

# Case study of participatory urban planning in the periphery of Porto Alegre, Brazil

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Like most Latin American cities, the outskirts of Porto Alegre are facing a fast growing illegal urban occupation, characterized by a fragmented settlement structure, squatter settlements and unauthorized land divisions. Uncontrolled urban expansion has also led to the occupation of land unsuited to urban settlement. As far as provision of infrastructure and services, such as supply of drinking water are concerned, there has been considerable progress during the last decade (Menegat 2002). But illegal settlements are still expanding. Although the local government has developed progressive urban policies and a very innovative master plan, stating sustainable development as guiding principle (Alfonsin, 2003), there has not been a substantial change in urban expansion pattern in the peripheral areas so far. The settlers of low-income settlements located on land prone to flooding or land slide face serious risks. Urban planning and housing policy has to deal with manifold socio-environmental conflicts, especially as far as resettlement, upgrading and legalization projects are concerned.

As an alternative approach, the department for urban planning is attempting to pursue collaborative planning approaches in order to achieve more effective intervention in uncontrolled settlement expansion. By integrating participation of the local population in planning processes, the local planning authority hopes to establish a joint understanding of urban and environmental problems as well as consensus on possible policy measures. In this paper, the potentials and limitations of this collaborative planning approach will be discussed on the basis of an ongoing case study. The presented analysis is based on the author's field study conducted in 2002/03.

## The study area

The metropolis Porto Alegre, capital of the Brazil's southernmost state (Rio Grande do Sul), is internationally well known for its experiences with participatory budget (*Orçamento Participativo*). For more than 14 years the city management strongly emphasises citizen participation in the definition of the public budget.<sup>2</sup> But also in the field of spatial urban planning popular participation has been a guiding principle for years. Especially in the context of the elaboration of the new urban master plan, several city conferences were held in order to collectively define its general goals. Public participation, transparency of administrative procedures and integration of environmental concerns in to urban planning were key principles stated in the new master plan published in the year 2000 (PMPA, 2000). Especially considering the very technocratic planning tradition prevailing in Brazil for a long time, this emphasis on participation in urban planning is very innovative and brings along far-reaching changes in the idea of urban planning. But how can these new legal frameworks and guiding principles be introduced into the local planning practice and administrative routines?

During the last years, the department for urban planning in Porto Alegre has been adopting participatory approaches for the development of urban action plans in areas with high

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<sup>2</sup> As the focus in this article lies on participatory approaches in urban and environmental planning, I won't go into detail as far as the participatory budget experience is concerned. A comprehensive analysis of this subject can be found in Abers (2000), Abers (2001), Baiocchi (2003), Fedozzi (2001) and Menegat (2002).

percentage of illegal occupation and high environmental risks, which formally have been blinded out by urban planning. The Lomba do Pinheiro district has been chosen for a pilot project in order to detail the urban master plan on the local level in cooperation with the residents. This area on the eastern fringe of the municipality is characterized by the typically heterogeneous settlement structure of the periphery, divided in about 30 different *vilas*<sup>3</sup>, as the residents call their local community or neighbourhood. The population of the whole districts totalises about 53.000 inhabitants. It is a complex mixture of mostly unauthorized land divisions (*loteamentos irregulares*), some legal settlements and *favelas* (squatter settlements). The latter amount for around 10% of the settlement area within this district and concentrate mainly on river banks and steep slopes. Some of these squatter settlements have been classified as risk-areas by the local environmental authorities as they are prone to land slides, rolling rocks and flooding.

So far, the local government tried to inhibit further illegal urban expansion in these environmentally critical areas by simple command and control measures. But due to lack of resources and personnel, control of settlement expansion was largely ineffective. This can be illustrated by the fact that in the Lomba do Pinheiro district, already one third of buffer zones areas along rivers and steep slopes, defined by environmental law as protected areas, have been occupied. For these settlements legalization and upgrading processes are particularly complicated as they conflict with environmental law, as well as with zoning definitions in the Master Plan. Therefore it is necessary to adapt the existing regulatory framework to the existing urban reality. Doing so by means of cooperative approaches, the urban planning department hopes to increase efficiency and acceptance of urban planning decisions.

