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**Women in Budgeting:
A Critical Assessment of Empowering Effects,
Limits and Challenges of Participatory Budgeting Experiences.**

by

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Women in Budgeting: A Critical Assessment of Empowering Effects, Limits and Challenges of Participatory Budgeting Experiences¹.

Introduction

“We, as women, we deal with all give and maintain life, including funerals, and we are naturally used to negotiated everything with others – including our visions of life. That’s why, I guess, we have a natural predisposition for participatory budgeting and nobody better than a woman can manage everyday reality, also at community level, and imagine a future...” (RondromalalaAndriamahasoro, Mayor of AmpasyNahampoana, Madagascar; during her speech at the “I Conférence Internationale sur la participation citoyenne à la budgétisation et gestion des affaires locales et régionales en Afrique”, Tunis, 04/06 December 2013)

In December 2012, the small rural municipality of AmpasyNahampoana, in Madagascar (located in the Toliara Region, Fort-Dauphindistrict), won the first edition of a special award for the best African Participatory Budgeting experience established by UCLGA (the African branch of the United Cities and Local Government Association) and delivered during the “Africities Forum 2012”, a pan-African convention of local authorities in the continent that takes place every three years in a different country². Competing with the more consolidated experiences of larger communes as RufisqueEst in Senegal or Youndé 6 in Cameroon, AmpasyNahampoana won the prestigious “Africities” award³ for the radicalism of its experiment and in representation of other similar experiences. In fact, as documented in the EITI Reports⁴, this small aggregate of rural villages (counting around 4,000 inhabitants) was an important advocate at the origin of an important agreement signed by the Madagascar State with mining companies operating on its territory, aimed to increase the effectiveness and the accountability of royalties transfers for mining exploration to local authorities governing the area. This, in turn, entailed commitment to a more transparent management of this flow of

¹ This text owes part of its reflections to the project “Participatory Budgeting as innovative tool for reinventing local institutions in Portugal and Cape Verde? A critical analysis of performance and transfers” (PTDC/CS- SOC/099134/2008, funded by FEDER – COMPETE and FCT). I want to deeply thank Craig Laird for reading the text with patience, and correcting its grammar imperfections.

² It is worth underlining that the award is open to participatory budgeting experts working for the small municipality and will be made available and funded by UCLGA to support other cities experimenting with PB through peer-to-peer learning.

³ It followed that won by a district of the Madagascar capital Antananarivo, whose participatory budgeting was rewarded in 2009 by the same Forum as a distinguished local management practice.

⁴ The “EITI Madagascar Reports” commissioned by the EITI National Committee, have been published since 2010 with the mission of reconciling the Madagascar State and its local authorities with the extracting industries operating in the country. They are produced within the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative and governed by the International norm ISRS 4400 on “Missions of agreed procedure regarding financial information”. The first aim of the EITI initiative is the reconciliation of cash flows between the State and the main extractive industries (mining and upstream oil companies) in Madagascar, and includes agreements on royalties payments, the statement of donations made by extractive companies to the local communities, transparency in extractive titles available in the public domain, a study on fiscal and economic contribution of the extractive sector to the Malagasy economy, highlighting information regarding decentralized authorities and information about the use of funds received from extractive companies by municipalities practicing participatory budgeting.

revenues through open processes of participatory budgeting, which directly involve the population in co-deciding where to invest the new resources.

If we chose to open with the quotation of AmpasyNahampoana's mayor is not only because she has acquired an important position of leadership in Africa, in terms of promotion of participatory budgeting, but also because her provocative sentence underlines the need for deeper reflection on the interrelations that are possible between the wide spreading innovation of participatory budgeting and its potential in addressing issues of gender-mainstreaming and social justice. Under this perspective, the quoted statement implicitly recalls a sort of "ontological affinity" between such experiences of inclusive governance and the potential of increasing the capacity of public policies to better address societal needs through a larger promotion of women's protagonism in local political decision-making. This issue is, with no doubt, a relevant one, especially if we look back over 25 year of participatory budgeting history (at least in the case of Latin America, given that in other continents we deal more or less with only one decade of development). Indeed, we must recognize that such a relationship has been widely underestimated, except in the limited cases of specific and engaged initiatives. Such a situation means it is essential – for the future – to globally revert attention back to the issue, imagining a new research agenda that could enlighten and support new political commitments by exploring features and methodologies that are able to widen and renew the goals of numerous experiences of participatory budgeting. This can be achieved by incorporating dimensions of analysis and more gender-sensitive action, strictly linked to the goal of making this innovation an important arena for strengthening equality among men and women and extending its impact on social justice through the capacity to address the problem of multiple exclusions among inhabitants of the interested territory.

The present essay intends to briefly depict the substantial lack of specific interest up-to-now devoted to the possible interlaces between participatory budgeting and policies of gender

mainstreaming, and to conclude with some policy-oriented suggestions for designing a different future of this democratic innovation. Under this perspective, the opening section aims at clarifying the concept and the main potentials of participatory budgeting in transforming policy making at local level (possibly impacting also beyond the borders of local governments' action). The second section focuses more on clarifying some issues related to gender-sensitive approaches and their substantial absence in the history of participatory budgeting development, notably in its dialogue with other democratic innovations that could be considered as complementary. Conversely, the third section proposes some counterstream examples of participatory budgeting – which constitute a sort of journey around the planet – in which a gender-sensitive perspective was able to introduce consistent and remarkable innovations. On the basis of those experiences, the conclusive section drives some recommendations, taking the shape of a sort of research agenda for a future improvement of participatory budgeting potentials and its complementarity with other democratic innovations.

1. What is participatory budgeting? A complex definition full of promises

Undoubtedly, the present world financial crisis raises issues related to the provision and distribution of resources, and the need to find innovative strategies is especially felt among local administrative institutions affected by diminishing State transfers and self-funding opportunities. If the financial crisis constitutes to be a major issue, it is not the only factor; its risks are added to those generated by the legitimacy crisis of representative institutions, and to a widespread loss of communitarian values as clearly identified in the analyses of authors like Bauman (1998) or Beck (2003), relating it to “liquid modernity” and the individualist trends of present society.

In such a framework, it is unsurprising that participatory budgeting (PB) is today considered one of the most successful family of democratic innovations of the last twenty five years, with almost 2,800 active cases around the planet (Sintomer et alii, 2013). In fact, since the first experiences took shape in Brazil in the end of the '80s – just few years after the end of the military regime – PB has been mainly conceived as a mechanism to promote trust in representative institutions to overcome their legitimacy crisis by promoting participation and co-governance through the direct involvement of citizens in decision-making on economical-financial issues, a highly concrete and also symbolic field from which a renovation of political cultures is taking place.

Many authors, throughout the last decade, agreed on the centrality that participatory budgeting occupies in the worldwide panorama of participatory innovations, especially at local level (Abers, 1998; Avritzer and Navarro, 2003; Fung and Wright, 2004; Allegretti and Frascaroli, 2006; Gretand Sintomer, 2005; Baiocchi, 2005; Santos, 2007; Wampler, 2007; Smith, 2009; Spada, 2010; Norris, 2011; Pateman, 2012, Ganuza and Frances, 2012). In fact, within the framework of the wider range of participatory instruments experienced up until now in different countries, PB stands for “its capability to generate a concrete decision-making space beyond representative elections, fostering new spaces of deliberation while enlarging people’s capacity to discuss political topics related to complex areas of intervention, such as that of financial and economic management of public institutions” (Alves and Allegretti, 2012).

Defining PB properly is not as simple exercise, as pointed out in the specific entry contained in the “*Critical Interdisciplinary Dictionary of Participation*” (Casillo et alii, 2013) assembled by the French-based research-group GIS “Democracy and Participation”⁵. According to a very general definition, participatory budgeting could be defined as a family of democratic innovations that modify the formulation and procedures of one of the most important aspects

⁵ See <http://www.participation-et-democratie.fr/fr/node/1035>

of urban politics — the formulation of institutional budgets - based on repeated negotiations between the city government and the participants. The latter could potentially be all citizens (including commuters, migrants and other inhabitants of a specific territory, not necessarily holding formal titles of citizenship), and in some rarer cases members of civic associations, or tax-payers, or even a more reduced group of persons chosen through random selection methods.

A number of variations exists in the design of the concrete processes, which combine in a different ways elements of deliberative, participatory, and representative democracy. But they all share the main objective of increasing the number of agents affecting the budgeting process. In the majority of cases, PBs focus on discussing expenditures, while very few deal also with revenues. The reason that many existing PBs concentrate on capital expenditures (i.e. investments, and usually just a limited part of them) is twofold: (1) investments are more visible in the public space, so more attractive for citizens and more simple to explain; (2) they are the more flexible part of an institutional budget, so the cost/benefit relation between the time needed for discussion and the possible results (in term of variation of the original budget draft, based on the political program of ruling parties) is maximized. This would not happen if the discussion was to be concentrated on more rigid costs (as current expenditures and personnel wages).

