Governance, accountability and participatory budget between myth and reality. The Italian case
Abstract

This paper explores the implications of participatory budget (PB), inspired by insights and reflections on public governance, accountability, participation and inclusion of citizens in the local authority expenditure decisions. Nevertheless a certain criticism is coming from the literature about the experience of participatory budget in the western countries experiences the paper shows how in Italy a positive impact of the PB implementation on the management culture of the local government drive toward its continuity. In particular it focuses on the characteristics of the context in which PB is getting started, the way by which it is realized, the most common type of intervention and, finally, the criticalities in the units of analysis. The conclusions give way to considerations on actions still required to promote PB, so that it can really be seen as a tool for improving accountability.

Keywords: public governance, public management, participatory budgeting.

JEL Classification Numbers: H 75, H 83
Introduction

In the last twenty years, the public sector has been characterized by innovative processes and managerial tools with new visions and trends (Hood, 1991; Rhodes 1996; Lapsley, 2008). Among these, a logic of participation and citizens involvement has emerged with the aim of diffusing the adoption of new forms of governance and promoting shared decision making. The need to build a system of participating mode of citizenship and collaborative governance appears pressing in order to connect policy effects with both expectations and needs of different social groups by discharging accountability (Newman et al., 2004). This is modifying the conventional rules of democracy, in order to encourage participation, dialogue, consensus and various expressions of interests in those contexts traditionally reserved to the policy maker (Lehtonen, 2006).

If the New Public Management (NPM) has revised the role of the citizen by assimilating it to that of a customer in a “marketized” Public Administration, a new emergent vision makes the citizen an active subject in a process in which the citizen’s role is integrated with government and based on a new vision of the accountability paradigm (Hummels, 1998; King et al. 1998; Goetz and Jenkins, 2001; Ackermann, 2004). The same concept of public value, in its evolution, has considered the “co-participation” as key-element to pursue public interest (Moore, 1995). Consequently, the very concept of public governance should benefit from the enrichment deriving from the direct involvement of citizens in public decision-making, thus stimulating the activation of accountability processes in which politicians, managers and citizens are fully involved (Bekke et al., 1995). This represents a starting point for new theorizations as well as multilevel governance (Rhodes, 1996; Stoker, 1996; Pierre e Stoker, 2000; Irving and Stansbury, 2004; Soma and Vatn, 2010) or collaborative governance (Newman et al., 2004; Fung and Wright, 2001; Fung, 2006).

Among the heterogeneous instruments of the participative democracy, undoubtedly, the PB plays an important role both for the impact exercised on society as a whole and for the involvement of several social groups in the resource allocation process. “At the heart of such initiatives is the right to increase councillors’ decision-making, with more localized citizen involvement in determining resource allocations” (Mitlin, 2004:6).

From a review of the literature it is possible to observe that several experiences in those poor areas of the world where the citizens’ involvement in public decision-making is encountered as an useful support for the construction of a priority scale taking into account political needs, social and economic differences (Eberlei, 2001, 2007). These initiatives have also influenced the most
industrialized countries with the adaptation of both methods and instruments to the context requirements, so that it is now possible to discuss how this has come about and what the concrete effects are (Ebdon, 2000; Gaventa, 2004; Lehtonen 2006; Sintomer et al., 2008).

In Italy, an increasing number of municipalities have been implementing participatory budgeting, so this may be considered a good starting point for some interpretative reflections and empirical observations. Coherently, this paper explores the relationship between Local Authorities and citizens’ participation, and aims to answer the following questions: 1) what does mean the PB in the evolutionary forms of public governance?; 2) what are the main benefits and criticalities in the PB implementation in the Italian municipalities?

The first section of the paper is dedicated to the concepts of governance, participative and deliberative democracy. The second section is devoted to the instruments mainly used in the implementation of participatory democracy. The third section focuses on the PB. The fourth section examines the case of some Italian municipalities that have initiated experiences of participatory budgeting. Finally, discussion and conclusions.

2. Public governance, participative and deliberative democracy

From the point of view of the public management theory that, over the last two decades, has supported changes in both the organization and structure of the public sector, firstly it is possible to observe the ethical dimension that has focused on the relations and integration between administrators and administered. The reforms have sought to transform the culture of public organizations, which includes encouraging employees to think of citizens as customers to be served instead of clients to be managed (Hood, 1991; Osborne and Gaemlber, 1992; Saarelainen, 1999).

