

Abstract

Municipal Innovations in Non-Governmental Public Participation: UK/Latin America

Principal Investigator

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Aims and Objectives of the Research

This project focuses on the municipal spaces of innovation in public policy making that have been notable in Latin America since the 1980s and in the UK since the 1990s. These innovations open new participatory spaces for non-governmental actors (NGOs, social movements, voluntary and community organisations) with the intention of creating effective approaches to poverty, exclusion and conflict. Latin American innovations, notably participatory budgeting, are now being experimented with in some UK cities.

In addition to empirical knowledge, this research aims to contribute theoretical insight into the evolution of democratic theory in the age of globalisation. These municipal innovations may appear to be isolated experiments. However, we associate them with a post Cold War shift in democratic thinking towards 'participatory governance'. We seek to clarify whether this is a permanent and/or sustainable shift. We also wish to explore whether it is creating meaningful spaces for participation and change below the State, capable of delivering effective new approaches to poverty, exclusion and conflict and the relational inequalities in which they are embedded.

Key research questions and methods

Our main research question is therefore: what tensions, changes and outcomes emerge when non-governmental actors begin to make use of these new opportunities for public participation in municipal government? We will explore this through five municipal case studies, three in Latin America and two in the UK, building an interactive rather than extractive research process with non-governmental participants, which will also ensure that the research involves user groups from the beginning. Our research methods will involve participant observation in new spaces of public deliberation and semi structured one to one interviews in each locality with participants in such spaces and others who have not been 'invited' but are considered 'beneficiaries', as well as with local officials and politicians.

Relation to the programme

This research will contribute to the three main objectives of the NGPA programme ie. theory building, empirical knowledge and the co-production of knowledge. It will explore whether non-governmental public participation at the municipal level can

contribute to reducing poverty and exclusion as well as transform conflict dynamics using an international comparative and multidisciplinary perspective.

Relevance of this research to user groups

The research consultants and research staff have been identified for their prior relationships with non governmental actors in their respective spaces and countries.

The director of the research is also Director of the International Centre for Participation Studies, in the Department of Peace Studies, University of Bradford, and the ICPS has a range of relationships amongst municipal and NGO groups in the North of England and Latin America and a commitment to building interfaces between activists and academics. The research is designed to build relationships with non governmental research participants from the inception of the research. The aim is to ensure that there is mutual respect for practitioner as well as academic knowledge and serious interaction between these forms of knowledge. The findings will be returned to these key groups in all the countries involved in the project at the end of the research period in workshops and accessible published format as well as disseminated more widely and in academic circles.

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