Undoubtedly, the growing widespread interest for PB as a pivotal tool for promoting innovation in local (and in some rare cases even supra-local) governing bodies⁶ seems partially path-dependent, given that it relays on the existence of articulated and more radical experiments, such as those of several Brazilian cities (namely Porto Alegre, Canoas, Belo Horizonte, Recife or Fortaleza) and some other scattered experience in other countries⁷. In these cases, specific features, outputs and impacts of participatory budgeting have been

⁶ See Sintomer and Talpin (2011) or Faria (2006)

⁷ Among the latter: for instance: Villa el Salvador in Peru, Seville and Santa Cristina d'Aro in Spain, Grottammare in Italy, Rosario and La Plata in Argentina, Chengdu and Zeguo in China.

wider and more remarkable. Nevertheless, such dependence does not seem to affect the main general definitions given of participatory budgeting, which in their large majority are able to focus on a concept open enough to welcome a large series of experiments, from the *lighter* to the most *radical* ones.

The positive side of deriving the spread-around confidence in PB from the most radical and in-depth experiences is that they are able to enlighten on the high potential of participatory budgeting when it is experimented with political courage and coherence, by relating tools to specific and explicit goals. The latter could be such the accountability and responsiveness of public institution, the struggle against corruption, the growth of spatial and social justice, the social inclusion of vulnerable groups, the strengthening of social solidarity, the increase of the effectiveness of public policies and the efficiency of the municipal “machine”, to name a few. However – as specified in the majority of literature – these broad goals are not indispensable to define fully the existence of a participatory budget. Addressing a PB to create social justice on a specific territory is undoubtedly desirable, but *less ambitious and more diluted* versions of participatory budgeting are also legitimate.

Nevertheless, there have been several attempts of proposing more “normative” and “essentialist” definitions of participatory budgeting, which strictly intertwine its main features with radical political goals. This is the case, for example, of some of the literature produced by main political protagonists of the first decade of Porto Alegre’s PB (Genro e De Souza, 1998; Pont, 2004), radical movement as “Democratiser Radicalement la Democratie” (2000) or even networks of cities – as in the case of the Antequera Charter in Spain (2008)⁸. Despite the existence of these “teleological” definitions of PB, the majority of literature and academic research tends to establish a more “neutral” definition that could reabsorb and value PB experiments that start as shy pilot-projects, but can gradually

⁸ The latter is a ground-key-document approved mainly by several Spanish cities, guided by radical-left municipal government in order to state “their” vision of PB, with the explicit goal to counterpose and contrast it to the “minimalist” and “light” concept proposed by groups of cities led by liberal/conservative political forces.

transform to address larger goals and foster wider impacts.

Up to now, among the slightly different formal definitions that have been given of PB (Allegretti, 2013), the most acknowledged is the methodologically-grounded given by Sintomer*et alii* (2008, 2012), which declines participatory budgeting as a device allowing “the participation of non-elected citizens in the conception and/or allocation of public finances”, adding to this five further criteria, namely:

- 1) The existence of an explicit discussion of financial/budgetary resources, which must take into account that PB usually deals with scarce (and often shrinking) resources.
- (2) The need to establish a dialogue with an elected body that has specific responsibilities and some concrete power over administration and resources in the interested area.
- (3) The existence of repeated cycles of events over years, getting rid of processes already planned as an isolated event (one meeting or a referendum on financial issues, for example).
- (4) The inclusion of some forms of public deliberation within the framework of specific meetings/forums configuring a new public sphere (so avoiding to define as “PB” a simple survey on budgeting issues in which citizens would have no contacts with one other).
- (5) The existence of a certain level of accountability that could allow participants to get feedbacks on whether or not their proposals have been accepted by the institutions, and provide citizens information on the following implementation of the proposed projects.

As the above mentioned features clarify, there is a growing tendency to consider PB as mainly those participatory processes with a similar scale to that of the elected bodies of representative democracy that undertake the social dialogue with inhabitants (so implicitly excluding a large series of neighborhood funds where citizens can decide upon a concrete amount of money without having any influence on broader scale issues). However, point (2) seems conceived to avoid the definition of participatory budgeting as a wide series of partially

overlapping processes that, in the past, have become confused or intertwined with PB (see Shah, 2007) although lacking of any real contact with public institutions. This is the case, for example, of those devices that international cooperation agencies call as “community driven development”, which tend to discuss pots of money with their direct beneficiaries, but try to maintain a healthy distance from any public representative institution. In fact, such common experiments – usually taking place in highly corrupted countries or in contexts with ongoing civil wars – tend to keep administrative bodies and elected officials at a distance, so implicitly undermine the mutual recognition and the reconstruction of trust between citizens and their political representative institutions. Conversely, PB explicitly seeks to bring people closer to institutions, promoting opportunity for their reform that could reduce the distance between a “supply-side” and a “demand-side” approach. Given such a perspective, the definition of the PB formula commonly used by the former English think-tank “The PB-Unit” is interesting, as stressed how PB is a process that “entrusts a given community the right to decide” on part of a public budget, hereby emphasizing the pivotal role that the (re)construction of mutual trust between citizens and political actors plays in the setting of any participatory budgeting experience.

Another specificity that should be underlined in relation to the above mentioned definition is that deliberation is not generally conceived as something that must necessarily lead to *shared decision-making* by non-elected participants. Despite this broad open possibility, the majority of PB experiences commonly reject a merely consultative formula based on “selective listening” (Sintomer and Allegretti, 2009) or “cherry-picking” of proposals (presented by citizens) by political authorities. Furthermore, entire countries – as is recently happening in the United States, Poland or Portugal (Alves and Allegretti, 2012; Sintomer et alii, 2013) – are today abolishing the presence of consultative PBs. Furthermore, in light to the refusal of external consultants and university researchers to support such processes. Behind this refusal

there is the wide-spread awareness that only participatory budgets that share decision-making power with their participants are able to challenge a traditional political culture in which the role of representative institutions in the setting of public policies is overemphasized. However, conversely, there is the conviction that PB cannot work as a proper “learning by doing environment”. PBs are capable of creating a feelings of “co-responsibilization” and “ownership” among citizens (and a balanced structure of duties and rights) if they do open solid spaces of co-decision that reward participants for their time and energy, and so long as they accept to voluntarily invest in discussions on public matters during their (supposedly) spare time.

Such a reflection is supported by numerous comparative studies that – throughout the last 12 years – have tried to point out which are the main factors for success in participatory budgeting experiments, usually concluding that positive outcomes depend on a balanced mix of (a) political will of institutions that decide to open part of their budgets to public discussion, (b) self-organizing capacities of the social actors, (c) proper organizational design of the participatory device and (d) the level of financial commitment (and autonomy) of the institutions experimenting. A sort of meta-factor of success also lays in the existence of clear goals and motivations behind the participatory process, which appears necessary in order to “enlighten” on the coherence between these goals and the means put in place to reach them. In this light, PBs that are incapable of establishing their “raison d’être” could be more fragile and “lack soul”, thus limiting themselves to the “copy-paste” of experiences conducted elsewhere. In these cases, PBs do not acquire resilience and sustainability in the construction of strong ties with the specificities of their territory and the local society.

If we adapt the pragmatic proposal made by Fung (2011), we could possibly imagine two differentiated “macro- categories” of PB, according to a sort of “reading standpoint” of the

implementers: (1) the “deontological” and the (2) “consequentialist”. The (1) would represent experiences in which the innovations are valued because “they help to create right relationships among citizens and between citizens and the state”, thinking that “democracy worth having simply requires greater citizen participation (participatory innovation), deliberation (deliberative experiments), and rights to information and knowledge (transparency) quite apart from any other effects that these innovations have”. As Fung suspects, it is possible that this “deontological perspective” could be imagined as the main strong driver of the worldwide explosion of many different participatory experiments (including PB), which look to participation as “a norm of institutional appropriateness” in itself⁹. The (2) consequentialist perspective would entail those experiences in which democratic innovation is considered more or less valuable “according to the extent to which it secures other values that we care about — policies that are responsive to citizens’ interests, social justice, state accountability, wiser policies, and so on”. Such experiences reify their main objectives through specific tools and techniques, which guarantee consequentiality and coherence between motivations, aims and results of each specific experiment.

On the base of such a perspective, some authors have proposed interesting guidelines to help read the articulated and very diverse worldwide panorama of participatory budgeting establishing macro-categories for reading and classifying different typologies of PB with different goals and (consequentially) peculiar designs. One of the most quoted is that proposed by Sintomer*et alii* (2008, 2013), who created some *orientation maps* made of *weberian ideal-types* of different families of participatory budgets¹⁰. These are strictly related to procedural typologies that characterize each specific process, and to prevalent models of

⁹For example, Alves and Allegretti (2012) support the idea that Portuguese PBs have been conceived as a sort of *self-referential tool* for introducing in the Portuguese political and institutional system a higher degree of social dialogue (between citizens and local institutions, as well as between different social actors within the social fabric) which are imagined as contributors to overcoming (or at least mitigating) the profound gap between citizens and elected institutions in Portuguese society. However other goals are barely pursued (although sometimes formally declared), and real innovation emerges within this panorama of light and shy PB experiments precisely when a single city can be seen to take care of other more ambitious goals and is able to shape specific tools to concretely reach them.

¹⁰ The last version (2013) lists 6 families, namely: (1) Participatory Democracy; (2) Proximity Democracy; (3) Participatory Modernization; (4) Multi-stakeholder participation; (5) Neo-corporatism and (6) Community Development. Obviously, concrete experiments tend to hybridize and to fluctuate between these models.

public management privileged in the context of each experiment (and often converging for experiences located in the same country).

The aforementioned seems to indicate that the more than 2,700 cities around the world that are practicing some form of PB (with new pilot projects implemented every year, while others are discontinued after a shorter or a longer period of experimentation) constitute a large and diverse *magma*, not easy to be understood and depicted. Now that this initially municipal level innovation is applied to a variety of different public (and sometimes private) organizations at different scales, is participatory budgeting still a “recognizable device”? And is it still readable as a device?

