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Participatory Budgeting and Community-Based Research: Principles, Practices, and Implications for Impact Validity

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ABSTRACT

Research and evaluation is an integral part of the Participatory Budgeting (PB) process. Since PB in New York City (PBNYC) is designed to be a democratic and community-based initiative that is grounded in the values of equity and inclusion, it is important that the research and evaluation methods used to study the process and its participants adhere to the same principles. For the past five years, a team of community-based researchers, academics, and PB participants have designed research questions and instruments, implemented data collection, analyzed and shared data with PB participants and practitioners, and issued reports to the wider public. Like PB, the research design is rooted in the communities where PB is operating. The research is not intended to sit on a shelf but is actively used by participants and practitioners to help reflect on the process, improve deliberation in decision-making, and strengthen the process and outcomes of PB. This article will discuss Participatory Action Research principles used by the Community Development Project of the Urban Justice Center, explore the applicability of these principles to the Participatory Budgeting research context, and explain how these practices have helped to deepen and improve the process and outcomes of PBNYC.

Introduction

Participatory Budgeting (PB) first came to New York in 2011, in a pilot process with four participating New York City Council Members. Since then, it has grown in scale each year, and in its sixth cycle, (2016–2017) ongoing at the time of this article, thirty-one Council Members, a majority of the fifty-one in the city, are participating. Individual Council members opt-in to the PB process, and dedicate at least one million dollars of their capital discretionary funds for PB projects in their district each cycle. Community members in their districts convene in neighborhood assemblies to brainstorm project ideas, refine these ideas into fund-able projects as volunteer budget delegates, and ultimately cast votes for PB projects, with winning projects subsequently funded by the Council member. The process is governed by the PB in

New York City (PBNYC) Rulebook, which lays out core goals of the PB process, a timeline, guidelines for structuring the process (such as holding neighborhood assemblies targeted to traditionally marginalized communities), and also rules for who can participate. The PB process is also overseen by the PBNYC Steering Committee, with representatives from community-based organizations (CBOs), Council members and staff, PB participants, and other stakeholders. This steering committee supports and guides the process, conducts an end-of cycle evaluation, and revises and approves the PBNYC Rulebook annually.

In the past few years, PB has grown rapidly across North America and has been recognized as a crucial form of civic engagement by all levels of government. Recently, PB practitioners from around the country were convened by the White House Office of Science and Technology to share best practices and chart a course for further expansion of PB. PBNYC has been recognized by academic institutions such as the Harvard Kennedy School with a recent award for “innovation in government.”¹

Research and evaluation is integral to PB. It is crucial that the process is documented and evaluated so we can ensure that PB lives up to its core principles. Many PB processes have established research partnerships to do just this. The Community Development Project (CDP) was established as the PBNYC research partner during the pilot cycle, and has continued in this role throughout the process. This article focuses primarily on PBNYC cycles one through four (2011–2015), during which our involvement was greatest. It is important to note that our work is embedded as part of the PB process, and intended explicitly to help evaluate and improve it.

The PBNYC research board, referenced throughout this article, was also convened during the first cycle of PB and continued through cycle four. Board members were drawn from local universities, CBOs and citywide research and policy organizations. The Board met periodically throughout the cycle, to help conceive, oversee, and refine each stage of research, as well as to contribute original research or other resources (such as making PB research part of their class assignments).

Our research each PB cycle is guided by a written research plan, which includes a set of goals, developed at the outset of the process in collaborative partnership with stakeholders, as described later in this article. Our research goals make explicit reference to the goals of the PBNYC process itself, which are laid out in the PBNYC Rulebook. Following the development of research goals, we develop corresponding research questions. After research questions are developed, appropriate and feasible methodologies are selected. We have employed various research methods in our PB work, with both quantitative and qualitative research instruments being designed collaboratively and tailored to the needs of the PB process, according to key principles from our Participatory Action Research (PAR) model. Over the past several years, the methodologies we have used include: surveys administered at various PB stages (at neighborhood assemblies, to budget delegates, and to PB voters); in-depth interviews with stakeholders (including past and present budget delegates, agency representatives,

¹ Harvard Kennedy School, San Francisco, New York Named Winners of Harvard’s 2015 Innovations in American Government Award [Press Release] (Harvard Kennedy School website, September 17, 2015).

elected officials, members of CBOs); brief voter exit interviews; meeting observations (such as of neighborhood assemblies, outreach trainings, etc.); poll site observations; and background and secondary research on the New York City budget and demographics.