### **General objectives of the participatory pilot project and its methodological approach**

As general objectives for the project entitled as “Integrative Project for Sustainable Development of Lomba do Pinheiro” were defined: 1) to solve the conflict between city expansion and environmental protection, 2) to produce housing for the area’s low-income population and 3) to foster the creation of job opportunities within this city district (PMPA, 2003). For the two latter objectives special initiatives and sub-projects are being developed, which I won’t discuss in detail. In the context of this paper, the focus lies on the first project goal, which is to be pursued by the collective development of directives for further urban development in cooperation with the local population. This action plan is to provide a detailed zoning defining areas appropriate for settlement and areas that are not appropriate for housing and that should be preserved as natural areas (PMPA, 2003). It is on the one hand based on a participatory appraisal, which was initiated two years ago, and on the other hand on an expert analysis of the natural and built environment within the district.

As the settlement structure of the Lomba do Pinheiro district is relatively open, the local planning department regards the district as having potential for further densification, which is to be achieved by consolidation and regulation of the existing settlements. At the same time the still preserved patches of natural vegetation shall be protected from illegal occupation according to the project goals. For the rivers and brooks of the area directives for restoration are to be developed.

Another general aim of the project at the administrative level is to overcome the traditional sectoral approaches and to give an example of integrative planning procedure. Especially the common contradictions between environmental authorities and urban planning authorities as far as land evaluation for building licenses are concerned are to be overcome through close cooperation between these departments within the project from the beginning on. Especially concerning legalization procedures of illegal settlements these contradictions have often constrain the urban development processes. Beside the objective to foster inter-sectoral

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<sup>3</sup> Literally translated: village

cooperation one strong emphasis lies on reducing the distance between the government agencies and the population living in marginal settlements, thereby making urban planning more demand responsive. At the same time, the local population shall be encouraged to find their own creative solutions and become engaged actors in local development. The cooperative approach is to create identification with the project and a sense of ownership of the developed ideas and thereby lead to a better acceptance of urban planning decisions. Finally, the demands for public investment the local population can make within the participatory budget process shall be qualified according to overall participatory planning decisions.

The central method to involve the local community into the decision making process within the project was a participatory appraisal, which was adapted in its key elements from the well-known PRA (participatory rural appraisal) methods. These participatory tools originally were worked out in rural development projects and have been adjusted in the past decade for the urban context (Abbot, 1999; Susin, et al., 2001).<sup>4</sup>

Participatory Appraisal can be described as a family of approaches and methods that enable people to express and analyse the realities of their lives and conditions, to plan by themselves what action to take, and to monitor and evaluate the results. Participatory Appraisal provides ways to give poor people a voice, enabling them to express and analyse their problems and priorities (Chambers, 1996; Schönhuth, 1996; Schönhuth/Kievelitz, 1993).

The participatory appraisal method (*diagnóstico rápido participativo* – DRP) was used to identify the specific social, economic and environmental problems within the district, to prioritise necessary actions and optimise the search for solution strategies. It was applied to analyse the socio-economic and environmental reality of the study area, linking the local knowledge and perceptions with the expert evaluations. The aim was to develop creative solutions to the identified problems in a cooperative way by applying visualization tools and group exercises.

For the implementation of the DRP, a so called “local planning group” (*grupo de planejamento loca - GPL*) was created, consisting of around 40 to 50 participants, half of them representatives of the local population, the other half representatives from public institutions, like the local health station, schools and the respective sectoral departments of the city administration. During two years this group held in average two general meetings per month, with additional meetings for sub-areas when working on a special appraisal tool.

### **Applied tools within the DRP**

After two community meetings for introduction in the participatory methodology and the aims of the project, the first element of the participatory appraisal was a mapping of the whole area, focusing on the social, economic and environmental problems of the Lomba do Pinheiro district inspecting the area along five different routes. The result was a map of the district, showing the socio-economically and environmentally homogenous areas, according to the participants’ perspective. The next task for the GPL was to conduct a series of semi-structured interviews with key-informants about the main problems in the area. The interview guideline as well as the list of appropriate interview partners had been worked out by the GPL through preparative workshops. In total 60 interviews have been conducted by the GPL participants. The results were systematized in two following workshops, resulting in a map of the region showing the most mentioned problems on the environmental, social and economic level. The most stated problems at the social level were lack of schools and nursery schools and lack of medical attendance. As far as economic problems were concerned, most people mentioned

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<sup>4</sup> For examples of participatory appraisal in the urban context see Mitlin and Thompson (1994) and Mitlin and Thompson (1995).

unemployment and the bad quality of the local shops. The environmental problems most often referred to were river degradation, illegal waste dumping and deforestation.