In our view, the variety of designs of participatory budgeting is still not sufficiently known and studied but is likely that PB could be best described as an “*ideoscape*” (Appadurai 1990), i.e. a model that travels around the world and becomes real only through local experiments, and whose diversity contributes to continuous change and adapts the model itself through its concrete localized implementations and through the different “meanings” they give to the original idea of PB, according to specific instruments and procedures used to shape its organizational architecture¹¹. Nevertheless, these variations do not prevent participatory budgeting experiments around the world having minimum common denominators that make PB “recognizable” among other participatory innovations that dialogue with it, and highlight some pivotal principles. The definitions previously displayed, undoubtedly show specific elements that allow and maintain the possibility of identifying common visible features to distinguish a PB from other (even similar) tools aimed at innovate local governance.

¹¹ When Appadurai developed his five dimensions for reading global cultural economy (ethnoscape, technoscape, financescape, mediascape, and ideoscape), he tried to demonstrate that globalization is not merely rooted in the expansion of global capitalism within core-periphery models and does not produce only a homogenized global culture. On the contrary, he sought to demonstrate that modernity circulates through geographic, diasporic, imaginary, and local spaces producing several irregularities of globalization (Martínez, 2012). Under this perspective, the suffix “-scapes” is used to parallel the variable and often uneven terrain of landscapes to that of uneven global modernization. “Ideoscapes” can be seen as attempts to capture state power and therefore also consist of counter-ideologies in opposition to modern, dominant political discourses. In this light we imagined PB as an ideoscape, born in Latin America and hybridized during its circulation around the world.

The (rare) studies that tried to address questions on the failed and short-lasting participatory budgeting experiments (Preissler, 2010; Alves e Allegretti, 2012) seem convergent when stating that the success of the PB model is driven not only by its plasticity, but most importantly by a set of pivotal principles that help these innovations overcome common challenges. As argued by Allegretti (2013), there are three key-principles that need to be balanced in order to guarantee better sustainability (or, at least, a lower degree of fragility) in a participatory budgeting experience. These are (1) the need to maintain a permanent “evolutionary spirit” that makes PB change annually, instead of repeat participatory rituals of a still nature from one cycle to the other; (b) the need to constantly ensure the collaboration of representative institutions in the process, by making the advantages, the outcomes and the unexpected surprises brought by that PB visible to their representatives; (c) the need to guarantee the “centrality” of citizens’ role in every stage and phase of the process, so to avoid a fast shrinking in citizens’ participation when something does not correspond to their expectations and thus demotivates participants and determines a loss of confidence in the process’ legitimacy¹². Balancing these three guidelines is not an easy task but it must be regarded as a fundamental knot for the process. Indeed, even if the evolution of the process is guaranteed, it is not uncommon for the transformations introduced over the years to create unrest among the social or the political actors as the changes are seen to give privilege to the role of one over the other. On the contrary, is important to understand that the success of participation relies on the very sensitive feelings of the involved actors, whose “perceptions” of the process (as well described in Pippa Norris’ “Democratic Deficit”, 2011) are sometimes even more important than the good will and the detailed motivations behind the change in some characteristics. In view of this, the higher degree of sustainability for PBs seems to coincide with those cases that give more attention to building monitoring and evaluation

¹² A typical issue that often generates a demobilization of participants relates to the “filtering phases” of citizens’ proposals. When the mechanism chosen to select priorities seems superposing bureaucratic logics, instead of respecting citizens’ views of priority and urgency levels, usually PB registers a high loss of participants, so risking to start a “vicious circle” that demotivates politicians to invest in a process which does not guarantee anymore a living social dynamism, the quality and quantity of deliberation and media visibility.

procedures aimed at constantly adapting their design to the changes in the participants' satisfaction with the process and in its perceived legitimacy.

Summarizing: participatory budgets are today regarded as important innovations and privileged fields of democratization of democracy and experimentation of new possible forms of governance. The perception of their intrinsic value possibly seems higher in the aftermath of the international crisis that are affecting economies as well as the legitimacy of representative institutions, which seem incapable of challenging and regulating markets. Within this conjuncture, PBs could therefore not only become privileged spaces to discuss the distribution of (scarce) resources, but also seem to contribute to the "repolitization" of a field (that of economic/financial issues behind any political decision-making) which has been for a long time communicated as a mere *technical reservoir* for highly skilled elites and is now growingly felt to be strategic in the domain of public deliberation. Somehow, participatory budgeting appears to many as an opportunity to start challenging the monadic vision of neoliberal economy as an "inescapable destiny" that has to be accepted as it is, reestablishing a richer vision of economic sciences as a "field of alternative possible choices" that could be addressed in different directions. This is furthermore pertinent because PBs can potentially contribute to maintaining a pivotal contact with citizens, and so potentially helping to constantly measure (and eventually readdress) the effects of the economic crisis on people's lives.

Undoubtedly, the last reflection mentioned above implies a "broad vision" of PB; and a desire to unveil its ultimate potential, which is not obvious in many micro-experiences limited to the discussion of small pots of resources and not extending to the strategic choices of a city. Nevertheless it is important as it helps to remark the diversity of possible "glances" that can be thrown on specific PB experiences.

In the end, the growing success of PB (even in its average dimension)

reflects the spreading belief of both decision makers and scholars that democratic participatory innovations are particularly important when they address specific failures and democratic deficits in the representative policy making process (Fung, 2006), thus somehow reverting (or completing and intervening onto) some of the “unfulfilled promises of Democracy” launched into the public debate by Norberto Bobbio (1987). Under this perspective, some concrete experiences can be regarded as *advanced excellences* in the world panorama (not only for their broad vision and their organizational complexity, but often for their capacity of maintain continuity across time and institutional changes, too), but a large range of other PB experiments exists, whose average quality and strength are definitely lower, and whose capacity to innovate political change does not overcome levels of “*aurea mediocritas*”. Despite this, even some shy and halting experiments could be considered “meaningful” for having, in a specific context, guaranteed some steps forward (at least at local or micro-local level) in comparison to the level of democratization of the pre-existing political and social environment, or a better performance of local policies. According to Graham Smith (2009), such an outcome would constitute a major output that must not be forgotten only because the experiment did not match all the original expectations or did not come closer to a theoretical model of abstract (and unrealistic) perfection that is often badly used to judge participatory processes and disqualify them through such a comparison with reality.

2. Is participatory budgeting gender-sensitive?

Undoubtedly, the majority of existing experiences of PB today belong to the typology of democratic innovations previously mentioned (through the words of Archon Fung, 2011) as “deontological models”, which value participation – in itself – as “a norm of institutional

appropriateness”, partially independent from the quality of procedures and implementing capacities of institutions and social organizations that can ensure their mutual interactions and the creativity of coproduced outputs. In this typology of processes, finding a gender-sensitive perspective seems very difficult, as if it would not be relevant to the very nature of power relations in society.

Conversely, we could imagine that among experiences more related to what Fung defined as a “consequentialist perspective” there would be many more PBs capable of prospecting a gender-sensitive vision. Unfortunately, once again we have to admit that reality differs from expectations, and very few participatory budgeting experiences among the almost 2,800 showed – in the last two decades and half – have a real sensitivity for the issues linked to gender, the majority of them are concentrated in Latin America, as pointed out in the next paragraph.

The first comparative research between European experiences of PB in the last decade (Sintomer and Allegretti 2014, 2009; Sintomer and Ganuza, 2012) blatantly stated that in Europe “participatory budgets almost never contribute to changing the social roles of men and women” despite the claim that, “almost everywhere, women appear to be involved in them to a considerable degree”, often representing between 30 percent and 50 percent of those involved, “with an upward trend when the process becomes more institutionalized”. The above mentioned research stresses that “in most cases, nothing is done to facilitate equal participation”, noting that this is true even in the cases of relevant political female figures who are attempting (or have attempted) to carry the idea of the participatory budgeting forward at national level, almost constructing “their political profile on the basis of the participatory theme” as is the case of Segolène Royal (governor of the French region of Poitou Charentes and inventor of the most renown High School Participatory Budgeting) and Hazel Blears, the

ex-Minister of the UK who strengthened the network of PB in her country and gave it support and national visibility.

In Africa, Asia and (to a lesser extent) North-America and Oceania the situation does not appear more promising, possibly with the exception of those experiences (as in China or Australia) that have been using random selection as one of the main features of the structuring of the PB procedures, provided that gender is one of the “variables” for the selection of participants to the budgetary decisional committees. Furthermore, in these cases, the risk has been mainly that of paying attention to the “quantitative aspect” of female presence in the participatory processes, while underestimating the issues related to power relations in society, as well as those concerning the equal valorization of women’s voices, their ideas and their decisional and oversight capacities.

What reasons can be imagined to explain such a weak commitment of PBs to adopt a gender-sensitive perspective, and include gender-mainstreaming as a pivotal goal of their experimentation?

Undoubtedly, there is not just one or single prevailing reason that can explain such a negative convergence of so many different cities and political and cultural contexts. However, some of the possible explanations are often recurrent and can be of use in trying to point them out, as for example:

- 1) Rarely have transparency and accountability been valued as a real “center of interest” of participatory budgeting, so implying a general lack in strictly associating a careful analysis of public spending with measures of affirmative action that addresses the promotion of social inclusion.

