

## **Promoting social inclusion through participatory urban planning: The Buenos Aires experience**

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Public participation in urban planning and management has come to be seen by many scholars and practitioners of urban affairs as a panacea for the construction of more inclusive urban societies. Internationally acclaimed blueprints in participatory urban planning, such as the city of Barcelona's Strategic Plan and Porto Alegre's Participatory Budget, have thus been widely publicised, leading various cities around the world to seek to reproduce these models by introducing similar institutional arrangements.

There are various possible ways of approaching strategic planning and participatory budgeting experiences. Most analyses have focused either on methodological aspects or on an evaluation of concrete results. Less attention has been placed on the initial motivations for and contextual conditions of the formulation and adoption of these mechanisms. In this paper, however, I argue that both underlying motivations and contextual conditions exert a determining influence on the likely outcomes of participatory planning experiments. Based on Hickey and Mohan's (2004) prerequisites for successful participatory development, I reflect on the origins of the introduction of participatory budgeting and strategic planning in Buenos Aires. I attempt to show that the failure of these two schemes to achieve their goals of inclusiveness and democratic decision-making in Buenos Aires is closely linked to the absence of a radical political project aimed at a true redistribution of power in urban policy-making.

### **Buenos Aires in the 1990s: Socio-territorial exclusion and polarisation**

The development of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires<sup>1</sup> (*Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires*) since the early 1990s has been characterised by increasing territorial polarisation, thereby reflecting at a spatial level the growing dualisation of the Argentine society. Subsequent to the adoption of the structural adjustment reforms known as the State Reform and Economic Emergency Law in 1989 and the Convertibility Plan in 1991, unemployment in Argentina soared by 200% towards the end of the millennium. A dramatic rise in income disparities also contributed to fuelling mounting inequalities. These negative changes have been felt with utmost severity in the Buenos Aires metropolitan region (*Gran Buenos Aires*), which hosts more than a third of Argentina's population and has been the region most affected by deindustrialisation and unemployment (Auyero 1999). The GINI coefficient for Greater Buenos Aires rose steadily from 41 in 1992 to a record level of 49.5 in 1998 (Gasparini, Marchionni, and Sosa Escudero 2002). As observed by the authors of a study of the Inter-American Development Bank, "a new stage of rising inequality started in 1992 and has not stopped yet. The Greater Buenos Aires has never

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<sup>1</sup> The political jurisdiction delineating the central city of Buenos Aires, commonly known as the Federal Capital (*Capital Federal*), was granted political autonomy in 1996. Since that year, it has officially been called the 'Autonomous City of Buenos Aires' (*Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires*), although the term Federal Capital is still very much in use. I will therefore use both terms indifferently. This study being spatially circumscribed to the central area, whenever referring to the wider agglomeration I will talk of the metropolitan region or Greater Buenos Aires (*Gran Buenos Aires*).

experienced the level of income inequality reached in 1998, at least since reliable household data sets are available” (Gasparini, Marchionni, and Sosa Escudero 2002; see also Llach and Montoya 1999).

In the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, growing social inequalities have been mirrored by intensifying spatial exclusion and polarisation, fuelled mainly by the boom of the real estate and construction sectors. Whereas the low values of commercial and residential space discouraged investment during the 1980s (Mignaqui 1998), the package of liberalisation and flexibilisation of economic policies attached to the structural adjustment reforms of the 1990s triggered a remarkable revival of the real estate market. This boom, as disaggregated data show, has been marked by a clear tendency towards increased residential dualisation (Furlong and Torres 2000; Torres 2001). A study of socio-residential changes in the Federal Capital over the last two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reveals that “over the period under study, housing construction has been increasingly directed towards high-income groups” (Plan Urbano Ambiental 2000: 11).

The spatial consequences of these developments have been increased territorial polarisation, as the location strategies of investors tended to concentrate around privileged areas in the northern part of the city. Admittedly, spatial polarisation between the northern and southern edges of the Federal Capital is not a new phenomenon. As early as 1917, a local politician was already denouncing the fact that “in Buenos Aires there are two cities: one, north of the Rivadavia Avenue, with European characteristics; and another one, in the south, more proletarian and unprotected”<sup>2</sup> (Clarín digital 17/03/00). These historical socio-territorial inequalities continued to deepen over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gutman and Hardoy 1992). At the turn of the millennium, there were 60% more unemployed residents in the city’s southern part than in the north and infant mortality was twice as high. The quality of housing is also much lower in the south, as 95% of the city’s slum residents are concentrated in that zone.

