

Future-Ready Society Conference 2024: Learning Journey 1 — Participatory Budgeting

By Flora Yuting Du

The Future-Ready Society Conference Series

The Future-Ready Society Conference Series is a partnership between the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities (LKYCIC) and Tote Board. As part of this series, learning journeys serve to introduce novel ideas to spark dialogue across the people, private and public sectors. These discussions are a prelude to the annual flagship Future-Ready Society conference, which aims to explore future trends, emerging issues and untapped opportunities along with insightful responses and solutions to address pressing societal challenges.

The series kicked off on 25 June 2024 with a learning journey titled “Participatory Budgeting”, moderated by Dr Suhaila Zainal Shah, Research Fellow at LKYCIC, Singapore University of Technology and Design. Two international speakers discussed the process of inclusive decision-making for the allocation of public funds within communities and shared successful examples of participatory budgeting (PB) initiatives from around the world. A Singapore public administrator weighed in on the localisation of PB, highlighting its potential to enhance collaboration, accountability, and community empowerment in Singapore.

Evolution of Participatory Budgeting from Porto Alegre

Dr Brian Wampler, Professor of Political Science at School of Public Service, Boise State University, opened the session with an overview of the evolution of PB, tracing its roots from Porto Alegre, Brazil, to its present-day applications globally.

PB began in 1989 as an innovative democratic process in Porto Alegre, enabling citizens to have a direct say in the allocation of public funds. The initiative aimed to deepen democratic practices, enhance transparency, and improve public service delivery. Initially, participation was low, with only about 1,000 people participating in its inaugural year. As the benefits of PB became evident, participation grew significantly, transforming it into a robust mechanism for public engagement. Porto Alegre’s model demonstrated that engaging citizens directly in budgeting decisions could lead to more equitable and efficient public spending.

Dr Wampler then elaborated how PB has evolved over the decades, highlighting its adaptation across various continents to diverse political and social landscapes. For instance, in European cities such as Paris, PB has been integrated into digital platforms, allowing for broader participation through online voting systems. In New York City, PB has been instrumental in

directing discretionary funds at the district level towards community-driven development projects.

Dr Wampler's research has also shown the many positive impacts of PB on people's lives. For one, he found that PB implementation in Brazil has led to increased public spending on health and sanitation, higher tax revenues, and reduced infant mortality rates. Cities with long-term PB programmes also tended to show significant improvements in civic engagement and public trust. Moreover, he found that the best results were achieved when PB implementation adhered to social justice and redistribution principles, ensuring greater resources for poorer communities, with noticeable improvements in social equity and overall community well-being.

Overall, Dr Wampler argued that PB's adaptability has allowed it to address diverse issues, from infrastructure improvements to social equity, making it a versatile tool for modern governance. He further emphasised the importance of building knowledge among civil society organisation leaders to ensure they are well equipped to guide and facilitate the PB process towards achieving more impactful and sustainable outcomes.

Practising Participatory Budgeting: Tools, Tricks and Guiding Sensibilities

Ms Anita dos Santos, Advocacy Manager of Participatory Budgeting Project, presented the practical aspects of implementing PB, drawing on her extensive experience working with government agencies, schools, and community-based organisations.

She first outlined the general PB cycle, emphasising the importance of ensuring inclusivity and transparency at each phase, from process design and idea collection to proposal development, voting, and evaluation. She stressed that the design phase is crucial as it sets the foundation for the entire PB process. During this phase, a steering committee composed of diverse community members, government officials and other stakeholders should be formed to collaboratively decide on the rules and procedures for the subsequent stages.

In addition, it is important to manage expectations to build trust and ensure sustainable community engagement. Specifically, clear communication about what is possible within the available budget and the constraints faced by the implementing bodies is essential to prevent misunderstanding and frustration.

Ms dos Santos shared examples of successful PB projects, such as the introduction of public bathrooms in Seattle and the construction of a sprinkler waterpark in Rhode Island. These projects not only addressed immediate community needs but also fostered a sense of ownership and pride among residents. She also cited PB efforts in Taiwan, where the Department of Labour engaged migrant workers in deciding on leisure activities, and the school-based PB in Central Falls, Rhode Island, involving students and parents in allocating COVID relief funds for extracurricular activities. These examples highlighted the flexibility of PB in addressing different community needs and contexts.