NPM has paid excessive attention to the possibility of exercising market control rather than democratic control, thus emphasizing the customer role of citizens and reducing their political role (Hood, 1991, Ferlie et al., 1996, Lapsley, 2008). However, what has taken a non-negligible meaning, together with the key principles of effectiveness, efficiency, responsibility and accountability, is the transparency in the action of the public administration. Transparency, in terms of a strong concept of responsibility, is powerfully rooted in the phenomenon of participatory democracy, and can be reached only by providing highly organized tools and means for citizens’ activism in the political process. Transparency is also strongly related to the concept of self-governing, according to which citizens do not have only an impact on the services offered by the public administration but also take part in the production process, firstly as co-decision-makers on “what” and “how” to produce, and secondly as co-producers of the service (Sjöblom 1999:22).

A complementary perspective is provided by the stakeholder theory. It assumes that a company (public or private) has a series of constituent groups depending on the context of the activities in which they operate (Freeman, 1984; Jones and Wicks, 1999). The concept of stakeholders in the public administration assumes a wide meaning compared with private firm, as all the individuals or their social and economic groups are holders of a “stake”, which derives from their role in society
(Handley and Howell-Moroney, 2010). Stakeholders are not primarily seen as actors who can influence the organization's continuity, but as individuals and groups who have a legitimate claim on the organization to participate in the decision-making process simply because they are affected by the organization’s practices, policies and actions (Hummels, 1998:1408). By highlighting the ways for a change through the development of a new administration model based on cooperation, collaboration and integration, this implies an overrun of what is traditionally indicated as a sort of bipolarism that sees citizens and administrators as antagonists. In this regard, the use of the term “co-governance” suggests properly that the borders between state and civil society are vanishing (Goetz and Jenkins, 2001; Ackerman, 2004; Arena, 2006).

In the field of public policy two different paths in this approach are proposed: the method of pressure and the method of comparison (Bobbio, 2002, 2004, 2006). The first, which is related to the expression “participatory democracy”, considers participation as a tool to give a voice to weak social subjects, who are marginalized or traditionally excluded, through social movements or associations. The method of pressure responds to an idea of participatory democracy which is supported by social movements and is reflected in the “participatory budget” experiments carried out in the Latin American countries and, in general, in those countries whose economies are particularly disadvantaged. (Abers, 1998; De Sousa Santos, 1998; Allegretti, 2001; Gret and Sintomer 2002; Harnecker, 2003)

In contrast, the method of comparison, which coincides with deliberative democracy, is based on the assumption that civil society has a pluralist nature. It does mean participation as a comparison of dialogic nature, between citizens which have conflicting ideas, different points of view or opposing interests, in order to draw up common solutions and to find a common ground or, at least, to clarify the terms of the conflict for finding a common ground of action. The relationship is no longer of dualistic type between people and administration, but is rather a multi-voiced dialogue in which the public administration assumes a neutral role and is equal to the other actors (Pellizzoni 2005: 23).

Comparison and co-decision are two crucial moments in validating the deliberative process, which are not longer guided only by elected bodies, but are determined by a majority, built for a specific purpose and therefore, legitimized to choose. The difference between the theory of deliberative democracy and other theories of democracy is consequently locus (Chambers, 2003:308). Deliberative democracy is ‘talk-centric’ not ‘voting-centric’.

The experiences referring to the deliberative democracy theory are based on two essential points: the use of comparison argued and the inclusion of all the interests and points of view that are affected by the social actors. In substance if in the model of participatory democracy the citizens are invited to take part in the debate, by opinions, suggestions and, sometimes, direct claims, in the deliberative model they are directly involved in decision-making process and are able to determine the outcome (Heimans, 2002).

Both models reflect the transition from a traditional view, towards a vision in which the citizens become co-protagonists in the decision-making processes. From a preliminary analysis of studies in the literature of international bodies (World Bank, International Monetary Fund, etc.) on the subject of stakeholder participation in the implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Process (PRS) (Eberlei, 2001, 2007), one can observe a multiple approach in the methods of
interaction between politicians and citizens, at the various stages of the political cycle. The degrees of participation, which are normally considered to be formal, vary and may take the form of the following actions: 1) sharing of information; 2) consultation, 3) joint decision; 4) partnership; 5) control.

Contributions from policy studies (OECD, 2001) consider that engaging citizens in policy making is a core element of good governance, and contributes to building public trust in government, raising the quality of democracy and strengthening civic capacity. Because of its direct interest in the problem at stake, this study deserves a more detailed analysis. The OECD’s vision of citizens’ involvement encompasses three levels: a) access to information; b) Consultation; c) Active participation.