It would, however, be misleading to lay all the blame on the private sector without considering the role played by the state, particularly with regard to planning policies. The polarising impact of the central state’s new non-interventionist mindset was further emphasised by the public provision of improved infrastructure and services to already privileged areas, coupled with the public neglect of deprived areas. The planning system, instead of being used to correct socio-territorial imbalances and avoid further exclusion of specific parts of the urban territory, was manipulated by the national state<sup>3</sup> as a tool for crafting favourable legal and material conditions to encourage the private production of urban space in selected portions of the urban territory (Ciccolella and Mignaqui 2002). In addition, the “spatialisation of poverty” (Prévôt Schapira 2000) advanced even faster due to the absence of state intervention in containment policies, and the lack of public investment in low-income housing and social infrastructure. Thus, while privileged parts of the city achieved over the 1990s ‘global’ standards of living and consumption (Keeling 1996), depressed areas deteriorated as a result of public disinvestment. The superimposition of geographical imbalances over pre-existing socio-economic inequalities thus created a highly uneven pattern of urban development whereby processes of social and territorial fragmentation resulted in the city’s profound dualisation (Ciccolella and Mignaqui 2002).

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from Spanish by the author. All translations in this article are the author’s own.

<sup>3</sup> Until autonomy in 1996, the Federal Capital was under the authority of central government. The city’s planning institutions and regulations were therefore devised and overseen by national legislators.

### **Institutional transfers: formal structures without substance**

By the time of the establishment of the new GCBA (Buenos Aires City Government - *Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*) in 1996, headed by a popularly elected mayor (*Jefe de Gobierno*) for the first time in the city's history, the unsustainability of the model of urban development followed until then by the national government had become too obvious to ignore. The reform of the national Constitution in 1994 and the Autonomous City's new Constitution in 1996 were fundamental in that they not only determined a new legal status for Buenos Aires, but also marked the beginning of a new political process expected to transform the relationship between the local government and the *porteño*<sup>4</sup> population. The bases for these changes were laid out in the city's Constitution under the heading "political rights and public participation". This section comprises a number of innovative participatory mechanisms which provide new avenues for citizen involvement in the city's democratic life. Among the various tools envisioned by the new Constitution, two particularly progressive mechanisms were devised as a means towards greater social inclusion through the opening up of new spaces for public involvement in urban planning and management: the Strategic Plan and the Participatory Budget.

A distinctive feature of strategic planning and participatory budgeting in Buenos Aires is that both mechanisms are modelled on foreign experiments. The Strategic Plan largely borrows from the city of Barcelona's 'model' of strategic planning, while the Participatory Budget is a replica of Porto Alegre's famous Participatory Budget experiment. There was a regular presence of foreign advisers in Argentina within the field of urban planning and management throughout the 1990s, and Buenos Aires' planners, city officials, NGO workers and academic researchers travelled and attended a number of conferences to acquire the technical and methodological skills for the replication of Barcelona's and Porto Alegre's experiences in participatory urban planning. The formal structures of Buenos Aires' participatory planning arrangements thus distinguish themselves by the fact that they have been imported from abroad, both conceptually and methodologically. However, by no means does this constitute an exceptional case. Institutional borrowing indeed came to be seen as a panacea by policy-makers and international development agencies during the 1990s, as testified by the ever-increasing diffusion and replication of 'best practices'. Institutional transfers of successful models have become popular in development thinking and practice, particularly with regard to schemes of popular participation in public policy-making, i.e. development strategies which utilise institutionalised systems of popular deliberation to allocate collective goods (Evans 2001).