Our research culminates in a variety of research products, ranging from comprehensive public reports² to memos intended for internal government audiences. As will be explored, these research products are intended to be action-oriented and utilitarian.

The remainder of this article will introduce our PAR model, and then discuss how key principles from that model are applied to the PB research, providing detail for each of the research steps described above. While we share some select findings from our research, this article is intended primarily to offer a model of research that we find to be important and effective in the Participatory Budgeting context.

CDP and our PAR Model

CDP partners with grassroots CBOs to build the power of their organizing work through grassroots policy-making, popular-education curriculum design and training, strategic campaign research, and PAR reports.

Throughout this article, we will refer to principles from CDP's PAR model, and its applicability and relevance to structuring Participatory Budgeting research. The PAR model we have developed and utilize connects to and is rooted in various research approaches as defined in the academic literature, including Action Research, PAR, Community-Based Research, and Critical Participatory Action Research, many of which have roots in the work of Paulo Freire³ and others in Latin America in the early 1970s.⁴ Our model relates to these approaches both in philosophy and in practice. A core principle of Action Research, as defined by Liz Charles and Neil Ward as an umbrella term for a variety of research approaches, is that

² Alexa Kasdan and Lindsay Cattell, *A People's Budget: A Research and Evaluation Report on the Pilot Year of Participatory Budgeting in New York City* (community Development Project of the Urban Justice center, September 2012); Alexa Kasdan, Lindsay Cattell, and Pat convey, *A People's Budget: A Research and Evaluation Report on Participatory Budgeting in New York City. Year 2* (community Development Project of the Urban Justice center, October 2013); Alexa Kasdan, Erin Markman, and Pat convey, *A People's Budget: A Research and Evaluation Report on Participatory Budgeting in New York City. Cycle3* (community Development Project of the Urban Justice center, October 2014); Alexa Kasdan and Erin Markman, *A People's Budget: A Research and Evaluation Report on Participatory Budgeting in New York City. Cycle 4: Key Research Findings* (community Development Project at the Urban Justice center, 2015).

³ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London, UK: Sheed and ward Ltd., 1972); Nina Wallerstein and Bonnie Duran, "the theoretical, Historical, and Practice Roots of community-Based Participatory Research," in Meredith Minkler and Nina Wallerstein (eds), *Community-Based Participatory Research for Health* (San Francisco, ca: Jossey-Bass, 2008), pp. 25–46.

⁴ Liz Charles and Neil ward, "Generating change through Research: action Research and its implication," *Center for Rural Economy Discussion Paper Series No. 10* (New castle, UK: Centre for Rural economy, University of Newcastle Upon Tyne,2007), p. 4.

research should have the aim of achieving “social, economic or organizational change,” a goal which is central to our work.⁵

We pursue partnerships with community organizing groups that seek to achieve social justice organizing goals and build power among their members. Organizers and members work on every phase of the research process, and the priorities of our projects are set by these organizations. We develop collaborative relationships that allow us to offer a methodologically diverse set of research tools to support organizing. These are all key components of Community-Based Research as outlined by Paul Speer and Peter Christens.⁶ The concept of impact validity—“the extent to which research has the potential to play an effective role in some form of political or social change, or is a useful tool for advocacy and organizing”—is also particularly salient to our work.⁷