2) A tradition of fragmentation and isolation of institutions and procedures in charge of overcoming gender inequality still persists in many local contexts. They are often in charge of specific policies for specific targets instead of inserting these goals into a larger spectrum of policies. Furthermore, such gender-sensitive structures are often coordinated by parties or officials who are seen as marginal to the powerful architecture of governing coalitions.

3) A trend to consider “gender budgeting” procedures as prominently “*a posteriori documents*” that can contribute more to the “understanding” of dynamics set in place to fight gender inequalities than to collectively forge such dynamics themselves through the creation of participatory arenas in charge of setting and funding priorities to shape antidiscrimination and gender-empowering policies. Under this perspective, they often act more as sort of “gender-balances”. Such a limited vision does not only diminish gender-budgeting potentials; in fact, it touches – in the same way – other governance tools such as “social balances” or “environmental balances”. These tools are often considered verifying instruments for actions that have produced social inclusion or affected environmental balances, more than spaces to influence the transformation of resource distribution in the phase of construction of preliminary budgets.

4) Another element that undoubtedly weighed on the incapacity of conceiving PBs as potential spaces for promoting gender-sensitive visions relates to the tradition of conceiving every gender-oriented action as mainly something addressed to women, instead of something that can provide new forms of dialogue between men and women. Hence, men often continued to act according to patriarchal/chauvinistic approaches, neither being targeted nor involved directly (as beneficiaries as well as co-producers) in policies and campaigns oriented towards addressing new visions of relations between sexes.

5) Self-censorship of women (in social contexts) is often not regarded as an indicator of exclusion, because it is presumed to be a voluntary act. However, if we observe this

phenomenon under the perspective of the solid constraint posed by cultural traditions to the transformation of power-relations in society, we cannot deny that it is a dangerous and recurrent practice even in participatory processes. The phenomenon gives strong evidence of barriers posed to the emergence of new collective visions capable to balance different perspectives, needs and point of views – including those related to gender-differences.

6) Finally, it has to be underlined that women's equality has rarely been read – in the setting of public participatory policy-making innovations – under the perspective of the impact brought about by multiple exclusions. The issue has not only therefore been separated from those related to disability, single parenthood, age, race or socioeconomic segregation, but also from a broader gender perspective that could include issues related to gender orientation such as those concerning the queer/LGBT universe. This is very clear in child-oriented participatory budgets, where it is very rare to find specific measures oriented to recognize the huge differences that exist among young men and young women (in terms of maturity, desires etc.) especially in some critical moments of their growth (Muñoz, 2004; Pecoriello, 2006).

Clearly, the above quoted reasons belong to a range of habits that operate as karst flows in corroding the political and social culture even in the national and local contexts in which the issues related to the empowerment of women have explicitly emerged as meaningful. Often, such constraints have acted in synergy, hereby avoiding PB being felt as a space for renewing the information flows and the transformation of cultural patterns in society, but instead as a solid opportunity to reshape public policies in a progressive direction on the basis of such a cultural transformation. In the majority of cases, such a lack of integrated vision of PB seems to diffuse a “minimalist” interpretation of its potentials.

The complexity of reasons at the origin of such “reductionism” underlines the plurality of agents responsible for the fact the participatory budgeting is not often as effective as it could potentially be. Administrative institutions - their elected officials and technical staff - are not alone in promoting a diluted and not very radical model of PB that lacks real interest for acting as a space to promote gender-equality and gender-empowerment. In fact, also civil society actively fabricates it as do, to a large extent, universities and other research institutions. In fact, as clearly underlined by Cecilia Mc Dowell Santos (2007), several researches in the last decades (and especially the comparative ones) have often forgotten to gather data and adopt a gender-sensitive perspective when analyzing participatory processes and trying to judge their effectiveness and efficacy, despite setting out to assess their redistributive effects and their capacity of social inclusion.

Even when recognizing that since the beginning of the XX century many social, political and economic transformations owe a lot to “the growing role of women in social life” (Avritzer, 2007, p. 12) that contributed to processes of re-democratization in many countries and also benefited from them (Alvarez, 1991), several studies on PB and other participatory tools of governance innovation have not been analyzed from the standpoint of their gender-sensitiveness. If this is true, we must recognize – with McDowell Santos (id.) - that “the studies on participatory democracy look blind to the gender differences and women’s participation” at the same extent that “feminist studies on women and/in politics seem everyday more focused in the presence of women in representative institutions, and not in the participatory ones” (2007, p. 240).

McDowell Santos (id., 242), criticizing the weight given by much literature to quotas and the numerical presence of women in representative institutions, agrees with Araujo’s hypothesis (2002, p. 150) that several types of affirmative actions have taken place in a context of neoliberal political reforms. These reforms are marked by the weakening of alternative

political projects, and are dominated by “pragmatic interests [...] shaped by the need of widening and absorbing the pressure exerted by this social segment, because of its weight in front of public opinion”. Araujo always advocated a “multicausal perspective” (a sort of conjuncture crossing of different factors such as the socioeconomic context, the political culture, the articulatory capacity of women’s movements and the electoral and party system of the specific context) when analyzing the inefficacy of many laws and gender-oriented policies that feminist movements relate to “bad faith” of politicians, “usually male” (id., p. 153), and many other social sectors relate to the “incompetence” and “lack of interest” of women for the political domain.

In view of this, McDowell Santos suggests that a new research agenda on participatory processes must be based on “critical theory with feminist perspective”, and would have to start from Scotts definitions of gender as (1) “a constitutive element of social relations, based in differences perceived by sexes” (1988, p. 42), which imagines gender as a category or a variable of analysis of relations, positions and social relations; and (2) a “primary field [...] through which power is articulated” (Scott, 1988, pp. 43-44), which sees gender as an attribute of culture. Such a shift could be strengthened by adopting Nancy Fraser’s *bidimensional vision* of gender justice as a combination of “redistribution [of resources] and recognition” (2002, p. 67), seeking to reach and asses a principle of “equality of participation” which could guarantee that every member of society could act as “pares”, whose “voice and independency” receive the same “respect” and social esteem (Fraser, 2002, p. 67). In such a vision, equality is imagined as a “qualitative condition”, referring to the interaction of different factors linked also to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion and so on...

What is interesting in the lessons that McDowell Santos takes from the analysis of so many “missing opportunities” in valuing the presence of gender-sensitive elements in participatory

processes, is that she adds the need to take into account a minimal level of numeric presence of women in every process (reachable through quotas and other affirmative actions) but also an “identity” feminist politics (not present in Fraser) that must guarantee that women can express themselves and their interests. The latter elements represent an evolutionary social category widely differentiated and in permanent transformation. In fact, what is important is that the presence of women in participatory processes translates into a real representation of their interests (which are clearly plural and complex, so constituting an open question to be constantly reanalyzed) and the redistribution in pro of them.

The need to acquire such a complex perspective needs a preliminary act (Rodrigues Alves and Viana, 2008), i.e. abandoning the acceptance - that is always “absorbed equally by men as well as by women” - of a sort of “natural incapacity of women to play a role in the public domain and develop a political intervention”. Such an acceptance is often so strong that it succeeds in identifying politics, including participation and collective actions, “as something belonging to [the] male world”, to the point that men feel almost “naturally empowered to deal with politics, exert power, occupy public space...” (p. 45).

The impossible justification of such a vision is underlined by Virginia Gutiérrez Barbarrusa (2012, p. 177) in a recent comparative analysis of participatory budgets in Spain, Uruguay and Dominican Republic. While proving the prejudices existing behind the reduced interested of many process to gather data on women’s presence in PB, the researcher encountered and described a phenomenon of “feminization of PB spaces” which seems to be a growing reality, especially at a time in which many of them see their resources shrinking and men show progressively less interested in “losing time” on small decisions that no longer guarantee a slice of solid power.

It is interesting that Gutiérrez Barbarrusa corroborates her interpretative perspective with a series of interviews proving how man is shown to have “other needs” and “other

commitments” that prevail whenever there are not substantial amounts of resources at stake, even if the shared amounts offered by participatory budgets could be meaningful for deciding on priorities that may provoke an increase in the levels of wellbeing in local territories.

Such reflections undoubtedly help to reveal the shortcomings in the general regard that has up until now supported the majority of comparative and study-case analysis on participatory budgeting. This regard has also rarely gathered specific data on women’s participation in PB and barely chosen qualitative methods of analysis and direct participatory observation of real processes, preferring to rely on memories and proceedings elaborated by those political institutions that proved gender-insensitive. As we may imagine, if local institutions have been unable to collect valuable data on gender issues in PB, it is very difficult to overcome the absence of understanding that has affected many analyses. However it is still possible to revert the situation and imagine – for the future – a new agenda for valuing the inclusive potential of PB henceforth.

3. Counterstream experiences which link PB to gender-sensitive approaches.

The aforementioned reflections fortunately do not represent the entire panorama of participatory budgets around the planet. In fact there have been – in the last 25 years (and mainly in Latin America) – experiences and institutions, both at local and international level, that have tried to promote a different approach to the relations between PB and goals of gender mainstreaming.

We can underline two main typologies of cases in which a gender-sensitive (or at least, a women-sensitive) perspective has been included within participatory budgeting.