Yet there is growing recognition among scholars that "institutional monocropping" rarely produces the desired outcomes and often fails to 'take' in new environments (Evans 2001; 2004; Mukand and Rodrik 2002; Berkowitz, Pistor, and Richard 2003; Dunning and Pop-Eleches 2004; Roland 2004). In the case of Barcelona and Porto Alegre, participatory institutions were not modelled after external blueprints but grew from within. This specificity conferred them institutional thickness. However, as Mukand and Rodrik observe, "institutional solutions that perform well in one setting may be inappropriate in other settings without the supporting norms and complementary institutions" (2002: 4). Participatory institutions are unlikely to 'take' if the sustaining socio-political environment does not favour participation. The successful introduction of formal participatory arrangements is expected to entail the redistribution of economic and political power. For this to happen, it presupposes a redistribution of the geography of power

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<sup>4</sup> The people of Buenos Aires

underlying prior institutional arrangements (Hoff and Stiglitz 2001). In Barcelona's and Porto Alegre's experiences, deep-seated changes in the configuration of power, both at political and societal levels, took place prior to the implementation of participatory practices. The relative success of deliberative urban planning and management in these two cities should therefore not be dissociated from the contextual conditions that allowed it. As Evans rightly remarks

None of this should tempt us to paint deliberative development as a panacea. It would be a deeply ironic mistake to fall into the monocropping trap and try to impose deliberative development as a blueprint. While careful examination of possibilities for borrowing ideas is a good idea in this domain, just as in others, but deliberative development is only likely to be successful when it emerges from local political dynamics (2001: 29).

For instance, the exportation of the Barcelona model of strategic planning to Latin American cities has produced few convincing results. Whereas it is argued that the model's participatory methodology delivers the ability to reach a consensual vision for the city with the inclusion and participation of representatives of the entire population, very often, large segments of the population have been shut out of the planning process. As one planner observed in Rio de Janeiro: "Under the mantle of 'consensus' between all social actors, the conflicts in the city are hidden and people with no participation in the final decisions are converted into authors and invited to applaud their own defeat" (Leal de Oliveira 2000). In Rio de Janeiro, participation indeed failed to flourish because of an old enduring monopole of political leadership shared between the city government and business organisations, together with an absence of demand for political involvement on the part of the urban society. In Mexico City, another failed case of 'inclusive' strategic planning, analysts reported that radical political reform was needed before strategic planning could take place (Borja 2000).

The need for radical political reform is indeed increasingly seen as a prerequisite for the introduction of truly effective participatory practices. In their review of participation in development, Hickey and Mohan have shown that participatory approaches are most likely to succeed

- (i) where they are pursued as part of a wider radical political project
- (ii) when they seek to engage with development as an underlying process of social change rather than in the form of discrete technocratic interventions
- (iii) where they are aimed specifically at securing citizenship rights and participation for marginal and subordinate groups. (2004: 237)

In the following sections, I will try to demonstrate that these conditions were not met in Buenos Aires. The introduction of strategic planning and participatory budgeting was not underpinned by a broader societal and political project to transform policy-making processes. Nor was the rationale behind the creation of participatory mechanisms aimed at shifting the balance of power in favour of excluded groups, or at altering the patterns of uneven urban development generated by processes of growing socio-territorial exclusion. Instead, it was used as a technical means of temporarily mending conflictive relations between the local state and the urban society so as to avoid more radical transformations.

### **(i) Participation as part of a wider radical political project?**

The creation of the Strategic Plan and the Participatory Budget were laid out as a constitutional requirement in the city's new Magna Carta. The 1996 Constitution is very progress minded,

particularly in terms of citizen involvement in public affairs. The word participation appears in 29 of the 140 constitutional articles (Rodríguez 2002). The first article starts with the assertion that “the City of Buenos Aires ...devises its autonomous institutions according to the principles of participatory democracy...” (Constitución de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires 1996: 1). However, it would be misleading to automatically conflate constitutional progressivism with political voluntarism. Some years into the autonomy, many constitutional mandates had failed to be ratified by the legislative assembly or simply put into practice by the city government. It took more than three years before the creation of the Strategic Planning Council was finally sanctioned by law in 1999, and the Participatory Budget did not come to life until the beginning of 2002 – and has still not been formally approved by the legislative assembly. The same is true of the ‘*Ley de Comunas*’, a project of political decentralisation of the city into smaller municipal units, which is expected to promote participation and inclusion by enabling a closer relationship with local citizens. As of today, the ‘*Ley de Comunas*’ is still awaiting political endorsement and implementation.