In our combined tenure at CDP, we (the authors) have produced over sixty PAR reports, and supported numerous grassroots policy campaigns in partnership with CBOs in New York City. Because our work is guided by the organizing goals of our community partners, we work on a wide variety of issue areas. Recent examples include a research project with a coalition of tenant-organizing groups and their members to document the impact of aggressive construction as harassment, a tactic used to displace rent-regulated tenants (resulting in a package of City Council bills to support the issue); a report with a pan-Asian organizing group on the lack of language access services for Asian tenants provided by the New York City Housing Authority; a report that explores the experiences of eldercare givers and care recipients in the movement to transform long-term care and ensure that caregivers and recipients have the support they need to age and work with dignity; and a report to document fraudulent services aimed at immigrants. Our work with these partners builds the skill and knowledge of their members, advances their organizing goals, and is used to launch campaigns, garner media coverage, advocate for policy change, and contribute to advancing social justice in New York City.

Our PAR model is designed to be practical, accessible, and adaptable to the needs of our community partners. At its core, it aims to uphold the fact that individuals and affected communities are experts in their own experiences, to center research around the needs of oppressed people, to use research as an organizing and community-building tool, to develop knowledge and promote growth and leadership, to transform power dynamics, and ultimately to produce action-oriented research that will be used in organizing to bring about social change.

⁵ *ibid.*, 2.

⁶ Paul w. Speer and Brian D. christens, “an approach to Scholarly impact through Strategic engagement in community-based Research,” *Journal of Social Issues* 69:4 (2013), pp. 734–753.

⁷ Sean G. Massey and Ricardo e. Barreras, “Introducing impact Validity,” *Journal of Social Issues* 69:4 (2013), pp. 615–632.

Select Principles of our PAR Framework, and How They Can be Applied to PB

We have found that many of the guiding principles of our PAR model translate well to PB research by local evaluators connected to a PB process. PAR principles and techniques strengthen PB research and ensure it has utility to those involved in PB and can be utilized in a variety of ways. PAR methodology is also uniquely aligned with the goals of Participatory Budgeting as a bottom-up, community-driven process.

As research partners to the PB process in New York, we have employed key principles of our PAR framework. Here, we highlight those principles and explore how they apply, in practice, to research on Participatory Budgeting. Those key principles are:

- Broadly collaborative research planning and design, using a community-driven process and explicitly tying research goals and questions to broader community goals.
- Sharing findings on an ongoing basis, with collaborative identification of themes and recommendations, to promote community review of data and community-driven analysis.
- Returning research products to the community in accessible, utilitarian formats, and designing multiple products for different audiences as needed.
- Thinking of research as action-oriented and not intended to sit on a shelf but rather to be used in advocacy and organizing.
- Undertaking collaborative assessment at the conclusion of a research project, and planning and adapting for future research.

The following sections expand on each of these principles and discuss their applicability in the context of Participatory Budgeting research.

Broadly Collaborative Research Planning and Design

A hallmark of our PAR projects is the collaborative, community-driven development of research goals and questions. This ensures that projects are rooted in the community from the start—that the plans guiding the research are purposeful, action-oriented, and developed in conjunction with those who will ultimately be utilizing the findings; that research goals relate to broader goals that the community seeks to achieve; and that research questions are answering questions that the community seeks to answer.

In our PB research context, this principle of collaborative planning plays out in a number of ways. As previously mentioned, in Cycles 1–4 of PBNYC we convened a research board that included members from the academic community, citywide research and policy organizations, and, crucially, CBOs and PB participants. Involving this group of broad and varied stakeholders is a concrete application of a PAR principle. In addition to the board, research planning also drew on the input and review of PB practitioners (including civil society organizations present at meetings, city council staff, and PB participant input gathered during interviews and observations), and with feedback from the de-brief of

the previous cycle in mind. This work culminates in a written research plan that governs the research for the cycle.

