

Alternative Forum Pune

Brief Report of 4th Meeting 20th August 2013

Venue: Lokayat, Law College Road

Present: Vidhya Jadhav, Aparna Susarla (SWACH), Avinash Madhale, Sanskriti Menon (CEE), K.J. Joy, Sachin Tiwale (SOPPPECOM), Arun Wakhlu, Wendy Burby (Poorna Pune/Pragati Foundation), Rainer Hoerig (Independent journalist), Amrtha.K. (Argnyam), Tanmay S.J (Koradvahu Gat), Sujit Patwardhan (Parisar), Ashish Kothari, Sujatha Padmanabhan, Shiba Desor, Mariam Abazeri, Meenal Tatpati (Kalpavriksh)

Key Points:

The meeting began with a round of introductions.

Sanskriti and Avinash presented an overview of the Participatory Budgeting (PB) experience of Pune, the brief history of participatory budgeting around the world, how it began in Pune and a critique/analysis of its achievements and challenges the process faces.

PB History: The process of PB began in Porto Alegre in Brazil during the 1980s, where citizens of each district became involved in the preparation of budgets of the local governments for city development plans.

It helped create citizen engagement in decision-making, increased participation and to some extent brought about greater local government accountability. It is now being practised in several cities in the world.

Indian Context: In India, an attempt to institutionalise representative democracy in urban areas was introduced with the 74th amendment to the constitution which provided for municipalities to become local-self government institutions with elected representatives. The municipal body can prepare plans for development and implement social-welfare schemes for the city. One of the efforts to further decentralise municipal bodies is the envisioning of the body of citizens within a city ward called the "Area Sabha" which can be envisaged as the urban equivalent to the Gram Sabha. However, all over the country, though informal forms of the Area Sabha (like Mohalla Committees) have been formed by certain citizen groups, there is a lack of any serious attempt to realise this as an institution.

In Bangalore, city-based organisation Janagraha, had undertaken an initiative where citizen's suggestions were invited for local budgets. However, this was done informally and was not institutionalised.

PB in Pune: The process began in Pune when some civil-society organisations and the Pune Municipal Corporation (PMC) held meetings, where the PMC officials described the process of making the municipal budget and invited suggestions from citizens. Several civil society groups and citizen forums then drafted their suggestions about various projects and improvement in infrastructure. In the meanwhile, the process of trying to develop a more formal and detailed process of citizen participation in budgeting was being carried out by the organisations and the Municipal Commissioner. In 2006, it was decided that a basic process of PB would be introduced in ward offices with the facilitation of Janwani and CEE, the PMC and the Urban Community Development Department (UCD). (Pune is divided into 15 wards. Each ward has 5 prabhags where 1 prabhag has about 42,000 people and each prabhag elects one or two representatives who form the elected PMC). Rs 20 lakh per electoral ward (Municipal Commissioner) was to be allocated for works

suggested by citizens through PB process out of which 5 lakh were allocated for works suggested in slums. Forms prepared by CEE (through a detailed process of deliberation) were kept for distribution at ward offices for accepting ward-wise suggestions from citizens. In February 2007, after the elections, a press note issued by the PMC was carried in several newspapers announcing the invitation by the PMC to all citizens to take part in the participatory budget at zonal meetings. A list of various prioritised suggestions (received earlier) was given to citizens and they were asked to deliberate on these. Each citizens group as per electoral ward finalized and submitted their list of prioritized works to the Ward Officer for inclusion in the PMC budget.

Critique of the Pune Process: Sanskriti and Avinash highlighted that the success of the PB exercise in Pune was that it is still carried out every year after 2006-07. Also, the entire process of engaging with the elected representatives and framing mechanisms to involve citizens in budgeting was an educational experience, both for the civil society members involved as well as for the citizens. Thus, it helped pushed the overall agenda of deliberative democracy.

However, the process also lacked in certain areas:

1. There are major weaknesses in the system of record keeping right from the beginning of the process where suggestions from citizens are received at the ward office till the actual budget is formulated.
2. Citizens have no role in ward level meetings where work suggestions to are deliberated upon by corporators to include in the PB exercise. This has resulted in a lack of transparency in the entire process.
3. The list of all suggestions received, considered, rejected and the reasons for rejection are not shared. One cannot be sure that the lists of work published under Citizens Budget in the PB Book are works suggested by the citizens (or they are works included by the corporators).
4. Civil society organisations involved in the process in the year 2006-07 carried out certain studies and facilitated by experts tried to find out the cost of works decided to be prioritised.
5. Corporators control ward level budgets and especially the discretionary budget. They have a chance to subvert the process and utilise funds for putting their own projects in the guise of citizens suggestions.
6. It was observed that the works suggestions that came from non-slum areas were the only ones that were accepted, in the first year of PB (2006-07).
7. Over the years there have been attempts at various levels by the local government to sideline the process of public participation, where forms are withheld and outreach is not publicised.
8. The process has so far been limited to ward wise work suggestions (geographic) and not thematic suggestions. Thus citizens do not have a direct institutional mechanism for giving inputs on city-level projects being included in the annual budget such as on works for transport and major developmental facilities at the larger city level.

Discussion in the Forum:

In the ensuing discussion, several points were raised about the Pune PB process.

- Though the outcome of the process was not as democratic as it was hoped to be, the process itself was important, since it meant getting educated about the mechanisms of how participatory budgeting works and engaging with local representatives.
- However, in the absence of a larger democratic process and greater civil society engagement, such processes can easily be taken over by vested interests and to prevent this, civil society as well as the common citizen should try to remain actively involved in such processes.

- Similar processes had evolved in Kerala, called People's Plans, where 40% of the village budget was deliberated upon by the gram sabhas or village Panchayats. Even in Nagaland, some percentage of the budget of several sectors is directly transferred to village level bodies who manage or monitor the works to be carried out under it. However, blindly applying village-level processes to an urban setting on a superficial level may not be appropriate as the contexts and situations differ.

Some suggestions were then arrived at that could make the PB exercise (and other such processes of citizens' involvement) more effective:

1. Persuade ward offices to create a framework where all suggestions received can be recorded.
2. Deeper engagement of civil society and individuals in the process. One important suggestion was about creating a space like the *Setu* project in Bhuj (<http://bhujbolechhe.org/en/partners/urban-setu-initiative-kutch-nav-nirmav-abhiyan>) where a dedicated staff of people would be engaged continuously, a sort of a facilitation centre for the city. This could start as a collaborative process by AFP member organisations. Using the Indradhanush space could be initially tried out, but it would have to become an independent entity eventually as empowering people with information is quite a political process.
3. Collation and dissemination of other such participatory experiments that have been carried out within and outside India.

Other points:

Arun spoke briefly about the "i-catalyst" initiative launched by Pragati foundation; he will circulate a note on this on the Forum list.

Rainer mentioned that he would like to present examples of alternative initiatives in Europe, if the Forum members are interested.

Wendy will revise the Pune resources map and circulate it again since there were some problems with the resolution.

Next Meeting:

Date: 13th September 2013

Venue: Lokayat (unless otherwise intimated)

Agenda:

1. Ashish will try to organise a meeting with a representative from Urban Setu, Bhuj
2. Rainer will put together a presentation of alternatives in Europe and present them.