Finally, challenges faced during PB implementation, such as resource constraints, varying levels of community engagement, and potential conflicts of interest, were also discussed. Ms dos Santos suggested that thorough community education and continuous engagement are vital to overcoming these challenges. By empowering citizens with knowledge and involving them in the decision-making process, PB can create a more participatory and democratic

society. Lastly, she emphasised the need for practitioners to remain adaptable, adjusting processes based on community feedback and changing circumstances. This approach ensures that PB remains a dynamic and effective tool for community improvement, capable of addressing a wide array of local needs and promoting civic engagement.

Participatory Budgeting and Citizen Design at Town Councils in Singapore

Mr Wee Kim Boon, General Manager of Marsiling-Yew Tee Town Council, provided a perspective of the potential of PB in Singapore at the municipal level.

He explained how Town Councils, responsible for managing public housing estates, are increasingly adopting participatory approaches to engage residents in decision-making. An example is the Neighbourhood Renewal Programme, a government-funded initiative that embodies participatory principles by allowing residents to have a say in the development and improvement of their living environments. While the programme makes strides towards participatory governance, its full potential in transforming the dynamic between Town Councils and residents and fostering true sense of community ownership has yet to be realised.

To address such gaps, Mr Wee believes in the potential of PB to not only boost community involvement and strengthen civil society but also to give residents a better and more holistic understanding of Town Councils' processes and constraints. At the same time, Town Councils gain a clearer understanding of public priorities and preferences, thereby improving community service delivery. Essentially, he expressed optimism about the potential positive impact of implementing PB at the municipal level in Singapore, suggesting that by bridging the gap between residents and Town Councils, PB can lead to more responsive and equitable public spending, mutual trust and confidence, sustainable co-governance and co-ownership, and an overall improvement in quality of life.

Highlights from the Question-and-Answer Segment

Question: What do you foresee to be some challenges for PB implementation in the Singapore's context?

Dr Wampler emphasised the difficulty of ensuring meaningful participation in PB processes. "PB works best when it has both government support and active citizen involvement," he said. "This combination ensures that projects are not only feasible but also truly reflective of community needs." He also suggested creating incentives for participation, such as linking PB projects to tangible benefits for local communities. To motivate people effectively, it is crucial to address both the broader public good and the specific, neighbourhood-level concerns and self-interests.

Ms dos Santos pointed out the challenge of limited resources and highlighted the need for efficient resource allocation and prioritisation. She said, "It's crucial to identify pots of money that are significant enough to make an impact but also realistic within budget constraints. Engaging community leaders in the process helps in setting practical and achievable goals." She also recommended leveraging partnerships with local organisations and businesses to supplement funding.

Question: What are the critical factors for the success of PB at the town council level and which stakeholder is key to ensure the success?

Dr Wampler stressed that all stakeholders are key to the PB processes. Successful PB in Singapore requires a deep understanding of the community's unique challenges and a collaborative approach involving Town Councils, residents, government agencies, and other stakeholders that is based on trust. Meanwhile, this trust is built through a series of small actions — delivering on promises, maintaining open communication, and involving the community at every step.

Ms dos Santos added that digital platforms can increase accessibility and participation, especially for those who may not be able to attend in-person meetings; and allow for continuous engagement and feedback. These platforms allow for continuous engagement and feedback, which is essential for the iterative nature of sustainable PB. From an advocacy perspective, it is essential to ensure that people understand what PB entails and to craft a compelling narrative to garner support and participation. She stressed that everyone can play a significant contributing role to make PB successful.

[Flora DU Yuting](#) is a Senior Research Assistant at Lee Kuan Yew Centre of Innovative Cities.

If you have comments or feedback, please email futureready@sutd.edu.sg. Additionally, to stay updated on the latest development of our project, we invite you to visit our website at <https://futurereadysociety.sg/> and sign up for our mailing list.



© Copyright 2024 Institute of Policy Studies and Singapore University of Technology and Design. All Rights Reserved.

You are welcome to reproduce this material for non-commercial purposes and please ensure you cite the source when doing so.