The guiding goals of the PBNYC Rulebook—a document created by the PB steering committee which guides the process—are incorporated into our research plan, with the aim of ensuring that our research goals and questions are investigating and evaluating aspects of the PB process that relate to the process goals. Not only are the PBNYC Rulebook goals written out in the research plan itself, but they are also referenced parenthetically next to our research goals to ensure there is a concrete relationship between the two. For example, the goals from the PBNYC Cycle 4 Rulebook (2014–2015) were:

1. Open Up Government: Allow residents a greater role in spending decisions, and inspire increased transparency in New York City government.
2. Expand Civic Engagement: Engage more people in politics and the community, especially young people, people of color, immigrants, low-income people, the formerly incarcerated, and other marginalized groups.
3. Develop New Community Leaders: Build the skills, knowledge, and capacity of community members.
4. Build Community: Inspire people to more deeply engage in their communities, and to create new networks and organizations.
5. Make Public Spending More Equitable: Generate spending decisions that are fairer and reflect the entire community's needs, so resources go where they are needed most.

Our research goals from that same cycle (2014–2015) were:

- To document the strengths and weaknesses of the PB process in order to draw conclusions and make improvements for the future.
- To provide support data and conclusions for organizations and officials seeking to democratize budget processes (Corresponds to PBNYC Goal 1: Open up Government).
- To identify who is participating, who is not participating, and why, in order to maximize participation of diverse stakeholders in future processes (Corresponds to PBNYC Goal 2: Expand Civic Engagement).
- To document the impact of PB on civic engagement, community building, and leadership development (Corresponds to PBNYC Goals 2, 3, and 4: Expand Civic Engagement, Develop New Community Leaders and Build Community).
- To assess the extent to which the PB process makes public spending in NYC more equitable (Corresponds to PBNYC Goal 5: Make Public Spending More Equitable).
- To examine the role of city agencies in the PB process (Corresponds to PBNYC Goal 1: Open Up Government).
- To examine outreach efforts and generate best practices about outreach, including the work of contracted outreach organizations.
- To monitor the implementation of key components of the PB process across the City as PB is brought to scale.
- To educate the public about the impact of the PB process.

- To develop action-oriented tools that PBNYC can use to improve and expand the process.

This explicit connection between the goals of the PB process and the goals of our research serves to ensure that the research is, from its inception, relevant to the PB process, to PB practitioners, and to the CBOs and community members invested in the process.

A description of this planning process may help illustrate its participatory nature. At a series of in-person meetings, we, as facilitators, would walk through a series of exercises designed for group brainstorming and planning. We posed a series of prompts that research board members or other stakeholders answered in small groups or by writing their answers up on butcher paper in the room. An example from an agenda used in one of our meetings:

1. Research goals
 - i. Are our needs and objectives captured?
 - ii. Do research goals match with PBNYC Goals from rulebook?
 - iii. Are all goals measurable?
 - iv. Are there revisions to make?

Such exercises and the involvement of various stakeholders in the research surfaced research goals we would not have otherwise pursued. For example, in our planning process we involved members of community organizing groups, some of whom were tasked with conducting outreach for the PB process. These groups advocated for the development of a research goal centered on the outreach process. They wanted to know how people were learning about PB, which would help improve their work, as well as advocate for resources dedicated to outreach and engagement. Based on their suggestions, a research goal and subsequent research questions were developed specific to the issue of outreach. As will be discussed further below, these groups also help refine the research instruments we used to ask these questions about outreach and engagement.

Following the development of our research goals, we develop a series of research questions related to each research goal—again in collaboration with the research board and others—and these too are incorporated into our research plan. For example, our research goal around examining who is participating in the process yielded the following questions:

Participation:

- Who participates in PB citywide, who does not, and why?
- In particular, what motivates low-income people, people of color, youth and immigrants to participate in PB? What are the barriers to their participation?
- Does PB succeed in expanding civic engagement for those that are traditionally disenfranchised: youth, undocumented immigrants, formerly incarcerated?
- How does this compare to neighborhood demographics and other forms of civic participation?
- How is participation in PB sustained from the beginning to the end of the process? And from year to year?

- How does this year's participation compare to the participation of previous years?