It acknowledges equal standing for citizens in setting the agenda, proposing policy options and shaping the policy dialogue, although the responsibility for the final decision or policy formulation rests with government” (OECD 2001: 23; Gramberger, 2001).

Accountability represents one of the ten guiding principle proposed by OECD (2001) for engaging citizens with policy making (the other are Commitment, Rights, Clarity, Time, Objectivity, Resources, Co-ordination,. Evaluation, Active citizenship).

On the one hand, this marks the abandonment of the conventional interpretations of the public government supported by the concept of power coming from the authority (typical of the traditional public administration) and, on the other hand, it introduces the power of communication as a source of an innovative idea of co-shared administration. This is based essentially on the principles both of “subsidarity” and “organisational autonomy”, since the first legitimates the autonomous citizens’ initiative in the alliance with the public administration to solve problems of general interest; the second, in its relational dimension, needs to establish in a pluralist society equal relations between the different areas of interests, both public and private (Arena, 2006: 82; Bourgon 2007).

That assertion allows to sustain a sequential logic, by starting from the concept of co-shared democracy, passing through the phase of participatory democracy or dialogical, and coming to that is commonly reported as the democracy of stakeholders. In this last paradigm, public governance represents the phenomenon to which politicians, citizens and interest groups contribute in an active way. On this innovative concept of governance, accountability and transparency of public action exercise a strong influence (Dwyer, 2005). In fact, accountability does not exercise its strength only in the operational phase of reporting from the decision-maker to the citizen, but it is inevitably a substantial component of reinforcement in the opening behavior that the decision-maker implements, by making citizens sharing the same decisions and putting them in a position to evaluate the effectiveness and the outcome of policies, both ex ante (programming ) and ex post (control of results). We talk in this way about social accountability defined by the World Bank (2005:1) as “an approach towards building accountability that relies on civic engagement, i.e., in which it is ordinary citizens and/or civil society organizations who participate directly or indirectly in exacting accountability”.

3. Participatory budget as an instrument of co-shared local governance
Among the different forms that currently seem develop the paradigm of deliberative democracy, the PB approach, in which interests of the participants intersect and integrate, seems to have reached a certain degree of success, keeping its original features and treating predefined arguments on which decisions have to be made (Gret and Sintomer, 2002; Bobbio, 2002). In this approach, citizens and/or organizations in civil society are actors in the decision-making process together with the representative bodies.

PB allows the citizens of an area (neighbourhood, regeneration or local authority area) to participate in the allocation of part of the local Council’s or other statutory agency's (health services, police) available financial resources. PB aims to increase transparency, accountability, understanding and social inclusion in local government affairs. PB applies to a varying amount of the local Council’s budget and the actual process is developed to suit local circumstances (PB Tool kit, 2008:4).

PB directly involves local people in making decisions on local spending and priorities for a defined public budget. PB processes can be defined by geographical area (whether that refers to a neighbourhood or to a larger area) or by theme. This means engaging residents and community groups in discussions and voting on spending priorities, making spending proposals, and voting on them, as well as giving local people a role in the scrutiny and monitoring of processes and results, in order to inform subsequent PB decisions.

The legitimacy of the power to manage the common resources of the collectivity derives from the mandate granted by the citizens to the elected representatives. However, in this historic phase, which is characterized by a scarcity of public resources together with the presence of strong social pressures, the complicated and complex system of rules determines conditions that undermine the representative mechanisms. So, it generates a deep split between both consensus and/or political opportunity and the capacity of the public administration to respond to the real needs of the community. The PB as a tool mainly used in areas of the world that are particularly depressed economically are characterized by strong social contrasts, seems to be a solution in western countries to improve the performance of public services and face to the fiscal stress (Ebdon and Franklin, 2006). The main factors inspiring the PB approach in Latin America have reference to: scarcity of resources, fiscal decentralization, need for transparency in policy and resource allocation (Roberto, 1996; Heimans, 2002; Cabannes, 2004; Afonso, 2006). PB is not a document but a pervasive process engaging all those who have an interest in public administration. The reference to local government is frequently mentioned as a cause of the various bottom-up experiences that have been increasing in many countries. PB does not reverse the roles in local government but creates a synergy in the knowledge of public interest between politicians and citizens.

Many contributions to the literature tend to highlight two different profiles in the PB approach. “The experiences fall between simple consultation with citizens, whereby the executive and legislative branches retain all the power, and deliberative experiences, in which the decisions of PB councilors have real power and are endorsed by the municipal council” (Cabannes, 2004:28; cfr. Heimans, 2002).

The implementation of PB would demonstrate that the democratic and transparent administration
of the financial resources is a powerful and very appropriate way to avoid corruption or deviation of the public funds, generating popular public participation.