To understand this – at first sight puzzling – lack of political will to comply with constitutional mandates, it is necessary to consider the political landscape within which the new Constitution was formulated. In 1996, elections were held to form the Constituting Convention (*Convención Constituyente*), the temporary organ in charge of drafting the new Constitution. The majority of seats went to a minority party, the FREPASO (*Frente por un País Solidario*). Composed of relatively young and politically inexperienced members with a political agenda aimed at social progress and institutional modernisation, the FREPASO was the only true ‘participationist’ party in the city’s political architecture. It took advantage of its majority within the *Convención Constituyente* to use the new Constitution as an authoritative vehicle for its ideas and political agenda, therefore stuffing the constitutional text with the most innovative mechanisms of participatory democracy. This ‘participationist’ philosophy, nevertheless, was not shared by the two main parties, the UCR (*Unión Cívica Radical*) and the PJ (*Partido Justicialista*). The UCR candidate, Fernando de la Rúa, won the 1996 mayoral elections. A few months later, the legislative elections granted a majority of seats to the *Alianza*, a political alliance between the UCR and smaller parties, among which was the FREPASO. The FREPASO nonetheless remained marginalised in the *Alianza*, the only reason for its association with the UCR being their common hostility towards President Menem’s national government. Ideals of popular participation and democratic inclusiveness did not constitute a common political platform between the member parties of the *Alianza*. It remained a theme uniquely dear to the FREPASO, until the socialist party – also a minority formation – later on associated itself with participative principles.

It thus appears that the Constitution, from the first moments of its formulation, was disjointed from the political process which it was supposed to lead and frame. It was drafted by a group of political challengers whose ideas diverged from those of the mainstream political class, thereby opening an ideological breach between the spirit of the constitutional text and the realities of the political process. Comparing decentralisation experiences in Buenos Aires and Barcelona, one of my interviewees observed that

The city’s Constitution is good, it is better than that of other cities, but it is disconnected from the (political) process. So the *Ley de Comunas* did not work out because in reality the Constitution put so much pressure on it that the political system did not respond... whereas the decentralisation process in Barcelona did not come by

law, they just decentralised; there were administrative decisions first, and the administrative rationality followed later on.<sup>5</sup>

Going back to Hickey and Mohan's prerequisites for successful participatory schemes, it appears that the introduction of participatory mechanisms in Buenos Aires was not part of a wider political project of transition towards a more participatory and inclusive democratic model. It rather originated in the attempt of a minority party to force its own programmatic views onto the political agenda of the city through the window of opportunity offered by the new constitution. The subsequent reluctance of the city's executive and legislative bodies to put these principles into practice testifies to the absence of a true political project in favour of public participation in Buenos Aires. The fate of the Participatory Budget, as will be shown below, remarkably confirms this observation.

### **(ii) Participation as a process of social change or a discrete technocratic intervention?**

Article 52 of the Constitution established the principle of participatory budgeting and foresaw the ratification of the 'Law of the Participatory Budget' (*Ley de Presupuesto Participativo*). Both the executive and legislative urban authorities ignored this constitutional directive until the 2001 economic collapse and the resulting socio-political crisis. On December 19 and 20 2001, a popular insurrection broke out when an outraged population poured into the streets of the capital chanting what came to be known as the eponymous slogan of the Argentine crisis: '*Que se vayan todos!*' ('Out with them all!'). The population's complete loss of faith in the country's political class and the ensuing crisis of legitimacy of all political institutions thus led the governing community to look for ways of rebuilding citizens' trust. At a time of public disaffection with government and politics, new processes of public engagement and participation in city politics and planning were suddenly seen as a salutary means of rebuilding confidence in local government. To the anti-politics slogan '*Que se vayan todos!*', the participatory budget provided a perfectly tailored answer: '*Que vengan todos!*' ('Let them all in'). In the face of disillusioned citizens determined to get rid of the entire political class, the latter sought to brandish participatory budgeting as an invitation to the citizenry to get involved in urban affairs. The decision to enact the Participatory Budget emanated from the Secretariat for Decentralisation and Citizen Participation, which was headed by a FREPASO politician. He took advantage of the critical conjuncture to seize the opportunity to convince the Mayor of the soothing potential of the scheme. According to the then Secretary of Decentralisation:

Why did the Participatory Budget come into life? It came into life because there was a 20th of December, although there was no Law of Participatory Budget. The Mayor's office was never interested in the Participatory Budget, that is, the Mayor has not been interested in the Participatory Budget since the beginning, it is only because of the contingencies and the particular conjuncture that the Mayor did accept the Secretariat for Decentralisation's proposal – our proposal – to create the Participatory Budget.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the introduction of participatory budgeting owed more to the political emergency triggered by the legitimacy crisis than to any deep-seated change in political values towards more inclusive practices of urban management. Hickey and Mohan argue that successful participatory approaches are those that seek to engage with development as an underlying process of social change rather than in the form of discrete technocratic interventions. Unfortunately, the

<sup>5</sup> Personal interview with a legislator, 19/11/04.

<sup>6</sup> Personal interview with a former Secretary of Decentralisation and Citizen Participation, 19/11/04.

implementation of participatory budgeting in Buenos Aires resembles a discrete technocratic intervention much more than the expression of an underlying process of social change. In fact, it was seen by the majority of the political class as just an ‘ad-hoc’ institutional response to the legitimacy crisis (Rodgers 2004) – in other words, a convenient means of avoiding engaging in a true process of change.

Three years after the creation of the Participatory Budget, its sobering state and the precarious conditions within which it operates confirm the above views. Once the crisis of legitimacy was over and state-society relations were back to normal, the political impetus that had driven and sustained the implementation of the Participatory Budget vanished. According to the current official discourse

the Participatory Budget is a process of participatory democracy, voluntary and universal, (...), which serves for the debate, elaboration, control and monitoring of the annual budget, the General Plan of Government, and the Investment Plan. Accordingly, it constitutes the opening of a space for participative intervention by neighbours in the city’s public affairs, thereby facilitating the democratic control of the administration and accounting for the new reality of the neighbourhood as a space of civic protagonism (GCBA 2005).

The reality is, however, far removed from the political rhetoric. Whereas the city of Porto Alegre’s experience in participatory budgeting is relentlessly cited by city officials as the model for Buenos Aires’s own experiment, after three years of participatory budgeting in Buenos Aires, there is little left of Porto Alegre’s initial methodology.

The mayoral elections in 1994 brought a change of political administration with an overhaul of the Secretariat of Decentralisation. When a new municipal government takes office in Buenos Aires, a look at organisational name-trading provides interesting insights into the political priorities of the incoming administration. In the case of the Participatory Budget, it has been obviously downgraded via the change of the title of its overseeing unit. Since its creation in early 2002, participatory budgeting had been functioning under its own agency, the General Office of the Participatory Budget, which answered directly to the Secretariat for Decentralisation. Under the new administrative architecture, the agency running the Participatory Budget has been given a new name, the General Office of Participation and Community Action. The disappearance of the term ‘Participatory Budget’ from the agency’s title conveys a symbolic message which captures well the loss of political interest in participatory budgeting.

The consequences are not just symbolic. Although there are no reliable official statistics about participation rates, all my informants have observed that participation has been in free-fall in 2004, as participants feel that there is no political will to support their efforts and that most of their decisions will have no bearing and will not be implemented. The high rate of in-compliance in 2004 with the priorities voted upon in 2003 (above 60%) does not help to reduce this feeling. Another element detrimental to participation, and which marks a clear rupture with Porto Alegre’s practices, is the absence of a fixed share of the city’s total budget dedicated to participatory budgeting. With the exception of only one municipal department – the Secretariat of Infrastructure – which dedicates a fixed share of its funds to participatory budgeting, participants do not know how much money they can discuss. Finally, the Participatory Budget’s own operating budget has been scaled down in 2004, with a resulting lack of resources for diffusion and advertisement. A recent survey showed that no more than 8% of the Buenos Aires population has ever heard of the existence of the Participatory Budget in their city. Even more damaging is

the lack of resources to remunerate the local officers who act as facilitators in participatory budgeting meetings. These meetings represent an additional workload, as they are held outside office hours, but local officers are not remunerated for these supplementary hours. As a result, 60% of them have refused to continue in 2004 and have been replaced by newcomers. Capacity-building is a very important stage in the participatory budgeting process, as it is designed to provide local officers with specific skills to handle public participation. However, whereas the former facilitators had been trained in the use of participatory techniques, their substitutes received no training for the task.