At this stage, too, new ideas (in addition to the questions above) are introduced into the research process due to the participation by a broad set of actors. For example, early in our research process, issues related to public administration or the work of city agencies had not been articulated as a priority. However, at numerous meetings, PB budget delegates voiced the frustration they were feeling with respect to their work with city agencies. Members of our research board took note of this emerging theme, and we explored it further in interviews with budget delegates. It became clear that PB participants were seeking additional inquiry into issues related to city agencies. As a result, the idea of conducting research specific to the role of city agencies emerged as a new area of focus for PB research, and Celina Su, a member of our research team, volunteered to spearhead the work.

Finally, we developed research instruments designed to answer these research questions. These instruments (particularly those that are newly developed) are shared with a variety of the stakeholders most likely to be affected by the findings to ensure their relevance.

As in the earlier planning phases, input from PB stakeholders shapes the research at this phase. For example, as mentioned previously, community organizing groups helped us develop a research goal related to PB outreach. In subsequent work to develop a survey instrument for PB voters, we included a question designed to investigate how PB voters found out about the PB process. The initial draft of this question included numerous and wide-reaching answer options. However, feedback from community groups helped to refine the answer options. An excerpt of our meeting notes captures that feedback:

Too many categories for a first question; could turn people off. What do we really want to know? We shouldn't just accumulate data, but target the question to what we want to know. If the theory is that personal contact is what gets people to come, ask them about that: (Did someone call you? Did someone come to the door?)

As a result of this discussion, the question was refined. Rather than the long list of answer options that had initially been envisioned, the question was modified to include the answer options that felt most relevant and salient for the community groups involved. Not only did this accomplish making the question feel more manageable to those responding to the survey, but it also ensured that it would yield data that had the most utility to PB stakeholders.

Both qualitative and quantitative instruments have been developed in this collaborative nature using our PAR principles.

PAR principles guide us to trust PB participants and community members themselves to come up with the criteria by which PB should be evaluated. The purpose of our work has not been simply to give us data that we publish for our jobs, but to generate research that has utility. Our collaborative process ensures that our research is appropriately tailored to the PB process: that we are asking the right questions in the right way, as determined not just by researchers but by multiple stakeholders. This also helps to ensure these stakeholders are invested in the research process from the outset. Rather than being merely research subjects, they are collaborators as well.

This planning and design process takes place in advance of each PB cycle. While we maintain continuity of key aspects of the research from cycle to cycle (such as standard demographic questions), our planning process is explicitly adaptable, and defined by a willingness to alter and revise our research plans in response to the on-the-ground experience and needs of those working on and participating in PB. For example, when the New York City Council introduced new, small contracts to enlist CBOs in outreach for PB, we adapted our research plan to include observations and interviews designed to evaluate and improve this new component of the process. This adaptability speaks to our emphasis on impact validity and utility of research, rather than an exclusive focus on maintaining consistent measures over time if those measures are no longer meaningful to stakeholders.

On-going Sharing and Reviewing of Findings, Collaborative Identification of Themes and Recommendations

Our PAR model is also defined by community-review of data prior to its public release. Community stakeholders are provided the opportunity to review preliminary findings, brainstorm additional analyses, and help to generate recommendations.

In the context of PBNYC, this data-sharing takes place in several ways. The research board convenes to review preliminary analyses, offer insight, highlight key findings, and brainstorm next steps. In addition, findings are shared with the PB steering committee, and with other stakeholders, such as the CBOs that work to engage traditionally excluded communities in the PB process. These stakeholders are asked to identify any additional analysis that might be interesting or useful, and are also asked to help generate and give feedback on recommendations related to the findings, in order to ensure that recommendations are relevant and feasible. This feedback is then used by researchers to guide follow-up analysis, generate recommendations, and inform the development of written research products.

As a result of ongoing engagement throughout the research cycle, our recommendations provide a meaningful way for PB participants to give feedback on the process. In addition, because decision-makers (City Council staff and Council Members) have also been involved throughout the research process, recommendations and findings are easily transmitted to them and are actually utilized.