The first PB experience was launched by the workers’ party in 1989 in Porto Alegre, capital of the Brazilian State of Rio Grande do Sul. The workers’ aim was to fight serious problems related to power concentration, resource waste, political affairs and corruption. That experience led the way for similar experiences all over the world (Abers, 1998; De Sousa Santos, 1998; Allegretti, 2001; Gret and Sintomer, 2002; Harnecker, 2003). Over 300 Brazilian municipalities adopted PB between 1989 and 2004, and cities in at least 30 other countries also have adopted PB (Wampler and Avritzer, 2006; Cabannes, 2004). The phenomenon has also caught on in Europe, where there are different rules in the various countries because PB does not imply a definition of rules but is a philosophy permeating the process of elaboration. More than 300 municipalities in countries such as Venezuela, Canada, Spain, France and Chile, and the UK have already used PB. In the UK, for example, experiences of PB began to catch on in the cities of Salford and Manchester in 2000. A 2008 report by the PB unit - a project of the charity Church Action (Participatory budgeting in the UK: values, principles & standards, 2008) – claims that 22 pilot projects have led to some form of participatory budget. The objective was to ensure that by 2012 each local authority area should have a PB.

Aspects of the PB Process

The process of PB generally requires citizens to be engaged in decision-making. It extends the succession of stages of the cycle annual budget formulation and approval which afford investments and projects to be allocated to the emerging local needs. In the participation process for the budget formulation, procedures and activities are not scheduled and, on the basis of indications from the experiences already gained in different countries, it is possible to design a sort of prototype of the process articulation as follows:

- preparation of feasibility studies to support the evaluation of the investments or projects;
- preparation of a proposal in the areas concerning the participatory process;
- monitoring process in the budget approval;
- monitoring in the budget management with specific reference to the priorities;
- monitoring the provision process (competitive tenders, contracting);
- monitoring services provision for the public works.

In these activities it is reasonable to think about the joint attention paid by both public administration and citizens to budget performance.

PB involves citizens and political forces in collaboration, therefore it has the prerogative to include in the resource allocation process those who traditionally are not involved in political decisions. There are really no universal rules about the application of PB. The methodologies may vary depending on the local authority and its requirements. So there are rules which determine the
percentage amount of resources to entrust to the citizens’ decisions.

Given the citizens’ involvement, PB creates opportunities for greater effectiveness in the distribution of public funds and increases social cohesion. According to the advocates of PB, this implies a certain amount of advantages (Heimans, 2002:10) as citizens’ empowerment and promotion of public learning; democratization of macroeconomic policy; integration among different social groups; co-shared economic and social growth.

Certainly PB is not a “consolation prize” for citizens but a decision-making instrument that is able to rebuild a relationship of trust between institutions and citizens.

At the same time the risks is that “people may view PB as just another bandwagon” while it is a new way of planning and budgeting. Therefore, the risk is that may be a mystification of the participation tool (Wampler and Avritzer, 2006). Other risks are: a potential impact on fiscal discipline of the increased demands on governments through participation; an erosion of the legitimacy of established democratic institutions, such as parliament, in favour of less accountable civil society organizations; an escalation of conflict over resource allocation and distribution among participating social groups; the “capture” of participatory processes by local elites, by the most vocal constituencies or by those with vested interests. In this sense the PB represents a tool for modernising local governance and activating the community to improve the local public services.

4. The Italian way towards citizens’ participation

As in most European States – according to the OECD report 2009 - also in Italy, in the last few years there has been the introduction of some form of citizen participation, in particular in the local authorities (mostly the Municipalities). There are also experiences that have launched a regional form of participation, by codifying methods and tools. This is the emblematic case of the Tuscany Region, which approved a law in 2007 whose content promotes regional instruments of deliberative democracy (Floridia, 2008; OECD 2009). Other experiments are in progress in other regions (Lazio Region, Emilia-Romagna Region).

In general, the administration of the local authority recalls closely the concepts of participatory democracy and deliberative democracy and particularly the small-size municipalities are more involved than others.

The advent of ITC and the start of e-Governance projects simplify the accessibility to the public administration by the use of web sites (for example online forums, wikis) and speed up the dialogue between public and institutions. It is the substance of the policies and the immediate tangibility of their effects to involve citizens by pushing them towards forms of organization where they can take an active part in the dialogue and be present in the choices relating to resource allocation.