Participatory budgeting's methodology is in general based on the Porto Alegre blueprint, and is believed to constitute an important factor for success. In the first two years of the Participatory Budget in Buenos Aires, there were attempts to follow these methodological principles, thanks to the monitoring of three well-established NGOs<sup>7</sup> with a proven track record and experience in participatory methods. Since 1994, though, collaboration with these organisations has been discontinued, as they were told by the municipality that their services were no longer needed<sup>8</sup>. Since then, the Buenos Aires experiment has been dissociating itself from its Brazilian model. As reported by the former Secretary of Decentralisation and Citizen Participation

(The Mayor) did not imagine that we would carry out the Participatory Budget with such a complete technique as that of Porto Alegre, he thought there would be small neighbourhood initiatives where the neighbours would decide whether to paint the place, whether to fix a pavement. In reality he succeeded, after some time, he succeeded in going back to that situation... now, the Participatory Budget, instead of producing a matrix affecting the totality of budgetary programmes and policies, controls only a small amount: a million pesos in each CGP<sup>9</sup>, that is, an infinitesimal share of the City's budget... it is a system of participation of glaziers, of political marketing.<sup>10</sup>

### **(iii) Participation as a means of securing 'voice' for marginal groups?**

The Strategic Plan's story is different from that of the Participatory Budget, particularly with regard to its origins. Strategic planning in Buenos Aires in fact preceded the 1996 Constitution. It can be traced back to the 1994 national Constitution, which paved the way for an overhaul of the capital's institutional framework by granting it political autonomy. Stimulated by the prospects of the city's imminent autonomy, and impressed by the City of Barcelona's recent successes in urban regeneration, a group of voluntary individuals and organisations, headed by the University of Buenos Aires, launched a process of strategic planning with the help and advice of experts from Barcelona. This initial phase consisted of weekly meetings where discussions revolved mainly around the theme of the forthcoming autonomy. It is difficult to determine to what extent this first experience of participatory planning may be called 'strategic planning' *stricto sensu*. The scheme was totally independent – hence disjointed – from statal authority and decision-making processes. According to one of the participants:

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<sup>7</sup> These NGOs are FLACSO, Poder Ciudadano and the CTA.

<sup>8</sup> Personal interview with Hector Poggiase, FLACSO, 23/11/04.

<sup>9</sup> The Autonomous City of Buenos Aires is divided into 16 administrative units called CGPs (*Centros de Gestión y Participación*).

<sup>10</sup> Personal interview with a former Secretary of Decentralisation and Citizen Participation, 19/11/04.

When we arrived in Barcelona with the first plan 'Buenos Aires 2000', Santacana (...) said that the marvellous thing with that plan was to see that it had not been imposed by the government on the population but that the population had formulated the proposal for Buenos Aires 2000 from below.<sup>11</sup>

In 1996, the interest for strategic planning was formalised through its incorporation into the city's Constitution and, in December 1999, the legislative assembly finally institutionalised it through the ratification of the 'Law of the Strategic Planning Council'. Many participants of the first hour yet talk with great nostalgia of 'their' initial experience of strategic planning<sup>12</sup>. Many of them even stopped attending strategic planning meetings once the Strategic Plan had become a state programme. They admit to having felt dispossessed of the scheme by the intrusion of the city's administration. In fact, the initial experience of strategic planning was regarded by outsiders as a closed, corporatist assemblage of people with specific – though varied – interests, which self-proclaimed itself the 'Strategic Plan' but was disjointed from the rest of society. As one of them admits

The truth is that we were a 'bunker', we had become a group over the years, we had dinner together, we went out together, we laughed together, when we could we went to CIDEU meetings, we went twice to CIDEU in Barcelona, to CIDEU in Guadalajara...<sup>13</sup>