Research Products Returned to the Community in Accessible, Utilitarian Formats

Another defining feature of our PAR model is that research products are designed with the community in mind. At times, this means designing multiple products (such as one-pagers, white papers, internal strategy documents, or public education materials in addition to a longer-form public report), and includes a commitment by researchers to ensure that research is presented in a useful, accessible fashion.

In the PB context, we have created multiple research products for a variety of uses. Internal documents, such as those that outline findings and recommendations not yet made public, are presented to the Steering Committee over the course of the PB cycle, as well as for use at rulebook revision meetings, for example. At times, memos have been written by researchers to targeted audiences internal to the government with detailed and tailored recommendations, such as about the best practices for work

with city agencies, or with ideas related to the expansion of PB. In previous PB cycles, data specific to each Council district have been compiled along with plain language recommendations to be used by the district and district committees during their evaluation process. A larger scale, comprehensive report, including background on the PB process and recommendations for the future, is also designed for public use. In the design of these public reports, researchers have prioritized the use of infographics to ensure data are accessible and engaging for broad audiences, and have established relationships with organizations like the Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP)⁸ and the design studio MTWTF⁹ to create visually interesting and informative graphics. These public reports are disseminated to practitioners and stakeholders.¹⁰

Research is Action-Oriented: Not Intended to Sit on a Shelf but to be Used in Advocacy and Organizing to Expand and Improve PB and Participatory Democracy

PAR is explicitly action-oriented. This means that the research is used strategically to push forward a specific social justice goal. In the PB context, the research is used to improve and expand participatory democracy¹¹ and ensure civic engagement by the most disenfranchised in New York City. This is done in several ways: by using data to make a case for why PB should be expanded to other Council districts and/or City agencies, by strategically sharing data with the press and other public stakeholders to raise awareness about PB, and by using data to continually evaluate and improve the process through different stages of PB.

Each year, Council members decide whether or not to join in Participatory Budgeting for the coming budget cycle. To help inform this decision, the research team packages and presents data about the previous cycle of PB in an accessible, user-friendly format and releases this data to the public. This way, prospective Council members can see who participated in other districts, why they participated, and how participants felt about PB. For example, summaries of findings can allow elected officials to grasp PB's effectiveness in engaging traditionally marginalized communities or community members who are not otherwise civically active. Findings are also accessible to constituents so they can put pressure on their Council members to participate in PB. In addition, findings are used by Council members currently doing PB to persuade their colleagues to join. For instance, Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito has cited the PBNYC research on various occasions to lift up why the process is beneficial to the City and to encourage her colleagues to participate.¹² To further ensure that the research has "legs," the research team utilizes

⁸ See the center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP), available online at: <http://welcometocup.org/>

⁹ See the MTWTF website, available online at: <http://mtwtf.com/>. MTWTF is a design studio that creates communication platforms for cultural, commercial, educational, and civic clients.

¹⁰ See for example, available online at: http://cdp.urbanjustice.org/sites/default/files/CDP.weB.doc_Report_PBNYC-cycle3FullReport_20141030.pdf

¹¹ Please see Su's introduction to this symposium for a discussion of the PBNYC case study's relationship to this literature.

¹² See for example: the city council of New York, office of communications, Speaker Melissa Mark-Viverito and New York City Council Launch 2015–16 Participatory Budgeting Cycle [Press Release] (New York city council website, September 21, 2015).

media and communications strategy to ensure that findings are covered in print, TV, radio, and social media. Since many elected officials pay close attention to media coverage, this also helps to influence decision-making about whether or not to do PB. This communication works also helps to inform the public about PB and encourage them to participate in future PB cycles.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, data are used to continuously evaluate and improve the PB process and its outcomes. Data are shared with all PB stakeholders at various stages throughout the process so they can better understand what is working, what is not and what needs to be changed or improved for a future cycle or within a current cycle. For instance, in early cycles of PB the research identified that people with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) had low participation rates in neighborhood assemblies in several districts. To address this, the research team recommended more resources and attention towards translation and language access throughout the PB process. In future cycles more attention was paid to translation of materials and interpretation at meetings and events. Another example of the use of findings in improving the PB process is that our research has shown that those who find out about PB online tend to be higher income, white, and English-speaking.¹³ Findings emphasize that in order to engage other community members, specifically those who are lower income, non-English speaking, people of color, or have lower levels of formal education, online engagement must be supplemented with in-person outreach and organizing. Such findings are emphasized in steering committee meetings and in planning for vote outreach.