(1) The first group is represented by experiences in which local institutions (often stimulated by supra-local or even transnational networks and organizations) have promoted studies

intended to read the effects of PB on gender equality, or to maximize the synergies between an existing participatory budgeting and other institutions and processes operating (in the same place) for the promotion of antidiscrimination visions or affirmative actions of gender mainstreaming. Unfortunately, although highly interesting in terms of cultural vision, many of these experiences have only been episodic, producing (with some exceptions) limited effects on the transformation of the PBs and their outputs, and rarely affecting the political and social culture in a permanent way.

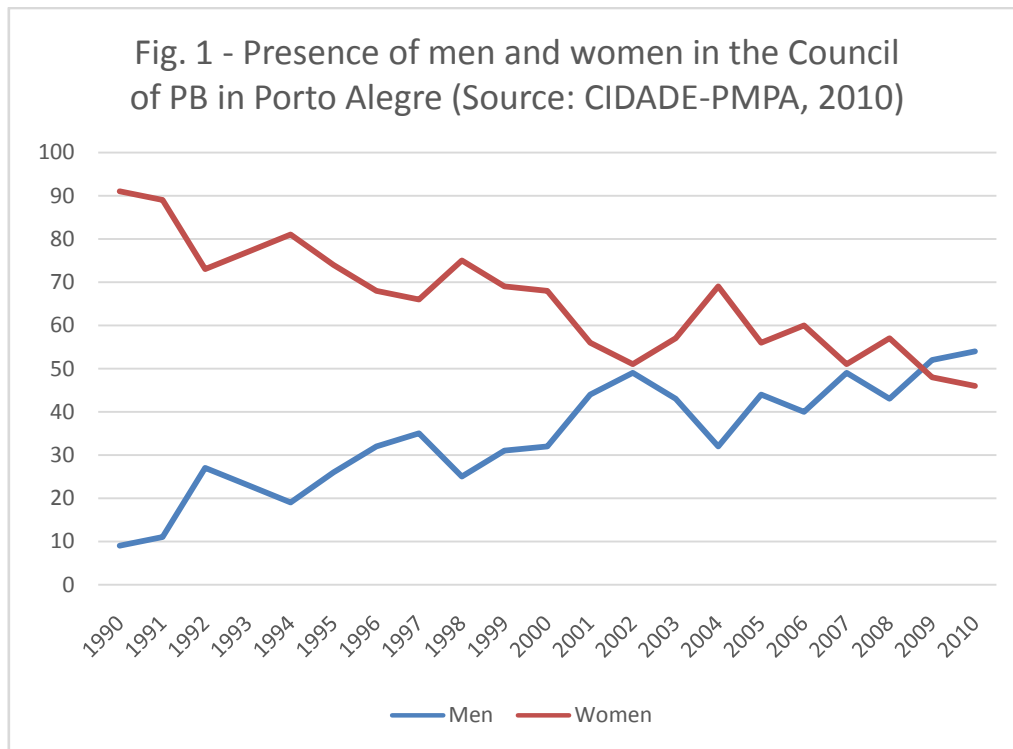
(2) A second group of experiences is constituted by cities that have promoted (sometimes to raise institutional awareness, or as a result of pressure from social organizations) specific measures for increasing the opportunities for an active and equal participation of women in the participatory budgeting.

Undoubtedly, the latter have been able to offer a series of creative answers to the difficulty of obtaining gender-mainstreaming as a side-effect of participatory processes and policies that had no such feature among their initial goals. As the INCLUIR (2007) project proved through its networking activities, it is almost impossible to find evidence of participatory budgeting cases that got results in terms of social inclusion (not only of women, but also of other groups marginalized for reasons linked to ethnicity, disabilities, migration, age or socio-cultural status) without having it among the main explicit goals, and without setting specific tools coherent with such a goal. This second group of PB cases is generally limited by two factors. The first is that their strategies seem more concentrated on providing an increase in numbers of women participation, though reducing visible barriers to their presence, than on incising on the balance and quality of power-relations. The second is that they deal prominently with mono-issues of “women participation”, rather than focus on a wider “gender-related” series of problems, and intertwine them with issues linked to ethnicity, age, education, parenthood status, disabilities and so on...

The Brazilian city of Porto Alegre has been among the firsts to try to monitor and study the presence of women in participatory budgeting since 1990. Owing to the NGO “Cidade” that, during the first 15 years of local PB, monitored several aspects of the process evolution, two books were published in 2003 and 2007: “*Olhar de mulher. A fala das conselheiras do orçamento participativo de Porto Alegre*”¹³. These texts analyzed the slow march of women to conquer the different institutions that compose participatory budgeting (with special attention to slum-dwellers), showing that - while in the basic territorial assemblies of the process women quickly became very numerous - in the more “representative” arenas (such as the “PB Council” or COP where the so called “popular councilors” elected in the 17 districts seat¹⁴), the obstacles to conquer equality were much more stiff, as a result of the resistance of men to lose their small “positions of power”. By 2005, women in Porto Alegre already represented 54.5 % of PB participants, but in the COP they only reached such a percentage in 2010.

¹³ We could translate “Through women eyes. The speech of female councillors of participatory budget in Porto Alegre ”

¹⁴ The COP is was made out of 64 citizens elected by the community assemblies during the annual PB process (2 + 2 substitutes in each district, and 2+2 for each thematic assembly) that take the last decisions related to the annual priorities of PB.



The analysis – through a large series of interviews with women active in PB - was able to point out several other elements useful in explaining such dynamics and in readdressing them differently. For example:

- 1) Women tended to concentrate their presence on some issue linked to family and the quality of social services in areas such as education, health, social assistance and income generation (in the "Health and Welfare" thematic assemblies they were 80% of participants, already in 2005).
- 2) In terms of age, women always tended to prevail in the average range (34-60 years) while men tended to prevail both among young people (16-33 years) and over 60 years.
- 3) As for marital status, women in leading positions in PB tended to be often “single” or “divorced” (62-65 %), so more “independent” from men’s “permissions” to participate (Fedozzi, 2007).
- 4) Many women (especially in the lower social classes) tended “to feed prejudices on women’s role” avoiding any extension of their militancy out of issue related to the everyday

life in their neighborhood, and often accepting to leave men “the monopoly of family representation”¹⁵.

5) Throughout the first 20 years of PB, there was a visible growth of women belonging to “organized groups” (as NGOs and clubs of mothers) taking part to PB and motivating their members.

6) Women still needed to achieve proper awareness of their potential, but they were conscious of their “commitment to change”¹⁶ and their specificities (in relation to men) in the capacity of having a more integrated vision of urban problems.

Such observations, in 2009, were translated into a real “Manifesto of Action” during the 4th “Porto Alegre Conference on Public Policies for Women”, where participants envisaged PB as a pivotal political opportunity for building new State-society relations, denouncing the minimal expenditures devoted to specific programs of women’s capacity-building¹⁷. Here, the existence of 170 nursery schools in 2010 (having cooperation agreements with the municipality) was shown as a visible indicator of the effectiveness and specific nature of women’s struggles within PB. An additional indicator came in the form of the creation of several bottom-up enterprises and cooperatives for women and educational committees. However, participants publicly expressed the doubt that the emphasis used by public institutions on the concept of “community” could be suspiciously used in order to hide and conceal social differences, especially among sexes. Additionally, they loudly demanded that new programs be established to empower women to increase their entrepreneurial capacities “in all the spaces of local and non- local” social life and citizenship, far beyond the traditional

¹⁵Conclusions presented at the “IV Conferência Municipal de Políticas Públicas para Mulheres de Porto Alegre. Diagnóstico e Desafios, 11 and 12 September 2009.

¹⁶Olhar de mulher (2007), p. 61

¹⁷Among the data published in the Conference of 2009 that criticized the declining commitment of the Town Hall in promoting women with Independence there was the fact that Programa Porto Alegre da Mulher (one of the 21 programs in which PB is divided) has always been the smallest and more marginal. As an example, it was revealed in 2008 that out of a 2,8 billion budget (in R\$), only 109,000 R\$ was dedicated to the gender program “Porto da Mulher”, and only 38% of resources were concretely used.

emphasis “on their role in community organizations”¹⁸. On this occasion, the city of Recife was publicly indicated as a model for having created a PB thematic Forum for Women (since 2002) that acted as a sort of transversal bridge between other policy sectors, linking them to the Women Movements enrooted in the city.

As a matter of fact, the transparency and accountability measures guaranteed in all Brazilian participatory budgets (which included the publication of simplified and understandable versions of the general city budgets and multiannual plans) has acted as an important element to allow women’s call for major investments dedicated to their empowerment, and proved useful in favoring emulations among different cities through the pressure of women’s movements in different areas of the country and even abroad.

The Brazilian metropolis of Recife (2006) and Fortaleza (2008) also realized specific studies on the presence of women in participatory budgeting, in order to approve measures capable of increasing the gender mainstreaming and expanding it beyond PB. The central idea of the study in Recife was that “gender inequalities create different conditions of participation” for different subjects, so demanding public policies aimed at gender equality must become a “structuring elements of PB”, whose main recognized added-value is that of “breaking with the confinement of women to domestic space” and “tensioning the routinization of daily activities strengthening their political presence”(Ávila et alii, 2006). The subsequent increase of the Women Coordination tasks was imagined as a space for bettering practical features and creating preconditions to increase women’s capacities to involving themselves in PB activities (for example creating specific courses and leaflets on budgeting for women, offering babysitting facilities during the public assemblies of PB, strengthening the programs aimed at

¹⁸ Conclusion presented at the “IV Conferência Municipal de Políticas Públicas para Mulheres de Porto Alegre. Diagnóstico e Desafios, 11 and 12 September 2009.

reducing the precarious nature of habitat and disasters prevention, etc.) but it was also recognized as a potential “limit” for expanding the gender-sensitive approach to all PB thematic areas, confining them to a specific channel. The Recife document was also important in as far as it analyzed the limits of a monolithic approach to women’s difficulties, stimulating a multilayer approach to plural and convergent exclusions linked to race and economic conditions of women. Under this perspective, it denounces that the “creation of rules” (for example for allowing building permits and large speculation plans of the real estate sector) happens without collaboration with citizens, so reopening space for *clientelism*, pushing participatory processes into the corner and reducing their structural impact on the urban space (Brabender et alii, 2011).