This account of the very beginnings of strategic planning offers interesting insights into what today probably constitutes the major criticism of Buenos Aires' Strategic Plan. The Strategic Planning Council is supposed to provide an inclusive participatory platform, yet its potential for inclusion is thwarted by problems of representativeness. An analysis of the composition of participation in the Strategic Planning Council reveals an imbalanced representation of the various sectors of society. Some sectors are over-represented, particularly with regard to organisations linked to the production of knowledge and professional associations concerned with the physical dimensions of the urban economy (González Andrada 2003). Knowledge-based organisations, such as universities, research institutes, and some NGOs dedicated to the diffusion of knowledge and information, constitute over 50% of total participation<sup>14</sup>. Professional associations with interests in the physical dimensions of urban planning, such as the Argentine Construction Chamber and the Architects' Central Society, also enjoy an exaggerated share of participation. In contrast, various organisations representing less-privileged sectors of Buenos Aires society are either 'absent' or strikingly under-represented in the composition of the Strategic Planning Council. Some of them, such as the '*piqueteros*' and the '*cartoneros*'<sup>15</sup>, or the representatives of slum settlements, are, however, closely associated to the future of the city. There are a few community-based organisations among the members of the Strategic Plan, but these are all found in economically privileged neighbourhoods. In fact, the forgotten actor of strategic planning in Buenos Aires is the 'poverty sector'.

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<sup>11</sup> Personal interview with Cristina Nieto, UOCRA, 01/12/04.

<sup>12</sup> Personal interviews with Mabel Fernandez, Universidad de Belgrano, 04/11/04, and Juan José Pi de La Serra, Co-ordinator of the first Strategic Plan, 10/12/04.

<sup>13</sup> Personal interview with Cristina Nieto, op.cit.

<sup>14</sup> Personal interview with Alicia González Andrada, former officer at the Coordinating Office of the Strategic Plan, 19/11/04.

<sup>15</sup> *Piqueteros* and *cartoneros* are associations of organised unemployed people. They have become very prominent in Buenos Aires since the 2001 economic crisis and their activities carry many consequences for the city's daily life.

Therefore, going back to the origins of strategic planning in Buenos Aires and the relatively closed and corporatist nature of the scheme during its initial phase, it seems clear that the creation of Buenos Aires' Strategic Plan was never "specifically aimed at securing citizenship rights and participation for marginal and subordinate groups", as Hickey and Mohan recommend (op. cit.). If the Plan does indeed provide a participatory platform, participation has remained circumscribed to a limited and well-delineated type of 'stakeholders'. While it cannot be said with certainty that this corresponds to a conscious policy of inclusion/exclusion of particular groups and interests, it can nonetheless be argued with confidence that the city authorities have not deployed an active strategy to use strategic planning as an inclusionary device to balance the city's socio-territorial inequalities. The appeal to join the Strategic Planning Council has been very little publicised and has received scant press coverage. In addition, the Strategic Planning Council is packed with friends and acquaintances of public officers, some of them enjoying little or no representativeness within their own organisation. I even came across the case of a participant – a friend of the Plan's first Coordinator – whose organisation has ceased to exist. Amazingly, he nonetheless continues to represent the non-existent organisation in the Strategic Planning Council.

### **By way of conclusion**

A key objective emphasised by supporters of strategic planning and participatory budgeting rests with their potential for promoting greater social inclusion – qualitatively and quantitatively – in the formulation of planning priorities. By giving voice to societal actors in the policy-making process, participation is valued both as a means towards a greater adequacy between the decisions made and the urban society's real needs, and as an end in itself through the construction of a more inclusive citizenry. In other words, strategic planning and participatory budgeting are seen by their proponents as efficient facilitators in the transition from representative to participatory urban democracy. In their Buenos Aires version, however, both models have been emptied of substance. The democratic content of these tools has not thus far been concretised. Experiences of public participation in urban planning and management in Buenos Aires have reproduced the formal aspects of their exemplar without its contents.

In trying to account for the failure of participatory approaches to deliver a more inclusive planning process in Buenos Aires, and in opposition to mainstream 'best practice' approaches, I have argued that the duplication of 'a priori' efficient institutional models is not a guarantee of success. In this article, I have tried to show that the contextual conditions within which participatory mechanisms are devised and introduced exert a fundamental influence on public participation's potential for greater inclusion in and democratisation of decision-making in urban affairs. In the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires, the absence of a concerted political project in support of popular participation, coupled with the lack of political will to truly democratise planning practice, have impeded the realisation of participatory planning's transformative potential towards a more balanced and inclusive model of urban development.

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