

# The Democratization of Information as a process of qualification and participation: the experience of the City of Porto Alegre Observatory

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## Introduction

This article aims to present a synthesis of how the democratization of information has been involved in the two main instances of participation which single out and, in a way, characterize the recent administrations of the city of Porto Alegre: the **Participative Budget** and **Local Solidarity Governance**.

To this end we shall divide this text into three parts: a) a brief introduction to the features and recent data from the Participative Budget and how information was devised; b) a brief introduction of the conception and implementation of Local Solidarity Governance; and c) the creation of the City of Porto Alegre Observatory (ObservaPoa) as a way of qualifying participation through the democratization of information.

We should stress that we do not intend deal exhaustively with the topic or to make a critical comparison of the two concepts as we do not consider there to be any incompatibilities between them, but rather that the present administration has noticed the coexistence of both examples to have been beneficial and expanded the range of social players participating in the various forms of discussion in the city. We believe that the opportunity for differentiating the concepts of “**the process of democratization of information**” and “**democratization of information as a process**” is more relevant than criticism or exhaustive investigation, since in the first instance we are talking about forms of access and availability of information, while in the second we are referring to the protagonists of information, with information being treated not simply as a narrow database with

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no interaction from those who are directly involved and are the protagonists of the phenomena researched and presented. We nevertheless believe that both concepts are necessary and have specific roles in the qualification and expansion of participative democracy.

### **The Participative Budget and Information**

□ It should not be forgotten that the UN considers the Participative Budget as one of the 40 best urban public-administration practices in the world. Born into a context where popular participation was already common, the Participative Budget encouraged the creation of new instances and strengthened those already in existence, enabling citizens to take direct decisions about the application of resources on works and services to be carried out by the public administration. Emphasizing the wealth of history of popular participation in the public administration of Porto Alegre, Fedozzi (2007) says,

“From 1989 the PB became the backbone of this recent history and has been attracting the attention of various agents of urban movements, political parties and international players”.

As a popular intervention, the Participative Budget is exercised on the resources making up the municipal public budget, and there are clear limits to the demands of the population, with the district and thematic assemblies consequently being indelibly marked by disputes. The disputes in fact tend to increase as the budgetary resources diminish.

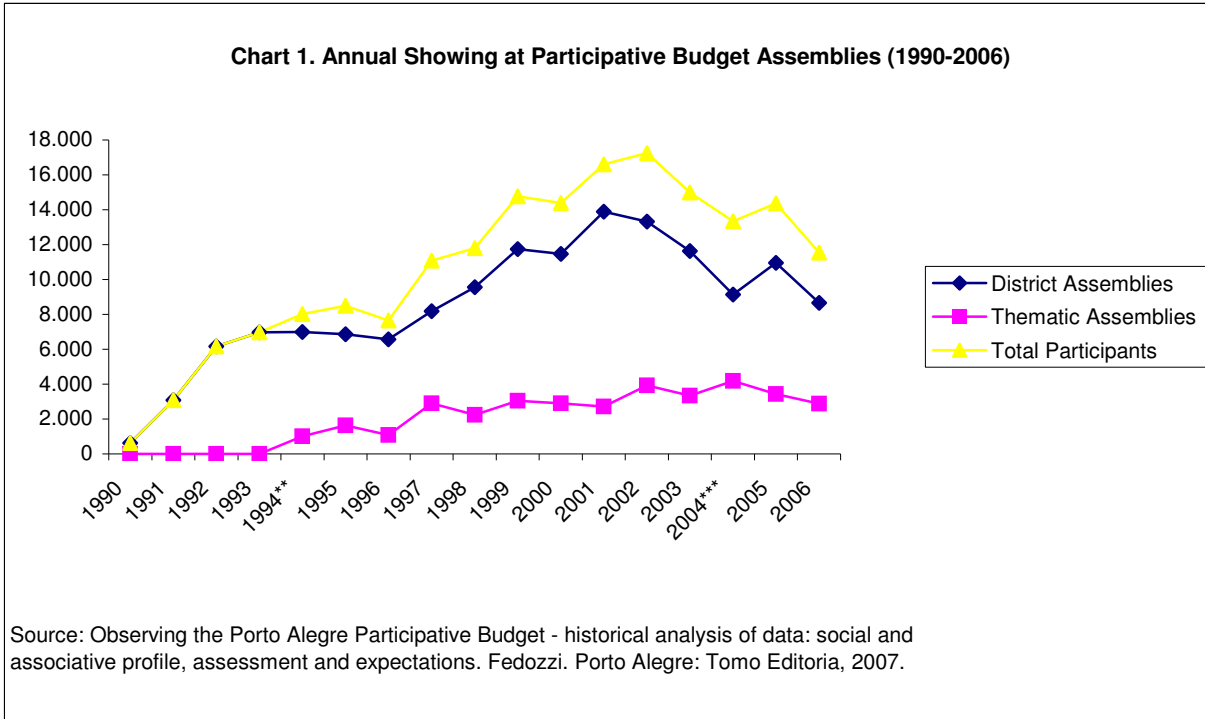
During the 18-year existence of the Participative Budget the population's main demands have been concentrated on the areas of paving, basic sanitation