Overall, action-oriented research ensures that the data are helping to push forward the goals of PB and the larger social justice goal of expanding and improving participatory democracy in NYC.

Collaborative Assessment of Research, Planning for Future Research, and Adapting to Changing Context

At the end of our PAR projects, all parties involved convene for assessment, reflection and planning for next steps. This helps to improve future partnerships, refine best practices, and concretely identify and plan around any remaining tasks.

In the PB context, this debriefing process occurs in multiple spaces. The research board conducts an in-depth debriefing, reflecting back on the work completed at each phase of the PB process and identifying strengths, challenges and areas for improvement in our work. In addition, members of the research team attend the PB Steering Committee's end-of-year debriefing, and themes and suggestions from that process that could inform future research are incorporated into planning. These debriefing processes and the on-the-ground nature of the research process allows researchers to remain aware of how PB participants are engaging with the research, evaluate any challenges with how research is structured or presented, and to identify and work to alleviate any research fatigue being experienced by PB

¹³ Alexa Kasdan and Erin Markman, A People's Budget: A Research and Evaluation Report on Participatory Budgeting in New York City. Cycle 4: Key Research Findings (community Development Project at the Urban Justice center, 2015), p. 5.

participants. Notes from these assessment and planning meetings are retained, and are used to inform the next cycle's research plan.

This kind of assessment at the end of a project is crucial not just to generate lessons learned, but also (coupled with planning before a new project is undertaken) to allow research to adapt over time. In a world in which PB processes may continue to grow while resources for research may not, this work is adaptable to a growing, changing process. As PBNYC ballooned from four participating districts to thirty-one, research had to be adapted, streamlined and prioritized. Review and modification are already built in to the PAR principles, so adaptability is inherent to the work. The collaborative nature of review and assessment means that stakeholders, rather than only researchers, can give input into the most essential components of research, so if researchers must scale back, the work with the most salience and utility can be retained.

In the New York City context, we held research board meetings structured around prioritizing research, where feedback from multiple stakeholders was presented and assessment of internal capacity was evaluated. Care was taken to have thoughtful division of labor among research board members (all of whom agreed in advance to a Memorandum of Understanding that indicated they would each contribute to the overall research process). We worked together to ensure the most useful questions were pursued first, and that different researchers in the group were not duplicating work or over-researching the same subjects which could lead to research fatigue.

Moving Forward: How PAR can Strengthen PB, and Challenges Posed by an Expanding PB Processes and Limited Resources

It is no surprise that lessons from a Community-Based Research model translate well into the PB context, since this research model is fundamentally in line with the core principles of PB: participatory, transparent, community-centered and inclusive.

Our position is that these lessons are relevant not only because the model itself is complementary, but because a research process that draws on these lessons is stronger. This research has real utility: it is designed to be relevant, useful, and comprehensible to a variety of audiences. People who participate in PB—from elected officials to PB voters to CBOs—are invested in the research because it is meaningful to them and they trust the process. And because of this investment, and the utility of the work, the research helps to improve the PB process itself.

We believe that PB research processes rooted in PAR principles are strong, robust, authentic, and utilitarian. This research, such as the reports CDP produced and cited earlier in this article, helps inform our knowledge of PB, provides additional engagement and feedback opportunities for PB participants, and is actually utilized by elected officials and others who have been engaged as stakeholders in the process. However, this research takes resources, and as PB processes grow and become institutionalized, new challenges are presented, and additional resources are needed. These periods of

growth are also crucial times for the evaluation of the PB process—leaving researchers and our partners grappling with challenging decisions.