Further the recent reforms in Italy have introduced new figures of responsibility and have embedded in the public rules principles of efficiency, effectiveness and economy that did not
previously feature in any law. This change has strongly contributed to move their culture towards the dissemination of a management logic based on results, at the top of which there is the principle of accountability of the organizational units in the achievement of the objectives.

The new managerial approach has meant a revolution in terms of prevailing strategic objectives, using the human resources as the main source of competitive advantage, in a management process which sees the co-sharing of objectives within the organization and a tendency to continuous improvement.

The challenge of the programming and control (P&C) system consists precisely in its capacity for adaptation and depends upon the elasticity of response to the context of reference. The P&C system, which constitutes a cross-operating system on which the different stages of activities and translation of political intent depend, is thus a fertile ground for allowing citizens participate in decision-making. It enables a cyclical transition from strategy to programming, management and reporting, by providing in each of these steps appropriate monitoring activities and forms of control. So doing programming extends in a horizontal span and is able to predict what will happen at every step.

In this succession forms of interaction between politicians and citizens, public officials and citizens may take place in a traditional way (for example with forms of questioning in municipal councils) or with innovative instruments. The implementation of P&C systems requires not only a certain degree of innovation in the instruments used, but also a change at the organizational level, through the involvement of all the operational units and the coordination of all activities. This implies a redefinition of the strategies and a change of management in a results-oriented logic. In addition, the complexity of the control system impacts on the quality of the external information, by improving the exercise of responsibilities and the guarantee of greater transparency that comes from the public (Garlatti e Pezzani, 2000; Hinna, 2004; Pezzani, 2005).

The need to comply with accountability, considered one of the main factors underpinning the path of deliberative democracy, is part of that change in the culture of public administrations which considers as the aspects of economy as the ethical aspects of management, by opening the way for new reflections on the perspective for improving the performance of the local authority. This is a tool that allows for comparison and the sharing of common objectives, and can be seen also as an instrument for the reduction of potential social conflict. The information function seeks to give account to the citizens of the use of public resources and the accomplishment of strategic objectives. At the same time, it meets the requirements for greater accountability from the internal offices, thus playing a strong motivational role.

In the light of this recent innovation the role and the meaning of PB should be interpreted by considering it as a dynamic process in which politicians, civil servants and citizens are involved. That surely may influence P&C system and the way politicians and public manager discharge accountability. The degree of inclusiveness, the importance of participation in decision-making processes, their extension, the channels of communication and the evaluation mechanisms are unquestionably the keys to a successful PB experience. Further PB may also support the local authority in facing the difficulties and constraints currently present in the system of public finance.
5. The research

On the basis of the theoretical conditions highlighted a research has set up by formulating a series of questions that have engaged the development of an empirical survey focused on a set of Italian municipalities that have acquired considerable experience on the participatory budget.

The survey was carried out by paying attention to the selection of municipalities, either well-documented in the literature or for having placed the project details on their own websites. The keyword inserted for their detection was “participatory budget”, assuming that the term in itself requires a continuous relationship with the citizens, so that occurs mainly by using channels such as Internet. The sample is based on only 11 local authorities (provinces capital and municipalities) that between 2009 and 2011 have collaborated with the research team. The first item has aimed to explore the ways in which PB has been implemented and how it was structured. Secondly, we asked “whether” and “to what extent” the PB is able to affect the programming process. Finally, “if” the PB is really able to ensure greater accountability of public decision-makers and managers in respect of citizens’ expectations, and can it ensure a long-term sustainability. That was followed identifying contacts with the responsible units for participatory budget. Subsequently, a questionnaire containing 20 questions was designed with reference to the following modules: characteristics of context; mode of citizens’ involvement; process execution; aims and achievements.

It should be specified that, in Italy, the PB has been implemented, especially in the municipalities located in the central and northern regions since 2000, except for some experience such as Grottaffore (Ascoli Piceno), which started in the early 1990s. In different local contexts, however, the PB was often put out of action or replaced by social reporting, another tool for discharging accountability. This last, while encouraging the citizens’ contribution in the phase of countercheck and audit, seems to limit the concrete incisiveness of the citizens’ participation. In some cases, the interviewees themselves made it possible to further deepen the experience, especially from the point of view of the setting-up of the PB process, to highlight the differences characterizing the practices of the citizen participation model.

The aim of the research was to find out the tangible benefits of the PB experience and include the stories of participatory democracy within local policies that imply the creation of deliberative arenas, debates and dialogues, by which the representative democracy mechanisms can be innovated. This was also to verify if these experiences really operate for the benefit of the majority of the population and what direction is followed by the PB process in any interviewed municipality.