and housing policy, with the priorities of the last four years being housing, education and social assistance.

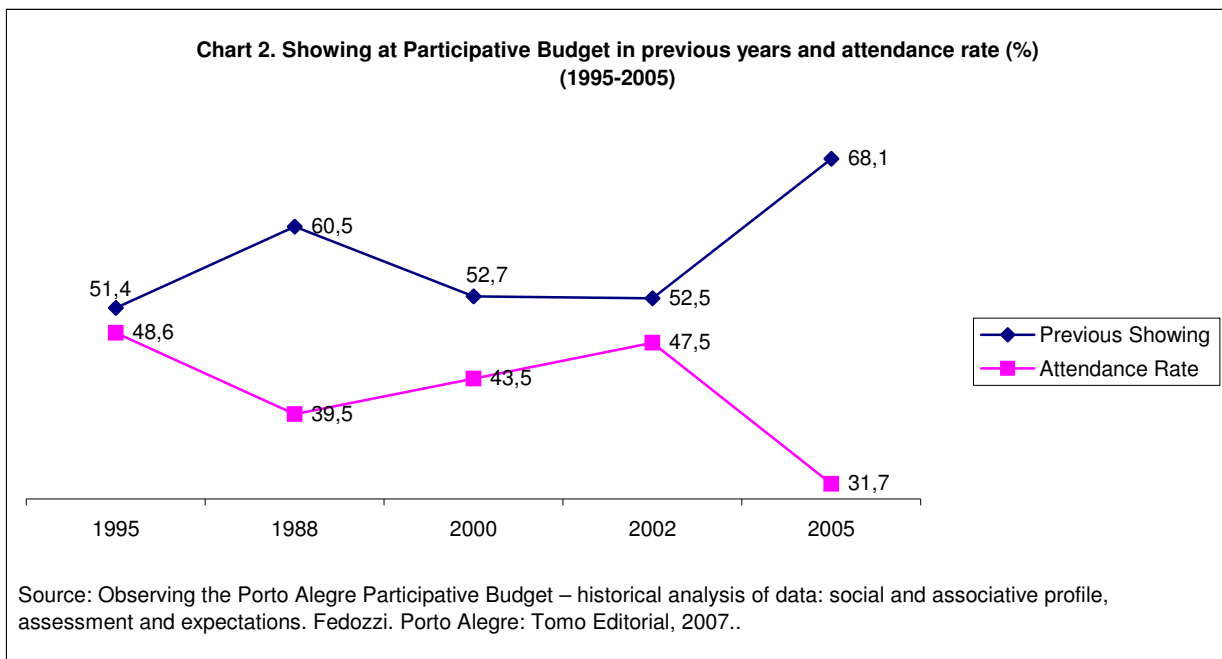
In a recent study entitled **“Observing the Porto Alegre Participative Budget – An historical analysis of data: social and associative profile, assessment and expectations”**, carried out in a partnership between the City of Porto Alegre Observatory and the Postgraduate Sociology Program of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, funded by Rede 3 of Urb-AI Democracy in the City, the author, Luciano Fedozzi, presents data from earlier and more recent research, with the aim of “contributing – within a succinct quantitative analysis – to the critical reflection of all those committed to improving the PB and the network of participation in Porto Alegre” (Fedozzi, 2007)

As most of the data in the work covers the period from 1993 to 2005, we believe it opportune to relate Professor Fedozzi’s principal conclusions. Before going into detail, we present Chart 1 as general information, in which we can see the trends for Participative Budget participation figures more clearly.