Several of these issues also reappeared in the specific gender-sensitive study of the Fortaleza PB (2008) that gave different solutions to similar problems, by creating – within PB – the so-called “Plenary of Segments”: a special assembly where minority and vulnerable groups (such as women who are majoritarian in numbers, but minority in the perspective of equality of substantive rights¹⁹) converge. The important aspect of the Fortaleza strategy was to face specific issues related to women’s equality within a wider policy oriented to increase gender-sensitive institutions, creating specific spaces to support citizens with different sexual orientations and making their representatives meet in the “*Encontros da Cidadania*”, where issues of multiple and multi-layered exclusions were discussed. The Fortaleza analysis of PB in a gender-sensitive perspective was an important step in accumulated knowledge and reflection on the added-value of the struggles for the approval of urban equipment and facilities (from kindergartens to health family-care centers), which “challenge the sexual division of labor and in that sense can contribute to reduce the overload of work for women”

¹⁹ The Study “*Políticas para as mulheres em Fortaleza*” shows that here (between 2005 and 2008) the women have been representing 67% of overall participants.-

(pag. 47). Despite this positive panorama, the study acknowledged the existence of difficult obstacles for women to convince male PB delegates of the need to approve proposals strictly linked to their priority and visions, and to defend children's interests. Its conclusions, therefore, promoted strengthening measures able to reinforce the dimensions of PB as a space for learning and making women's needs and ambitions more visible, increasing their perceived legitimacy and contributing to consolidate their image as "political subjects with full rights" through continuously questioning the inequalities among sexes and carriers of different sexual orientations.

Undoubtedly, these Brazilian experiences became a reference in other continents, where the gender-mainstreaming of participatory budgeting still did not have a pivotal centrality. In Europe, for example, few countries took specific measures to improve women's contributions to PB. Especially in central and northern Europe very few specific measures are known, with the exception of United Kingdom where the think-tank "the PB Unit" that, up until 2012, offered consultancies to the majority of local PB, published a small reflection on the issue (Lavan, 2006), making reference to Recife. It also created special training spaces for immigrant women and provided - in some cities - mobile recreation spaces for children (usually installed in the venues where PB takes place). These steps were intended to facilitate the participation of women with childcare responsibilities.

In general, it has been in neolatin-Mediterranean countries that a deeper inequality between women and men has been recognized and addressed with specific measures.

In 2004 in Pieve Emanuele (Italy) a small city forged mainly by immigrants from Southern Italy, the monitoring of the PB process underlined the scarcity of women's participation (around 20%), partially due to the tradition of Southern social cultures in Italy to allow men represent the families in public spaces. In an attempt to revert the situation, the municipality

duplicated public meeting, repeating them (in the same day) around 17 pm in schools, with a guaranteed prolongation of children's activities in order to allow mothers to take part in the discussion on the budget. The strategy achieved excellent results, rebalancing women and men's participation in participatory budgeting. In Arezzo and in other Tuscan cities, as well as in Portugal (in Cascais and São Brás de Alportel, for example) mobile play areas and babysitting spaces were organized to allow young families with childcare responsibilities to participate in PB meetings. In Modena (Italy) an online streaming transmission of the public assemblies was the main strategy to guarantee participation of women and young families. Important examples can also be found in Spain, especially in Andalusia, where PBs set specific quotas (of 50%) for the election of citizens delegates. Seville – the first city to experiment the quotas for promoting women representation – inserted PB in a larger political context, careful to gender-sensitive issues. So, PB was explicitly linked with the Vice-Mayor Office for Women, but also specific support and visibility to LGBT groups and immigrant communities have been provided. It must be stressed that Seville – together with Fortaleza (a source of inspiration on this topic) - is one of the few cities around the world to have dedicated direct attention to gender difference within its specific PB process dedicated to young citizens, recognizing the existing differences between women of different ages.

An interesting experience came from Greater Geraldton in Western Australia in 2012, where the first PB experiment to include a random selected committee that guaranteed also gender equality took place. Additionally, special meetings were organized for citizens of aboriginal origin, respecting cultural habits, including habits related to the interdiction of direct dialogue among some components of society. During the events, a mobile truck equipped with playgrounds and computer facilities was offered by the Town Hall in order to facilitate women's participation.

Among the most interesting experiences in Africa, we can highlight those of rural villages in Senegal (as Fissel or Ndiagagnao) where citizens were divided into socially homogeneous groups (women, youngsters, the elderly) in order to make participants more at ease in the discussion of their specific needs and proposals. In places where women in representative democracy do not reach 15% of the elected officials, PB managed to attract an almost 50% rate of female participants, challenging self-censorship (which usually affects women participation inside big meetings) through the “temporary separation” of the smallest target-oriented groups that could, then, interact with the overall population.

The “Training Companion for Participatory Budgeting” published by UN-Habitat in 2008 to help diffuse PBs in the continent repeatedly stresses the importance of the cultural dimension and in particular gender-biased cultural norms and traditions that influence the levels of women participation in the budgeting process. The handbook, thus, challenges local governments to take bold measures to implement gender empowerment, also to try to overcome the lack of understanding around local government systems and council management that often affects women more than men²⁰. Following this perspective, the handbook suggests some examples aimed at enhancing the linkages between economic and social policy outcomes and tracking public expenditure against gender and development policy commitments. It also suggests simple measures such as timetabling PB meetings’ and choosing venues in order to avoid obliging participants to stand high levels of mobility, particularly at night. Scattered grassroots gender budget initiatives that focus on such areas as

²⁰ On page 50 the report claims, “Some religions, for example, forbid do not promote men and women to sit together or, in some instance, to work on certain days of the week. In some cultures, one is not allowed to express dissent or criticize higher authorities in public meetings. In others, age is a serious issue where the young people cannot oppose the views of the elders. In that regard, the socioeconomic and sociocultural dimensions call for the local government to be sensitive to diversity among citizens. In addition, cognisance should be taken of constraints imposed to effective participation in the budgetary process by the language barrier due to the multiethnic composition of many African countries which calls for the use of indigenous languages during participatory budgeting meetings” (Training Companion, 2008, Vol. 1). Even stronger is “Box 4.1: The Case of Singida District, Tanzania” that states: “Local tradition and custom holds sway in Singida District. These are often oppressive to women, restricting married women for example from speaking before men, lest they be regarded as prostitutes in the community. Husbands restrict their wives from participating in social and economic activities, and men seize any income generated by women which leaves them even more dependent on their husbands. Widows may, however, engage in the community decision-making process as they are perceived to be heads of households like men. [...] High bride price that men pay as dowry make them feel superior to women, which increases their social power over women who cannot seek divorce for fear that the dowry would be reclaimed”.

education, health and agriculture are quoted for countries like Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe (especially highlighting is the commitment of gender budget analyses inside government plans and budgets, due to pressures from civil society coalitions and international donors²¹). However, the majority of examples of local institutional commitment on gender-mainstreaming stem once again from Latin American experiences. To name four of the most internationally quoted experiences: Cotacachi Canton Municipality (in Ecuador), Rosario (in Argentina), Santo André (Brazil²²) and the Peruvian city of Villa El Salvador (Ortiz, 2008).

Although drastic changes weakened the example since 2009, the typical romanticizing *inertia* of the networking exchanges continue to consider the case of Cotacachi as one of the world's most interesting gender-sensitive participatory budgeting because of the outcomes of the period 2001-2008. A municipality located in the Imbabura Province in Ecuador with more than 37,250 inhabitants, among which 80% live in rural areas, Santa Ana de Cotacachi has always been marked by ethnic and cultural diversity, composed of around 60% indigenous Quechua, 35% white-mestizo, and 5% Afro-Ecuadorian (Meyers, 2005). Its rural population had traditionally been excluded from development processes and there was poor access to potable water and sewerage, and one of the highest child mortality rates in the country. With an annual budget of around 3 million dollars, the municipality was run, until 1996, by the white-mestizo community, as the indigenous majority tended to be politically subordinate, economically pauperized, and socially excluded. Furthermore "segregation was especially

²¹ Specifically, the most quoted African example is that of the "Gender Budget Initiative" in Tanzania, which resulted in budget guidelines instructing line ministries to submit gender-sensitive budgets. Another frequent example concerns Uganda, namely the District Development Project (DDP) Promoted in the beginning of the Millennium by the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development and the Ministry of Local Government. According to the new strategy, all the sub-counties and districts are in possession of well outlined planning and budgeting guides that emphasize a bottom-up approach to the soliciting of planning ideas and their prioritization. Gender inclusion in planning and budgeting systems and processes, through fair women representation in public meetings is emphasized, through recommendations for correcting education and career imbalances through increased education for girls, and ensuring a cut in the illiteracy rate currently still at an average of 60 percent for women and 38 percent for men. According to the Training Companion, the programme has made "remarkable steps in the inclusion of gender concerns at sub-county and parish levels, opening out the participation of women in non-traditional areas such as construction of health units and other facilities. This " has increased ownership " while "a gender task force was constituted [...] to oversee the incorporation of gender concerns in the DDP and other local government development programmes" and "engender all training materials and develop a mainstreaming strategy for local governments" (p. 55)