There are various opportunities and challenges that we should continue to monitor and evaluate as PB continues to grow in NYC and beyond particularly focused on inclusion, equity, community building, quality implementation, and accountability.

As documented through our research on the last four cycles, PB continues to engage those that are traditionally excluded from civic engagement such as undocumented immigrants, young people, people of color, the formerly incarcerated and those with LEP. For example, in PB Cycle 4, nearly a quarter (twenty-three percent) of PB voters reported a barrier to voting in regular elections, including twelve percent who reported they could not vote because they were under eighteen and ten percent who reported they could not vote because they were not a US citizen.¹⁴ In future research, we have the opportunity to assess whether participation in PB leads to other forms of civic engagement such as voting in traditional elections. We also have the opportunity to better understand the quality of participation for these communities and what happens to people after they participate in PB.

At the same time, we also face the challenge of ensuring we have the tools and resources to conduct inclusive, collaborative research. A prime example is the issue of language access, which has been a major barrier to achieving inclusion of Limited English Proficient speakers and immigrant communities in the research process and in PB more broadly. We must do more to ensure that all research instruments, outreach materials, and other information is available in all languages. This will require resources and monitoring to ensure that the priorities and plans of PBNYC in terms of language access are actually being implemented. We also must be careful not to use measures of LEP participation from previous years to measure need for the next cycle. This only perpetuates the lack of language access. We are thus presented with the challenge of striving to be inclusive—not just to “count” LEP participants but to meaningfully engage them and the CBOs that work with them in the research. The growth of PB exacerbates this challenge while simultaneously making it more important to engage in meaningful participatory research.

Another challenge in PB research has been evaluating the degree to which PBNYC is promoting equity and shifting power imbalances that currently exist in our budgeting process. This has been one of the more difficult things to measure through our research and evaluation. We have not been able to clearly assess whether PB has actually changed the way resources are allocated to low-income and traditionally excluded communities. It has also been one of the principles that is less prominent in conversations about PBNYC. As we move forward, we should ensure that equity is at the forefront of PB planning, research and implementation.

We also have the opportunity to ensure that PB is implemented with integrity and quality, as the process is taken to scale and institutionalized within the City Council. By surveying council member staff

¹⁴ Ibid.

and budget delegate facilitators, and monitoring the implementation of the PBNYC Rulebook, we are able to assess whether the core principles of PB are being adhered to across districts.

However, as PBNYC grows, there is a tension between maintaining an organic, community-led process and ensuring we have the rules and structure in place for accountability and transparency. A solid participatory research and evaluation component helps to reinforce the community-led nature of PB and ensures that community building is being measured and monitored as part of the research.

We have also grappled with questions about what constitutes community participation in PB research, and encourage other researchers to do the same. Is it sufficient to have mostly staff from CBOs representing the community in discussions about the research? If some data are reserved for internal use and presented to the steering committee and participating elected officials to help improve the process, is there sufficient community access to that data? Such questions are inherent to working within a PAR model, and may be particularly challenging when applied to research on a process with so many different stakeholders.

While research is a critical way to ensure that PBNYC stays true to its core principles, it becomes more difficult to conduct a comprehensive participatory research and evaluation as PB grows and becomes institutionalized. During the pilot year, researchers were at every voter site and conducted observations and interviews with budget delegates and exit interviews with voters. We attended evaluation meetings in each district to share data and facilitate conversations about how to use the data to evaluate and refine the PB process. With thirty-one districts this current cycle (Cycle 6, 2016–2017), we do not have the capacity or the resources to take on this level of evaluation or community engagement.

We contend that our PAR principles are a natural fit for PB research, and make the research more meaningful, more inclusive, and more impactful. These principles are no less important as PB processes grow, but they are harder to maintain with limited resources. Accordingly, it is important for PB communities to prioritize and dedicate resources to research and evaluation, even as the process grows.

About the Authors

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