Analysis of Chart 1 allows us to see two well defined trends of participation figures: 1) growth, with drop-off in some years – covering the period from the start until 2001, for district assemblies, and until 2002 for total participants;) accentuated drop-offs – with isolated inversions in 2005 – in the period from 2001 to 2006 for district assemblies and 2002-2006 for all participants. One possibility put forward by the author could be the “strong reduction in the Council’s investment capacity due to the financial crisis that arose in 2002” (Fedozzi, 2007).



Other data available from the research concerns participation in previous years and the Participative Budget adherence levels. As we can see in Chart 2, no trend can be seen due to the accentuated variations in the figures for 1995-2005. The data from 2005 seems to indicate a falling trend for adherence levels, but caution should be employed when drawing conclusions about whether or not there was a fall in Participative Budget activity, as the intervals between the years studied are not the same. Despite the unequal research periods, the fall of almost 35% in adherence levels (attractiveness) of the Participative Budget between 1995 and 2005 could indicate other problems beyond budgetary restrictions. We should not forget that if the adherence level falls the repetition levels of those participating increases, implying lack of renewal and even stagnation of the participation process. This assertion seems to be ratified by the data in Tables 1 and 2. We analyze some of the constant data from these tables.



**Table 1. Number of Advisor elections (%)**

Number of times advisor was elected	2000	2002	2005
1	54.5	53.3	49.1
2	38.6	33.3	36.1
3	2.2	6.7	4.6
4	2.2	1.7	7.4
5 or more	2.2	5.0	2.7
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Observing the Porto Alegre Participative Budget – historical analysis of data: social and associative profile, assessment and expectations. Fedozzi, Porto Alegre: Tomo Editorial, 2007,

**Table 2. Number of elections of Delegates (%)**

Number of times a delegate was elected	2000	2002	2005
1	62.9	45.5	33.1
2	20.9	21.7	21.9
3	12.7	11.1	12.5
4	4.9	6.1	7.6
5 or more	3.8	15.6	25.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Observing the Porto Alegre Participative Budget – historical analysis of data: social and associative profile, assessment and expectations, Fedozzi, Porto Alegre: Tomo Editorial, 2007,

Despite the percentages of those participants elected more than 3 and 4 times being insignificant for the post of advisor, the percentage variations between 2000 and 2005 are impressive. The increased percentage of participants elected for this post more than 4 times exceeds 236% in the period. But the more worrying situation concerns the percentage of participants elected 5 or more times to the position of delegate, for although the figure is large and the growth occurred during the three years studied, the percentage increase from 2000 to 2005 exceeds 550%.

Further data available from Fedozzi's work refers to reasons for participating in the Participative Budget. As we can see in Table 3, the reason "Demand", which was indicated by 36.8% of participants in 1998, increased to 46.1% in 2005, up by more than 25%. Despite the low percentage of participants indicating "Demand, participation and democracy" as a reason, increase over the same period was more than 145%

**Table 3. Reasons for participation in the Participative Budget (%)**

Why do you participate?	1998	2005		
		Total	Advisors	Delegates
Demand	36.8	46.1	28.4	42.8
Demand and community connections	10.5	6.3	4.6	7.6
Demand, participation and democracy	3.5	8.6	13.8	8.1
Requested, demand, find out about bad work	7.7	10.2	2.8	3.1
Democracy, citizenship, participation and inspection	11.4	13.7	30.3	17.8
Community values connected with democracy	24.4	15.2	20.2	20.6
Others	5.7	-	-	-
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Observing the Porto Alegre Participative Budget – historical analysis of data: social and associative profile, assessment and expectations. Fedozzi, Porto Alegre: Tomo Editorial, 2007,