²² See: FéMenina, 1999

hitting indigenous women in the rural area” (UCLG, 2011). The election of the indigenous Mayor AukiTituaña in 1996 (and his subsequent re-elections in 2000 and 2004) modified the local governmental structures, leading to the creation of Women’s Coordinating Committees and a series of Annual Cantonal Unity Assemblies. The creation of participatory budgeting in 2002 stated three main intertwined goals: (1) promote social, ethnic, inter-generational and, especially, gender-based participation and organization; (2) bring transparency to the management of the municipal budget; (3) and achieve self-management that places value on the economic contribution of the community. Thanks to an Oversight Committee created in 2003 (made up of members of the community) the implementation of co-decided measures (programs and works) was socially controlled. In the same year, the creation of gender-differentiated and positive discrimination measures shaped specific workshops aimed at creating a collaborative environment where indigenous women could feel ‘at ease’ and overcome traditional passive behaviour when confronted in the public scene. As a result, their participation quickly increased and their community organizing capacity was strengthened, through a careful use of the native language of local communities, as well as of pedagogical resources employing colours, local symbols and other daily materials. The ascent and empowerment of the women of Cotacachi in PB implied a series of transformations in municipal management, policies and back-office procedures, supported by special training sessions for the municipal technical teams (who received specialized skills in participatory techniques and were reinforced with a mostly female group of members). Other transformations included: a new arrangement of the Cantonal Development Plan, the Cantonal Health Plan (reinforced through an agreement with the State made possible by Ecuadorian Law that passed part of its competences to the local authority), the Environmental Management Plan, the Parish Plans, and the Community Plans. In 2003, the ‘Yes I can’ campaign was launched, involving 1667 people (65% women) who were taught to read and

write (UCLG, 2011). Since then, 10% of all indigenous women and 20% of all adult women have been taught to read through this program, and Cotacachi has been declared by the UN as the first “illiteracy-free canton” in Ecuador. Since the application of participatory budgeting, over two-thirds of municipal resources have been allocated to rural areas – in radical contrast to the formulas that had previously been applied. Significant improvements in rural electrification have been made (with 95% coverage in the subtropical area), while 12% of the annual budget has been allocated to basic sanitation. In a few years, infant mortality has been reduced to 0%, and the promotion of traditional medicine was approved, which places value on ancestral indigenous knowledge and gives skills to previously informal workers in the area. As the ODP Best Practices distinction in 2006 stated, the Cotacachi experience went far beyond the scope of merely distributing and controlling public resources, achieving durable economic, political, social, and cultural impacts. Somehow, it underlined the importance of political will as a precondition to fostering the development of a real “participation culture” in local society, showing how institutional actors can assume the risks of empowering people, leaving them a real space to define their policies and control the execution of their projects and works. The degree of social integration and sustainability that PB managed to achieve granted the continuation of several (but not all) of its features, even after the electoral defeat of Mayor Auki Tituaña in April 2009.

In the case of the Argentinian city of Rosario (1.2 million inhabitants), the results of an interesting “hybridization” of PB with gender-sensitive policies were also very promising and sustainable along time²³, making this municipality a real international “model” to be emulated largely owing to its articulation and the networking capacity and huge investments in international diplomacy. In this case, PB started in 2002, following a methodology adapted

²³ See “Box 9: Participatory budgeting and gender mainstreaming: the Rosario experiment” in Sintomeretali, 2013.

from Porto Alegre (Roeder, 2010) and, in 2003, the municipality decided to develop a gender budgeting strategy, soon supported by the UNIFEM gender budgeting program. This included several different activities for increasing women's participation in PB and more generally in citizen activities, such as training civil servants (both men and women) to be more sensitive to gender issues, public campaigns to combat gender prejudices and better interrelate participatory budgeting and other "actor-centered" activities aimed at promoting more gender-responsible public policies (Bloj, 2013). Gradually, all districts were involved in the experiments and a growing number of projects have been adopted with investments of more than US\$ 800,000 per year. Among the measures, a system of quotas was established in order to promote gender equality in the election of citizen delegates in participatory budgeting (going further than cities like Porto Alegre, whose IV City Congress only "recommended" in 2003 50% quotas in the composition of candidate lists during the elections of PB people council). The main goal of such transformations was to produce a dissemination of "mental change" i.e. "a new way of framing public issues in relation to gender" (Sintomer et alii, 2013). This new frame could be more sustainable than just the goal of increasing women's involvement in PB, which is an important but not a sufficient condition given that it cannot alone transform relationships between men and women within the participatory arena (UNIFEM/UNV, 2009).

It is worth underlining that UNIFEM (the UN Development Fund for Women, later transformed into UN-Women, an agency dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women²⁴) has had an important role to play in promoting experiences, particularly in Latin America, that try to merge PBs with principles of gender-responsive budgeting. Not only Rosario and Recife have benefited from this support (that allows the agency to have strong examples of success to better advocate the multiplication of similar experiences), but today

²⁴ www.unwomen.org

several cities and social organizations around the world can take advantage of a specific website called “Gender and Budgeting” (<http://www.presupuestoygenero.net>) developed with the aim of providing a platform for managing and sharing knowledge (in Spanish) on the subject of Gender Responsive Budgeting in Latin American and Caribbean experiences. Created within the project Fiscal Policy “Pro-Gender Equity” of the German Technical Cooperation (GIZ) together with UN-Women and the Programme of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV), it counts on numerous support bodies such as the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (AECID) and the Basque Government.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the very positive achievements obtained in one of the latest generations of participatory budgeting in relations to the issue of gender mainstreaming – that of United States. In New York, the various experiences have benefitted from the support of New York Women’s Foundation and community organizations such as Community Voice Heard and WORTH (Women on the rise telling her story) and, since early 2011, special attention has been paid to the interlacements between gender, economic status, race and age issues. As a result, and as stated in the 2nd Annual Research and Evaluation Report on Participatory Budgeting (2013), in New York City over 60% of the more than 13,000 who voted on how to spend almost \$10M of public money in 2012-2013 were women; and most were people of color, Asian, or Latino and lower- or middle-income earners. The interesting task of motivating was done with immigrants and formerly incarcerated ex-offenders (who are often dispossessed of political rights in the US) showing the “inclusive” face of participatory democracy and its capacity to address the multiple layers of exclusion. One interesting feature that emerged from monitoring participants in New York’s PB was that, “women were more likely to participate in all the stages of PB process compared to men as proved by the fact that in 2012-2013 women were 66% of neighborhood assembly participants, 60% of budget

delegates and 62% of voters in the PB process (more or less the same as for the previous year). Furthermore, interesting is the fact that women did not just attend PB events in large numbers, but also were active in their participation: 92% of them declared that they “spoke” during the different phases of PB community organization and during the small group discussions at neighborhood assemblies. As stated in the detailed analysis of 39 District results (id., p. 84), community-based institutions have been key resources in building trust and engaging women (and especially the formerly incarcerated) in civic participation. In view of this, it is possible to say that PB “challenged the patriarchal paradigm”, bringing about a significant increase in engagement, when compared to 2009 local elections where only 53% of voters were women²⁵.

1. An open conclusion: heading to a “fine tuning” research agenda

Data reveal several problems in the reality of the country, by showing, for example, to what extent our society is still patriarchal: women struggle for their rights, when they are not subjected to men, who usually do this for them or do not allow them to be active (L. Fedozzi, 2007, p. 1).

For a long time, it has been taken for granted that participatory budgeting is a gender-sensitive tool *per se*, or is - at least - “closely related” to gender budgeting²⁶ and other internationally widespread approaches based on monitoring public finances with regards to the impact of revenue and expenditure policy on women and men and with the aim of stimulating deeper levels of gender equality.

Paradoxically, this was especially true when all data from international studies showed the opposite: i.e. that women’s participation was much lower than the commitment of their male counterparts, especially in the “higher steps” of PB, which usually include some level of representativeness and a small power in setting the final agenda of PB decisions.

²⁵ In District 39, 97% of women spoke during small group discussions, 80% made specific budget proposals and 33% volunteered to be a budget delegate (p. 84 of the 2013 Report).

²⁶ http://www.partizipation.at/part_budget0.html

The reasons behind such romanticizing of PB is possibly linked to its potential, as a result of which participatory budgeting is considered an important tool for the empowerment of social actors traditionally marginalized from decision-making on public policies and projects. In fact, PB includes a series of distinguishing features (such as more profound methodological and communicative care compared to previous formulas of participation) that make it appear richer and more radical in challenging norms and addressing the decreasing perceived legitimacy of political/administrative institutions and the individualistic tendencies of society²⁷. Moreover, its imagined components of transparency, accountability and responsiveness look like suitable tools to rebuild mutual trust between politics and the social sphere and to allow for the tracking expenditure and impact on the improvement of social inclusion, including gender equality and empowerment objectives pursued by important international documents such as the Beijing Declaration (1995) and the Millennium Development Goals²⁸.