Findings

The procedures of the PB are very different and depend on the context where the process is implemented. The experiences are almost all addressed towards progressive experiments that have highlighted the strong points of the PB. These consist mainly in adjusting its rules so that the process can always adapt to the characteristics of individuals, by reestablishing the relationships
among the different institutions and groups of the civil society. It is considered a tool of aggregation and permits the abandonment of old forms of policy for guaranteeing a transparent administration in the choices made by local governments. In fact they are different experiences even if, through the networks for the exchange, as in the case of the URBAL program, it is to build a consciousness of mutual benefit (between public administration and civil society). Moreover, in a few years, some experiences are trying to formalize the process, in order to make sure a certain continuity and to develop particular skills in the field but, above all, with aim of practicing more and more a “legitimizing policy”, after the electoral vote. In this perspective the PB is used as an instrument putting in relationship the *representative democracy* with some moments of *deliberative democracy*. The observed experiences reveal that the joining element is the location of some fundamental steps in the construction of PB, such as: *emerging needs, priority voting* (all participants brainstorm a list of ideas), *verification of feasibility and insertion of specific expenses* in the annual budget. In detail, every Municipality interviewed has been trying to adapt the process to the demands and characteristics of the participants and to what the administration would really like to achieve.

*Characteristics of context*

Since the municipalities were chosen exclusively on the basis of the indispensable condition that they had completed a PB experience, their characteristics are heterogeneous as regards the number of inhabitants and the composition of the population. Firstly, the data about PB come from small and medium-sized municipalities (54%) and only 5 (46%) are provincial capitals. The geographical area mostly concerned is North Italy.

Almost all of the municipalities are run by centre-left governments, under which it has been chosen to apply the participatory budgets. Only in two cases (Grottammare and Isola Vicentina), the government is represented by a civic list, composed of individuals not belonging to any political party.

In the majority of cases, the option of introducing the PB has been a political choice, proposal by the Mayor and town counselors, while presenting the electoral program. The Italian case that inspired the PB in most cases (Castel Maggiore, Isola Vicentina, Ivrea, Modena and Vimercate), is Pieve Emanuele (MI), which was one of the first Italian municipalities to implement a participatory process, thus maturing a large experience in this field. Among the international experiences, the inspiring PB case is that of Porto Alegre, as well as those of the Latin America (Bel Horizonte-Capoliveri), with which a relationship of interchange and cooperation, within the European programs, has been initiated.

It is important to highlight the role that some municipalities such as Modena, Ivrea and Castel Maggiore have had in spreading the experience. Through seminars and conferences, they have been proposed moments of comparison among local authorities which have activated or would like implement experiences of participative democracy. The aim was to make known, analyze and compare the various experiences, so as to develop cooperation between institutions and improve and disseminate the forms of participation. In some cases, in which a large resonance to the
communication was given for empowering participation (for example in Ivrea), the Municipality has joined the work table “URP of URP”, on the topic “communicate the participation”, by focusing attention on the aspects of communication in the context where citizens are included in the decision-making process. Through a comparison of analogous experiences there has been an attempt to deepen the role that communication plays in the PB implementation, both in general and in relation to the different phases that characterize the co-shared processes.

In all the cases surveyed the PB path has been formalized as a new management tool by means of specific regulations. This is subjective compared to every experience, but only in two towns attention has been paid to including the PB in the “accounting rules” of the institution. Collaborations with other local authorities have been initiated especially for spreading the experience and for a comparison, but it is not a very common practice (only four municipalities out of 11). In most cases, a special office is activated to manage the PB steps and it’s properly called “Participation Office”. In the other cases it is related to the financial service, or social policies service. Rarely, the PB management is entrusted with the competence of the Communication Office, or of the Financial services.

**Rules for citizens’ involvement**

The main forms of citizens’ involvement for bringing them closer to the public administration choices are questionnaires during the periodical quarter assemblies, the institution of a participation office, posting flyers, the continuous updating of the municipal web site. In particular, in Ivrea a “Suggestions” box was opened, as well as an area on the website for sending proposals, comments and suggestions on how to achieve and improve the process of citizen participation; in Bergamo some citizens were interviewed and small focus groups (with a maximum of ten people) were organized; Reggio Emilia distributed a tabloid newspaper describing the various stages of the process to all families resident in the quarter where the PB was implemented. The instruments used to involve citizens frequently are: the grid of priorities and votes, the operational plan, as an instrument of resources allocation to each project, questionnaires and polls, postcards, modules of proposals.