When the reason is "Community values linked to democracy", the percentage drop of participants indicating this reason exceeds 37% in the period under consideration. We can see that in three of the six reasons indicated by

participants the word “demand” appears in all those that increased between 1998 and 2005, with the reason “Demand and community links” falling by 40%. We can therefore consider that a good part of the reasons for participation seems to be unconnected with issues relating to democratic maturation. One should once again exercise caution with these data, however, since there “was a decrease in demands being met in later years, due to the fall in the Municipality’s investment capacity,” (Fedozzo, 2007). This budgetary restriction was not, however, a reason for the “construction of values related to democratic culture and citizenship throughout the time of participation” losing impetus since, when participation time exceeds five years, the percentage of those indicating “Democracy, citizenship and inspection of the process” as a reason increases. Furthermore, when income and education levels increase, so too does the percentage of participants indicating values such as “democracy and citizenship” and “links with community life”. (Fedozzi, 2007).

An increase in inclusion is seen when family-income data are used, for when considering the income brackets of Participative Budget participants the study concluded that there had been an increase in inclusion of those individuals in the 2-minimum-salary bracket in the 1998-2005 period. The percentage of participants in this income bracket leapt by 60% during this period, from 30.9% to 49.8%.

Having made this brief report on the condition of the Participative Budget, we move on to indicate our perception of how information was dealt with in the period when the Participative Budget was citizens’ only means of participation in the municipal administration of Porto Alegre.

In the last ten years we have been working with other Porto Alegre City Council technicians on researching, organizing and making available information about the socioeconomic condition of the city of Porto Alegre, with administrative data relating to municipal services, and also producing more specific reports and studies into demographic, social and economic aspects of the municipality.

Our work with indicators over the past ten years culminated in the release of the Porto Alegre Map of Social Inclusion and Exclusion in December 2004, in which we formed the Living Conditions Index (ICV) and the Social Vulnerability Index (IVS)<sup>2</sup>.

Due to our experience in dealing with information and studies relating to the city of Porto Alegre, we can therefore indicate that for most of the Participative Budget's existence information was treated more according to the first concept outlined in our introduction, as a "**process of democratization of information**", than as "**democratization of information as process**." Not that there were communication problems about data and information. On the contrary, the administration always made every effort to make available and even publicize in the communication media not just actions but also everything enabling the participation of the various discussion hearings and decision-making forums about the budgetary issues and the directions of the city. Evidence for this can be seen in the conferences, city congresses and wide-ranging open-access and democratic events for citizens. Interaction with the budgetary management was also a striking feature of the administration that ended in 2004, and it is clear that this interaction requires access to data and information. There was, therefore, no unavailability of information during that administration.

What we would like to suggest is that even free and abundant access and availability of data and information may often be insufficient for qualified intervention into the democratic decision-making and discussion forums and hearings. It is well known that there are many data- and information-bases – printed or electronic – in which interaction has not been an important concern. When interaction does exist, it is only based on simple feedback in which the important thing is just the feedback provided. Furthermore, this interaction only takes place digitally, without any direct contact with the citizen. Within this concept of information it is in fact impossible to develop a pedagogy of information,

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<sup>2</sup> The study is available at the City of Porto Alegre Observatory (ObservaPoa) website: <http://www.observapoa.com.br>

meaning the possibility for the data and information being directly presented and discussed with those experiencing the phenomena under consideration. To understand the democratization of information as a process requires treating it as a source of empowerment which qualifies intervention and allows the citizen to go beyond the idea that meeting demands is a sole and exclusive responsibility of the state. Interaction between the source and reception of information has to go beyond the limits of simple consent and validation to achieve an interaction in which the poles of provider and receptor can be inverted, understanding the importance of each in what we are calling here **information as process**: the consent/validation of either provider or receptor of information for what is being provided is not as relevant as interaction and understanding the importance of information in qualifying intervention, the possibility of overcoming demands disconnected from awareness and seeking out the links with community values, citizenry and participation.

One item of information provided by Professor Fedozzi's study may help us to understand the reasons for the low percentage of participants speaking at Participative Budget meetings. In 1998 the total percentage of those stating they "never" speak and those who "sometimes" speak, reached 81.5%. In 2005 this figure dropped to 79.6%; very little over such a long period. If we consider the level of education in 2005, the total percentage of those who "never" speak and those who "sometimes" speak was 86.5% for those educated only to elementary level. In the same years, the total percentage of those stating they "always" or "nearly always" speak, exceeded 27%, with the level of education for these figures being higher, or postgraduate. Although this data is inconclusive, it does allow us to suggest that participants with low levels of education seem to manifest themselves less than those with higher education levels.