Today is clear that, without specific and coherent measures to make these goals effective, PB could turn into another of the “unfulfilled promises”²⁹ (at least in relation to gender mainstreaming potentials) that democracy has been spreading throughout the last century (INCLUIR, 2007). Even worse, the fact that today, from a numeric point of view, many participatory budgeting experiences have achieved formal equality in term of the presence of men and women in their larger face-to-face meeting steps, could prevent actions for making them more responsive in terms of gender-mainstreaming.

There is today a vast literature on the topic – often influenced by feminism struggles – that points out the “insufficiency” of quotas and other instruments concentrated on efforts to

²⁷ There is an interesting tale, circulated by the Director of the Participatory Budgeting Project Josh Lerner, that tells of a woman he interviewed in Rosario for his Ph.D. thesis who proudly affirmed to have been able to “divorce” her husband thanks to Rosario Participatory Budgeting. The apologue is centred on the fact that PB enhanced her social relations, allowing her to feel supported in her choice to abandon a condition of suffering in which she lived in isolation and was incapable of reacting for lack of friends and community support.

²⁸ Especially, see the art. 13 of Beijing Declaration and the MDG n° 3.

²⁹ See [Bobbio, 1987](#).

multiply the numeric presence of women in participatory processes. The reason is that they can create an “illusion of equality”, ignoring the “differential of power and sociopolitical recognitions” between sexes, and putting aside other gender-related issues. Furthermore, they could forget the “thickness” that gender-related exclusions can acquire when combined with other exclusions related to race, age, parental status, educational or socioeconomic conditions (Ribeiro, 2000; Martins Costa, 2003).

As the III Gold Report on Decentralization states, “many of the most dramatic inequalities are related to housing, living conditions and access to basic services, which have knock-on effects on other inequalities, particularly gender inequalities”(UCLG, 2013, p. 111). In this sense, participatory budgeting is seen as a possible solution, capable of triggering and inciting a “virtuous circle” that can gradually improve living conditions and enhance citizenship, as well as create feelings of ownership and belonging to a territory among vulnerable social groups (Cabannes, 2013). PB is also able to give value to invisible urban equipment (such as underneath sewerage networks and water facilities for example) hereby making them “marketable” from a political point of view and so allowing approaches to basic-needs to have a more “central” role in the shaping of public policies.

However, these same unequal living conditions can become barriers to the participation of specific social groups if the participatory processes themselves do not carry the burden of specific measures to overcome them. For example, an important assessment of participatory budgeting that was promoted in Brazil in 2004 by the Inter-American Development Bank and the Center for Urban Development Studies of the Graduate School of Design at Harvard University, showed how timetables and venues of PB public meetings could act as barrier to equal participation of women. The study also showed how “scale” could influence the costs of

attending PB sessions and their inclusiveness, especially given that, “at the state level and in the municipalities with large rural zones, the gender dimension of participation is particularly striking, since women are more reluctant to travel too far from their homes” (p. 25)³⁰.

Some of the previously quoted studies are specifically interested in analyzing the obstacles to women’s participation in PB and have revealed multiple reasons that justify forced self-exclusion from taking part in some (or to all of) the different stages of participatory budgeting. These proved to be useful in taking concrete measures to lower access barriers, such as introducing technological tools to facilitate distance-participation. Nevertheless, it has not yet been proved that such measures genuinely work to overcome participation barriers. A study on the Belo Horizonte electronic PB (PMBH, 2012) showed that the participation of men and women among the 25.378 voters of e-PB was very balanced in every age group (around 49-50%). It is, however, inconclusive on the advantage for women’s inclusion in such a new technological rearrangement of PB. The national study conducted by the “OPtar” project (2013) in Portugal showed that women represent an average of 48.8% of overall participants in the public assemblies but just 44.5% of participants in online activities. The extreme differences between each targeted PB provided inconclusive results in terms of “structural reasons” that could explain such a dynamic, suggesting that local contexts and conditions have a heavy weight on such results and they often reproduce in the participatory arenas exclusions/seclusions which are strongly enrooted in the elected institutions of representative democracy³¹. Similarly, the project has not been able to prove that measures like “babysitting facilities” to support families with childcare responsibilities have had concrete effects on women’s participation, even if it recognizes that they are an important measure for fulfilling rights.

³⁰ Scale and distance have an “impact on the participation of women which falls off rapidly the farther away from the community public meetings are held” (p. 38) being that physical and financial cost of participation increase with distance from home and affect representation (particularly women) on the forum of delegates and COP (p. 34).

³¹For example, in the case of the PBs of Amadora and Leça da Palmeira district in Matosinhos Municipality, the presence of women in public assemblies (reduced respectively to 38,2 and to 11,9%) can be explained by the fact that in these two places mostly members of elected local district councils participate, so reproducing the dynamic of Portuguese representative institutions where women presence is traditionally very scarce.

The last examples not only recall the need for further studies on these issues, but also new methodologies, such as “participatory observation” which could provide a better “fine tuning” (or high definition, in this digital era!) in explaining persistent phenomena of inequality in terms of numbers and – even more importantly – power. We have seen the existence of several PB processes that have adopted measures of positive discrimination based on quotas, on specific “actor-centric” processes targeting women, or on the delivery of special training session and support-materials to increase women’s presence in participatory budgeting. Still missing are the detailed monitoring reports and analyses which could provide evidence-based proofs of the effects of such measures not only on “numbers” measuring women’s presence in the processes, but also on the quality of their commitment and the concrete outputs coming from it.

Under this perspective, the Reports published annually in Porto Alegre (Brazil) or New York (US) are interesting starting-points, but they need to be complemented with monitoring reports where the presence of women is linked to their degree of activism, as well as to the type and quality of proposals presented, and to their major (or minor) capacity of attracting general attention and votes of larger audiences during the voting phases of PB.

Following this same logics, much is still missing in terms of analyses of the relations established between women’s movements and the transformation of institutionalized spaces of participation, in order to understand the capacity of social self-mobilization (those that Pedro Ibarra, 2007, called “participation by irruption”) to influence and modify the spaces of “participation by invitation” (id.), which are often top-down creations. Such researches would need – as McDowell Santos advocates (2007) – to adopt and update a feminist perspective and develop an interest in understanding the historical relation between State and Society in a specific territory, in particular its recent improvements through the connection with gender-

sensitive participatory processes. Such a change would be even more important at a time when a new “form of hybridization has occurred between PB and gender mainstreaming” in order to “tackle the root causes of inequalities between men and women”, encouraging “the development of comprehensive programs that target both men and women, and seek to change traditional views” (Sintomer et alii, 2013, p. 36).

Unfortunately, there is today a wave of experiences of PB that tends towards a “hyper-simplification” of proposing and voting procedures, for the fear of losing participants by asking them to fill in too many forms and provide personal data. Such experiences (especially active in Portugal and Germany through the use of internet and SMS voting) seriously compromise the possibility of knowing “who” participates in PB by gathering some simple data on involved citizens. This would make it impossible in the future to set adequate measures to rebalance participants according to their sex, age, race or socioeconomic and cultural status.

As stated in Sintomer et alii (2013, p. 36), “strangely enough, although they are characterized by elective affinities, PB has not merged with gender mainstreaming very often”, maybe excluding some of the Latin American cases we have highlighted in this essay. Faults for the above-mentioned situations are not only concentrated in local political institutions, provided that also universities, research centers and social organizations (as well as international institutions which, until now, have scarcely supported or stimulated such a merging of models) few have contributed to an innovative culture in the field of gender mainstreaming through participatory budgeting.

In the past, some important international institutions (such as the UMP of United-Nation, the Ebert Foundation³² and UN-Women) were very active in supporting pilot-initiatives but in some cases³³ their regard for gender inequalities was too simplified and, almost 25 years after the first experience of PB, the goal of bridging inequalities between men/women still seems an underrepresented problem in the project of transforming and spreading participatory budgeting around the planet.

For the future – as stated in one of the most complete documents on gender and PB produced by the highly qualified commitment of the English think-tank “The PB Unit” with the Manchester Women Network (Lavan, 2006) – it will be very important to concentrate on the different use of the city by both men and women, as well as on the “qualitative aspects of equality” and the “internal deliberative equality” (Mc Dowell Santos, 2007, p. 251) of the analyzed PB processes. Moreover, it will be necessary to link such elements to an integrated and complex interpretation of social exclusion (understood in its multilayered and articulated dimensions) and to the existing interrelations between the active presence of women in the participatory processes and the struggles of gender movements in the same territory. Finally, it will be important to try to measure the effectiveness of women’s proposals – presented through PB – to change city models and urban cultures, more than just affecting single services and urban spaces.

Until now, several of these goals have not been explicitly posed; other have been shyly traced, but the analysis is still inconclusive, their research methods are still anecdotal instead of evidence-based and – importantly – there is a large shortcoming and absence of comparative studies. These researches could analyze the relation between participatory budgeting and

³² The Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Porto Alegre (in June 1999) the first workshop on “Public Budget and Gender Policies” to strengthen Labour municipal governments for including gender issues in planning and implementation of municipal policies.

³³ See Indicator n° 7 in the UMP document (2004) “Participatory Budgeting: Conceptual Framework and Analysis of its Contribution to Urban Governance and the Millennium Development Goals”. It is entitled “Percentage of women councilors in local authorities” and somehow reduce the understanding of differences of powers that separate men from women also in the participatory processes.

gender-sensitive issue beyond single case studies and specific contexts in order to search for common problems and shared solutions among some of the thousands of PB experiences that are growing daily around the planet.

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