranteed to **every citizen without mediation**. **Meanwhile, participation in the PB process didn't negate mass engagement in contentious politics**.

Iain noted that the PB redirected resources to the poorer parts of the city, increased political awareness amongst ordinary grassroots citizens of how public finance works. And participation increased as people began to see changes. For example, the numbers of participants grew significantly from 976 in 1990 to 18583 in 2001. He mentioned that the PB enjoyed popular legitimacy, even though, only 13% of the public actually participated by 2001.

On the other hand, in places like Rio Claro, a weaker version of the PB has been experienced. The Mayor, a member of the Green Party, was unwilling to risk his political future by devolving authority to the masses. There has been a lower density of citizen participation in the PB. Participation was allocated to representatives of special

interests. The PB had no sovereign decision-making power – it has been a consultative process. And deliberations were not over the whole local government budget. The PB meetings were usually dominated by state bureaucrats and the executive decided which percentage of the budget will be up for ‘consultation’.

### **Community Councils**

Iain indicated that the Venezuelan experience comes, in large part, from the opposite direction. It was an initiative of central government, a project of the Bolivarian revolution. "Participatory and protagonistic" democracy was written into the Bolivarian Constitution adopted by referendum in 1999. Various attempts to replicate the experience of the Brazilian participatory budgets were voted into law, but almost all failed. Finally the law on Communal Councils, passed early in 2006, scaled back these ambitions to a form of participatory democracy on a very small, local level, but the practice soon spread to cover many thousands of communities across Venezuela. He indicated that the limitations of these very small-scale communal councils are now being addressed by a project to federate communal councils into local communes, a step towards what is supposed to become a new kind of "communal" state. But the concrete results are still limited and there are plenty of obstacles to carrying this project through.

Iain mentioned that the establishment of CCs was preceded by Local Public Planning Councils. He observed that the LPPCs were not well designed. Most of the political elite didn't want them to work, and so they were only really effective in areas where political leaders were willing to delegate authority downwards. Another important participatory mechanism is the Urban Land Committees, which is responsible for the transferral of land title deeds to the poor of Venezuela's barrios. He noted that 90 000 families or 38% received title deeds by 2006.

He observed that approximately 30 000 communal councils were established, between 2006 and 2009. The total funding redistributed during this period was US\$1.89 billion for an array of projects, including community projects, production projects, social projects and housing project, benefiting approximately 7 million of Venezuela's poor.

Dr. Roy is the Associate Director of the Institute of Social Sciences in New Delhi. He gave a snapshot overview of how India's traditionally oppressed castes and women participate in the panchayati raj institutions that were introduced by the Indian government in the early 1990's.

Dr Roy observed that India is often compared to an elephant, not just because of its slow and lumbering nature and fabled memory but also because of its 'long pregnancy'. He asserted that India's democracy is the largest and perhaps the most boisterous too. The panchayati raj institutions were introduced in 1993 in the wake of the 73<sup>rd</sup> and 74<sup>th</sup> amendments of the Indian constitution. The amendments envisaged the panchayati raj institutions not only **as the third tier of government, but also as the first tier of democracy**, where local communities would take control of their own destiny.

He mentioned that the functioning of the PRIs has been a mixed bag of some successes and equally significant reverses. Whilst the PRIs have opened space for the participation of historically disadvantaged people in public policy issues, most Indian states remain unwilling to devolve power to the PRIs, and therefore they are like a structure which has pillars and walls, but no roof.

Dr. Roy indicated that grassroots citizens access the PRIs in different ways. For example, in West Bengal they access them through the Communist Party and in Karnataka their link is the local leaders. However, whilst representatives of disadvantaged groups have access to the PRIs, they lack political power. He contended that the real test of power is one's ability to influence decision-making on issues that directly affect the community. Meanwhile, the participation of women in public life has also grown in strides. Women are increasingly engaging in electoral politics and are exercising voice in the PRIs, he observed.

Most participants felt that the presentations were informative. Shepherd opined that people are only prepared to participate, if they feel that it will yield results. Cyril observed that low levels of participation in South Africa are a consequence of the weak state of S.A.'s civil society. Anita wanted to know what happened to the PB after 2004.