We believe that the reasons why low participation is related to low education levels, although emblematic of a degree of exclusion due to low education, are also related to the lack of interaction and preparation of information in the periods preceding the debates and effective interventions of citizens. In other words, we

wish to suppose that is possible to inform interactively, once, as we have mentioned, source and receptor of information are clear about the interactive nature of what the information is and that this interaction can overcome, or at least alleviate, the deficiencies of low education levels, making the citizen informed enough for his or her speech to be a vehicle for a qualified expression.

Expression at democratic participation hearings is fundamental for what Fedozzi calls “discursive interaction” and he states:

“Discursive interaction, as democratic and citizen learning, is still a great educational challenge for the more egalitarian evolution of the opportunities for social and individual growth created by the PB.”

### **Local Solidarity Governance and Information**

After sixteen years of administration led by the Workers Party, a new administration took over in 2005. The present administration has been committed to retaining the Participative Budget since the electoral period, believing it to be a victory for citizenship and a mark of democratic participation. Those who had been acting in the various participative forums and particularly the Participative Budget were, however, concerned that this commitment would not be maintained and would not reach beyond the electoral campaign. A little of this concern was recorded in Fedozzi’s study (2007), in which we calculate that a total of 45% of participants believed the Participative Budget would be “weakened” by the new administration (2005-2008), with this figure approaching 50% among delegates. These are impressive figures when we take into account that the sixteen-year experience benefits from national and international recognition and has been used as a reference for other cities in Brazil and across the world.

The expectations were not confirmed and the Participative Budget has been retained with the same features and functions as before. The fall in participant

numbers in 2006 is very recent data to be analyzed with statistical rigor, as the falling trend began in 2002, and cannot be attributed to the current administration.

One of the current administration's key initiatives is Local Solidarity Governance (GSL), as we believe this to be most aligned with the spirit of participative democracy. Founded on the thesis that the paradigm of participation should move on to co-administration, governing with civil society, not just depending on the resources of the public budget and taking into account the social budget generated in the ambit of governance, GSL started to promote the democratic participation of citizens for the development of people and communities, stimulating partnerships for carrying out actions to improve the living conditions and social interaction of the population. The Secretariat for Political Coordination and Local Governance makes a point of stressing its support for the Participative Budget on its website, believing it to be an important forum for deciding the public municipal budget, and also includes preservation and improvement of the Participative Budget and other forms of participative administration among its goals.

Despite this emphasis on the importance of the Participative Budget, however, GSL seeks to expand the cast of social players, believing that the social budget is broader than the public budget and that the bounds of public action are not limited to the state sphere.

In a recent article presented at the "Evaluating Citizen Perception" Event organized by the Institute of Government and Politics (IGOP) in February 2007, Adriana Furtado, Social Assistant and technician at the City of Porto Alegre Observatory (ObservaPoa), clearly synthesizes the associative context in which Local Governance has been established:

"The city's wealth of associative forms and innovative solutions to local problems has expanded the possibility of participation beyond budgetary discussion towards participative planning. The link between participative budget

and planning has made room for participative administration. The issues debated at **Local Governance** meetings imply the strengthening of participative administration in the city, reinforcing the social capital in the communities and constructing alternatives for local development.” (Furtado, 2007, my italics)

Almost three years since the start of the current administration and shortly after the establishment of the Local Governance meetings, it seems imprudent to analyze its reception as an example of participation, as we still do not have more specific information and/or studies like those we have used for commenting on the Participative Budget. In fact we believe we have no information with the minimum statistical foundation to be free of the typical bias of hurried analysis and that we are not in that comfortable position of having a retrospective and sufficiently distanced view of the heated current discussions, which can only come with the passage of time.

In terms of how information has been treated by the current administration and particularly since setting up Local Solidarity Governance, we believe we now have the minimum conditions for suggesting that this concept is closer to dealing with democratization of information as a process than simply the process of democratization of information.