In the municipalities of Bergamo, Castel Maggiore, Grottammare, Isola Vicentina, Ivrea, Reggio Emilia and Udine the administration has launched training courses for citizens and public officials, to improve the approach to this experience and to ensure the proper conduct of the participatory process. These training sessions are carried out, in particular, during assemblies. In particular, in Udine, initial conferences have been activated to find out more about the experiences of Brazilian city of Santa Maria Rio Grande do Sul, with which Udine has established a cooperation inside the URBA project. In Ivrea pilot meetings were organized with the trade union representatives and four associations which play an important role in the economic context of the territory in order to discuss the experience of past and on-going participation.

As regards the age groups of the participating population is not very accurate since some of the municipalities have not carried out a monitoring process. On average, it is possible to say that the most involved residents fall into the 45-55 age band. Since this is especially important if one
considers that young people, the most important resource to enable the process to really affect a cultural change in programming, is not very present.

Themes and criticalities of the PB process

In the municipalities of Bergamo, Castel Maggiore, Ivrea and Udine, the participatory process takes place over the whole year, from January to December. In other municipalities, instead, the process is concentrated in the second half of the year, after the formal approval of the budget. The subjects discussed are chosen according to the citizens’ preferences and their emerging needs in Grottammare, Isola Vicentina, Ivrea, Reggio Emilia and Udine. Instead in Bergamo, Castel Maggiore, Cinisello Balsamo, Modena and Vimercate the themes that will be discussed on assembly and among those in which will vote the proposals, shall be selected by the mayor and by the Municipal Council, and are more the themes of culture and leisure, public works and environment. In the Municipality of Trento the themes are chosen by a committee, formed by the mayor, three assessors and by the representatives of constituencies. On the one hand, this choice is made to avoid the citizens’ proposals going beyond both the competences and resources of the administration, but on the other hand it may be so restrictive that it discourages the public from proposing measures to implement. For that reason, even if the proposals are not present in the predefined areas of intervention and therefore they cannot be discussed in this occasion, a list of them will still reported to the competent bodies. Generally to assign predefined themes for addressing participation offers a clear point of reference and reassures the citizenship, above all in the preliminary approach to PB.

In Castel Maggiore there are two types of assemblies: public assemblies, open to all, and thematic assemblies, reserved for associations and organisations in the area, concerning education, the regional economy, the nonprofit sector, the area of production and commerce, trade organizations and unions. Also the number of assemblies carried out is rather variable but in any event, beyond the assemblies for listing the emerging needs, other assemblies are made to for getting a feedback information about what the administration has actually done for implementing feasible actions.

In the quarters of Ivrea, Isola Vicentina and Modena the costs linked to the PB procedure were attributed to a specific item inherent respectively to services for the participation. In all the other experiences analyzed, specific items and relative costs are divided according to department, with the other items of the various sectors concerned.

In Modena the proposals emerging from the assemblies are subject to an examination by means of tables of territorial comparison, so the administration may assess the financial and technical feasibility. In Reggio Emilia, as well as in Grottammare, the evaluation is entrusted in the technical work tables, involving all competent leaders in the field, the project team, the representatives of each quarter and the citizens’ delegates appointed during the meetings. The work table shall submit to control the proposals on the basis of two factors, the technical and legal feasibility and
the compatibility of the acts already adopted; finally, estimates costs and time of implementation.

The area of co-decision on which major projects were achieved, as in most of the experience examined, is that of Culture and leisure (73%); immediately after Public Works (64%), Welfare (64%), Environment (55%), Safety (37%) Mobility (37%). This shows how the PB may be used for investment in infrastructure even if it requires at the same time a great capacity for alternatives selection that often the respondents/participants do not have. As a result, with reference to these areas the BP represents a test bench of legitimization and a guide in the choices that the political bodies have to translate in action.

With reference to the PB investigated, firstly it emerged the need to clarify what the areas of competence were with reference to the proposed measures, mistakenly charged to other institutions. Contextually politicians (and their delegates) had to dissolve the initial mistrust, by launching issues and stimulating participation. In fact in the most recent experience, several obstacles depend on the difficulties encountered to explain how the PB proposals have to be submitted, where these are required. Often this does not lead to a successful path, because who is confused in the face of topics and issues that require specific skills, in addition to the common civic sense, tends to abandon the assembly of PB.

Secondly, there are some communication difficulties due also to the gap between citizens and administrations which often are not able to get people involved in participation.

For example in the municipality of Isola Vicentina, the project of BP was used as a tool to build a scenario on the future of the town, by defining a comprehensive a long run plan in which the actions indicated by citizens in assemblies were consistent with the project, in order to save resources and to maximize the social utility. The PB experience has not been successful and the citizenship has not seen the implementation of those projects as compared to the initial forecasts.