Another tool was a diagram of institutional relations in the community, visualizing the existing institutions in the district and the local community's relation to the local authorities. These diagrams, also known as Venn-Diagram, show by which institution the population feels well attended and which are perceived as distant. The results also helped to understand the organisational structure of the district as far as community organisations are concerned and indicated key actors for participation in the local planning group. One very decisive step within the participatory process was the collective definition of priorities for action, selecting those problems to be addressed most immediately.

In a parallel process the urban planning department worked out the necessary modifications for the urban master plan, which are prerequisite for the implementation of the proposed measures. It is part of my further field studies to investigate the final output of the project, especially the transference of the participatory appraisal in concrete planning decisions. The urbanistic action plan for this region still is in the phase of conclusion and cannot be presented and evaluated yet. At present it is not possible to assess to which extent the population effectively had access to the decision making process. Nevertheless, in the following I want to suggest some criteria I consider important for the evaluation of such an approach of participatory planning. Generally speaking, participatory projects can be assessed on the one hand regarding the intensity and the quality of the process and on the other hand analysing the project's concrete outcome (Souto-Maior & Gondim, 1992). As the project's final results cannot be assessed yet, in the following I want to focus on how the process was conducted. Therefore I will try to formulate some exploratory questions, which lead to preliminary findings on the achievements and limitations of this process. These hypotheses on the problems of this kind of participatory approach will serve as analytic guideline for my further field studies.

### **Possible criteria to analyse the participatory planning approach**

The first aspect of participatory planning I want to draw attention to is the question: who participates? When initiating the participatory appraisal, government officials mainly relied on the well-known community leaders and activist, mostly engaged in neighbourhood associations (*associações de moradores*) of the different *vilas*. By doing so, they hoped to mobilize the key actors within the district who best could disseminate the project and act as „multipliers“. This proceeding, however, appeared to be limited, as some communities within the district were clearly underrepresented in the first meetings of the planning group, although the respective neighbourhood associations had been contacted. During the process it became clear that in those *vilas* neighbourhood organizations only existed officially, but the *vila*-residents did not consider them as representatives of their interests. After special mobilization and information efforts these settlements with weak community organization could get some representation as well, but the composition of the local planning group continued to be unequal.

Theories of collective action give some hints how public mobilization is influenced (Abers, 2000). It depends on the perceived costs and benefits of participation in the different communities. These are also closely linked to the trust people have in the government's responsiveness on the one hand and to their own neighbours on the other hand. Especially in the less represented *vilas* people stressed their frustrating experience with government projects and initiatives. As far as trust within the community is concerned it became clear that in the older, more consolidated settlements, people were more engaged for collective action as

in the recently formed *vilas*, where people identify little with the settlement they live in and perceive their dwelling place as a temporary solution.

As possible perceived costs of participation, besides the investment of leisure time for meetings in the evening, one can also mention the expenses for bus-ticket, as for many participants within the widespread district the meetings did not take place in walking distance. The idea to overcome this constraint by choosing different meeting places did not lead to the expected results. In general, it proved that during the period the process was studied so far, the poorest population living in the squatter settlements was less represented than the less poor living in impoverished, but somewhat better-off, *loteamentos irregulares*. For the further evaluation of the whole process one important question will be, if in the meantime the local planning group managed to effectively represent the more disadvantaged, excluded social groups.

Another important factor, that influenced who participated in the local planning group was former experience in community activities or participatory procedures. Most of the participants were very experienced in community meetings and showed high communicative competence, what confirms the findings described by Abers (2000). Assessing the participatory project in a more advanced stage, a further research question will be: Does participation act as an educational force in promoting citizenship and contribute to the rise of new political actors?

For the final outcome of the project it is crucial to which extent the different sectoral departments are backing the participatory approach initiated by the planning department. As stated before the relevant government departments, like departments for sanitation, health, education, transport, environment, water supply and housing were asked to send representatives to take part in the local planning groups meeting. But the accountability of the different local authorities was very heterogeneous. Some departments, which regarded the participatory appraisal as a useful information source on the most important deficits in their area, like the health, the transport or the education department, actively took part in the process. In contrast, the housing as well as the environmental department did not show the required adherence. Especially the housing department continued to act independently and made little effort to collaborate. It did not even inform the local planning group on the department's policy decisions about relocation of squatter settlers from risk areas in other parts of the city to the Lomba do Pinheiro. The housing agency disrespected the principle of transparency of the public decision-making process arguing that cheap land in the periphery has to be developed for urgent resettlement projects, which cannot be discussed in a slow cooperative process. By undermining the participatory planning process, its credibility was put at stake.