We understand that only some actions effected by the current administration directly give rise to the search for a more interactive approach of citizens to the availability of data and information. By creating the Secretariat for Political Coordination and Local Governance the current administration was concerned to also create an Information Management for its administrative structure, responsible for functions such as organizing, systematizing, georeferencing, and providing data and information about the city of Porto Alegre at municipal and intra-municipal levels.

The need to provide data and information at the smallest possible geographical level has already become clear in the detailed attributes of

Socioeconomic Information Management, since there has been a demand for information on a geographic level that enables visualization of the socioeconomic heterogeneities not recorded in the indicators available at municipal, Participative Budget District and neighborhood levels.

### **The City of Porto Alegre Observatory and Democratization of Information as a Process**

The idea of creating the City of Porto Alegre Observatory (ObservaPoa) was created in the context of maintaining the Participative Budget and setting up Local Solidarity Governance. This rich context of transformations in the way of running the city and solidifying the PB is where we began to take the first steps towards creating a space in which availability of and access to information were just the start of a route which would lead to the launch of ObservaPoa in March 2008.

Resulting from a combination of the perception of the current administration and the possibilities created by the Urb-AI Local Observatories of Participative Democracy (LOPDs) Program, ObservaPoa was set up based on a broad partnership of institutions involving Porto Alegre City Council, the Participative Budget Board, the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, the Rio Grande do Sul Economy and Statistics Foundation, the Intersyndical Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies, and the Porto Alegre Municipal Company for Data Processing.

Technical Coordination of ObservaPoa comes under Porto Alegre City Council's Secretariat for Political Coordination and Local Governance through the Socioeconomic Information Management Group. From the start of its activities the Technical Coordination consisted of three technicians from Porto Alegre City Council and was responsible for preparing the content available at the first ObservaPoa presentations. The Porto Alegre Municipal Company for Data Processing was responsible for developing the website information technology. As partners deliver studies and/or research, the website becomes richer and more interactive, since a large part of the studies follows from one of the fundamental

objectives outlined in the ObservaPoa creation project to provide georeferenced information at intra-urban level. In this way citizens are able to have information relating to their neighborhood and Participative Budget District, enabling their interventions and demands to be prepared based on publicly available information from genuine, official and time-specific sources. Furthermore, with the launch of ObservaPoa, information about the city of Porto Alegre which was previously spread across a huge number of websites can now be found on one single website.

Citizens can now visit ObservaPoa and, with a click of the mouse over the map of their Participative Budget District or neighborhood, can access the information they need to qualify their interventions and demands. In addition to thematic maps, citizens also have access to a database of statistics in the form of tables which they themselves can draw up according to their needs. They can also register to receive information about availability of new studies, research and events, as well as send suggestions and enquiries about information they consider erroneous, creating an interactivity with the technicians which allows their reliability and recognition that without their interaction the website itself loses importance.

If we consider these aforementioned features of the multi-institutional creation of the content and form of ObservaPoa alone, perhaps a good part of the reflection proposed by the **7th OIDP Conference** would be covered, since the challenge of expanding citizen participation in the processes of participative democracy necessarily runs through the availability and facilitation of access to information. However, we believe that it is necessary to go further if we in fact wish to expand participation in terms both of participant numbers and quality of intervention.

The participation of those citizens and/or sectors not yet channeling their interventions and demands through participative democracy forums is not increasing because there are either other strategies by which their needs are met by the civic authorities or because they do not believe that participative democracy

is better than such strategies. We therefore believe that setting up the Local Solidarity Governance program is seeking to expand the cast of social players, making them believe that with social capital they can overcome the limitations of the public budget and actions linked only to the sphere of the state. The challenge of incorporating those citizens and sectors that we have not managed to convince so far about the benefits of participative democracy through the Participative Budget, in fact seems to be progressing well through the efforts of Local Solidarity Governance.