In the town of Modena instead the assemblies have been spread in a non-homogeneous manner, without continuity and in this case, emphasis was placed on the low quality of the proposals that were viewed as a sort of “shopping list”. Consequently, in 2008, the PB was suspended because of problems in the constituencies, from both political and organizational points of view. The principal obstacle seems to be derived from the representative bodies that have seen in PB a sort of field invasion, that is an obstacle in the regular flow of the decision-making process. Without abandoning the way to participation, that is always seen as an opportunity, the administrators tried to address the technical difficulties deriving from the non-inclusion of PB in the procedures of the municipality and chosen to give priority to targeted interventions. From 2010 onwards is in fact proposed a new path focused on municipal areas that tries to involve those social groups, in particular young people and migrants, which traditionally have been very active in public life. The process hesitate in the detection and selection of projects considered to be worthy and compatible with their inclusion in the programming documents to be translated into financial expenses in annual budget. Among the cases analyzed, just two experiences have been completely abandoned (Cinisello Balsamo and Isola Vicentina)
6. Conclusions

If from the theoretical point of view the BP gets its justification in the development of democratic dynamic and represents the most allusive procedure of deliberative democracy, from the operative point of view the PB approach represents a method to join to P&C system. Its performance depends on the tenacity and the conviction by which it is implemented and, especially, on the impact that may have internally and externally. Unlike management tools that are only recently introduced into the culture of the local government, the BP imposes itself as a path to have a multifunctional impact, acting in several directions. First of all, it acts on the political level and consequently on both the economic-financial and management levels. From a political perspective the PB gives its greater contribution to enable the decisions on investment policy in the territory and on themes of common interest where the citizens’ preferences are mediated by the policy capacity of government, the involvement of political bodies and the reaction of the public personnel responsible for the coordination of all activities related to the PB process.

This may create a strong strategic value to advantage of the investment planning and in particular, of the annual budget operation. At the economic and financial level the PB enables citizens to take part in the resources allocation process, although in most cases it reserves to citizens only a residual investment quota, or even anchored to a so specific investment, that the procedure doesn’t appear convincing and convenient compared to the arising overheads costs. In this regard, the participation, by its very nature, affects only investment expenses for the benefit of the entire community (i.e. public works etc.). Besides, it would be questionable to imagine that co-decisions may relate to the resources allocation regarding the current expenditure. In such a way the PB becomes an instrument for ensuring significance to the financial management of the investments, according to the principles of transparency, efficiency and effectiveness.

From the organizational and management perspective the process has repercussions both inside and outside the institution. Internally, the PB is an instrument for innovation that primarily affects the economic-financial area and communications. Both areas should coordinate for the execution of the operations of citizens’ involvement and document completion, bringing it up only in the last phase of approval by political body. This requires the deployment of a set of skills that are able to support the high flow of information generated and the interaction of the main players in the various phases of participation. No activation of a proper process may involve the approach’s failure. It’s no accident that successful PB experiences are largely the result of a path undertaken by small municipalities, which are intrinsically facilitated by many more relationships rooted in the social fabric than larger municipalities have, because, in this last case the plurality of interests makes cohesion more difficult to reach. In the municipalities with a greater population density, not infrequently the PB process takes place by a territory partitioning in quarters or districts and its coordination often involves just a few parts of the city. In general, in order that BP can play a key role, it must not be a simple consultation, but a true voluntary process of opening from the administrative apparatus to participation, by sharing of decision-making process and control by the citizens with their direct involvement in public choice and with the activation of the necessary flow of information needed to make participants aware of choices taken. Only by this way the PB may be an effective instrument of deliberative democracy and a strengthening of the programming
process getting a positive impact on governance. The experimentation of PB in different Italian local governments not only showed an important educational content and a capacity to mobilize resources by spreading the concept of active citizenship through a more dynamic vision of democracy and its effects, but it has also helped to improve the transparency of the process, by stimulating a greater awareness of the concept of accountability of political bodies and managers. It has also permitted to those administrations that have dared to risk in this opening to control and direct involvement of citizens in our own, the construction of social pacts, inclusive of most vulnerable members of citizenship, and the growth of political consensus. In this sense, the PB represents an instrument of consensual strategic choices, supported by a co-sharing of difficulties, expectations, objectives and benefits, in the medium and long term. The implementation of PB is not the construction of a instrumental model but arises as the construction of a relational model able to simplify the choices and the tasks of public decision-makers, with the involvement of the users of these choices.

References