In the long run it is crucial for the participatory planning process that the involved population is able to pressure public agencies to cooperate, making them more transparent, more responsive to their needs and more susceptible to the control of civil society. This also has to do with a new professional attitude of local government officials, accepting not only expert knowledge and legal regulations but also local knowledge and the local interests.

The changed attitude of public authority members is also decisive as far as communication processes in the participatory meetings are concerned. The government representatives must leave their "discourse of competence" behind and accept the community's contributions as valid information. Besides, they have to be careful to communicate the relevant information in a clear language in order to level the knowledge differences between the population and the community. If people do not fully understand the purpose of a policy issue, it is less likely that they will mobilize. In the case study, it appeared to be quite difficult to communicate the content of the urban master plan and its implication for the peripheral settlements. An explicit introduction into its planning concepts and regulations only took place half a year after the beginning of the local planning groups work. In general, the question of urban planning with

its long-term implications was difficult to convey, as the representatives of the local community seemed to think in different time scales and tended to direct the discussions to their concerns about immediate infrastructure improvements within their vilas. Long-term aspects of land use development were perceived as very abstract. One strategy adopted to address this understandable impatience of the local community was to work out some more immediate measures responding to the priority issues. It will be important to analyse whether beyond this immediate action the Lomba do Pinheiro residents accepted the necessity of long term planning decisions.

With respect to the collective understanding of the spatial planning scale of the whole district and not only the individual neighbourhood, the communicative process can be regarded as successful. In the first meetings, the contributions drew on the specific necessities of the different *vilas*, but throughout the process the participants have become conscious that many local problems are closely interrelated and can only be addressed on the district scale. After several months of group work, a better identification of the GPL with the whole study area could be achieved.

### **Influence of the participatory appraisal on the zoning decision**

The intended outcome of the project is a detailed zoning in areas appropriate for settlement and areas with priority on environmental protection. In order to obtain a sound data basis for this decision, experts were assigned to conduct surveys on the natural vegetation, hydrology and geology. As these environmental assessments could not be concluded at the early stage of the project, this information could not be introduced to the GPL in the beginning. For the evaluation of the level of participation reached in the project, it will be decisive to which extent the local population will be able to participate in the final zoning decision and to which extent local interests will be integrated in this decision. This depends largely on how the expert evaluation is introduced to the local population and whether the environmental department is willing to negotiate or will only inform about the ecological evaluation without discussing it further. If the latter is the case, this would mean a low level of participation according to classification used by Arnstein (1969), Borrini-Feyerabend (1996) or Pimbert and Pretty (1997). The participation would be restricted to informing and consultation.

### **Conclusion**

Participation can no longer be seen merely as a means of making urban planning more successful in reaching its objectives and increase acceptance of planning decisions. During the participation process in Lomba do Pinheiro it became clear to the initiators that participation is not only about applying communicative tools and group exercises. Participation has to be understood as a social and political process, which has a general bearing on the relationship between people and institutions in society. For effective participation in planning processes all government authorities have to back the process. For real co-management in many aspects institutional reform is necessary in order to make public participation in urban planning viable. So far, the case study showed, that there is already widespread know-how on how to conduct participatory appraisals, but little reflection on the complexity of institutionalising participation and the difficulty to introduce the outcomes of the participatory appraisal into the formal planning processes and administrative routines.

Generally speaking, the initiation of this participatory planning project has to be considered a tremendous progress in making urban planning in the periphery of Brazilian cities more “down to earth” and more responsive to the real problems in these areas. Particularly bearing in mind that technocratic planning attitudes, as described by Maricato (2001), are still common in Brazilian planning institutions, this pilot project is to be considered a big advance. It is also an important step towards the creation of new relationship

between the public agencies and the residents of the illegal settlements. However, the initiators of such a process must be cautious not to frustrate the participants, giving the impression, that the participatory process only was used to legitimise a predetermined plan. If this tightrope walk between administrative routines and delegation of power in this case study will be successfully managed only further analysis of the project's outcome can tell.

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