In terms of qualification of intervention and demands, we believe that those citizens and sectors that have not yet taken part in the democratic forums can be incorporated through the qualification and interactivity of information. So we return here to our concept of democratization of information as a process, as interaction between those who convey information and those who receive it. And this concept led us to seek mechanisms to enable ObservaPoa to interact with the citizen. The technicians therefore started to attend all the Participative Budget district and thematic assemblies to present the ObservaPoa access and navigation facilities in advance. We sought in this way to enable participants to see that, in addition to access and navigation facilities, there was also a series of information that could be combined to enable them to qualify their demands and thus make their public intervention more securely and on an equal footing with those better-informed citizens accustomed to manifesting themselves more frequently. This strategy was seen to be inadequate, however, since the participants at these assemblies had prepared their demands beforehand and their interventions continued to defend those demands and analyze the council's actions towards meeting demands of previous years or recent problems in the district and/or city. Despite being a culminating moment of participative democracy it is not, however, an appropriate occasion for establishing more profitable interactive contact.

Having recognized the limitations for interactivity at the district and thematic assemblies, it seemed that a good opportunity would be to introduce the topic and discuss with citizens before the assemblies. We therefore started going to all the

districts and presenting the website more interactively, creating a more direct dialogue, to be able to record citizens' requirements and limits for understanding the information and, in particular, their acceptance and criticism of the content and form of ObservaPoa. This was an essential experience that enabled us to verify how distant the form and content of information can be from those who are generally part of the social phenomena being presented. We heard criticism ranging from divergent information (census, administrative etc.) to regionalization that did not consider the accentuated social differences within the same district or neighborhood.

Based on the positive response from our visits to the districts, we can see that if we organize workshops about the function and content of ObservaPoa with administrative-center staff, representatives of the Participative Budget in each district and those responsible for the Local Governance meetings, we could create replicators better able to publicize the ObservaPoa website, due to their direct and almost daily contact with citizens. The information at ObservaPoa would also serve as a daily work instrument for administrative issues related to the services provided by Porto Alegre City Council, for issues related to the qualified construction of demands, or for formulating local development projects. In fact, the more these people can master the ObservaPoa content the more time will be saved in looking for information and the greater will be the return in terms of citizens' perception of the requirements and adaptations of the website. Several workshops were therefore organized with these staff and representatives during 2006 and we can see that many citizens have started to manifest themselves through ObservaPoa email and many institutions have been turning to our team to make presentations about the website and talk about the process of setting it up.

Almost two years since the launch of ObservaPoa, we can see that there are still challenges to be faced. Despite Porto Alegre City Council's initiatives for

increasing Internet access through 25 Telecenters<sup>3</sup> and a Cibernarium<sup>4</sup>, most of the population is still excluded from the digital world. These two Council projects were created on the understanding that digital exclusion is strongly related to insufficient income for accessing the benefits of the information society. Therefore, if we consider insufficient income as the main variable in determining poverty, it should not be underestimated by cities intending to make democratization of information a process for expanding participation, for although poverty reduction is not solely and exclusively under the control of local governments, information will be increasingly contained within the digital world. In other words, there is no possibility of qualification of participation without reducing poverty, just as there is no possibility of sustained reduction of poverty without qualification of participation.

Despite the aforementioned limitations, we have however been seeking other vehicles for interaction with citizens, through publications or in direct contact through presentations and discussion about the form and content of ObservaPoa. We have attended many events to introduce the website and interact with the public and we are continuing to set up arrangements that enable us to qualify the available information. In October 2007, we are currently working to establish an arrangement through the United Nations Development Programme for constructing the Intra-urban Human Development Index for the Metropolitan region of Porto Alegre, in which we can provide more than 100 Indicators in Human Development Units (HDUs) which will allow verification of intra-municipal and intra-district heterogeneities. We therefore continue to believe that it is possible to expand and qualify informed participation in an interactive way and not forget that **“not knowing it was impossible, he went on and did it”**.

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<sup>3</sup> Telecenters are digital centers coordinated by the Council, with 10 to 20 computers connected to the Internet, printer and scanner. People attending the units take part in basic computer courses, surf the Web for free, research, read news, visit chatrooms, type documents and CVs and send emails.

<sup>4</sup> The Cibernarium is a Porto Alegre City Council project run by its technology company, Procempa, which aims to reduce digital exclusion, providing an online room where citizens have free internet access and 200 places per month for computer courses. The courses are also offered to the visually impaired.

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