

# GOLD VI

**Case-Based Contribution  
to Chapter 9: Democratizing**  
*GOLD VI Report on Pathways  
to urban and territorial equality*

**Local institutions for civic participation,  
participatory budgeting and planning,  
inclusion of youth and migrants**

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# Local institutions for civic participation, participatory budgeting and planning, inclusion of youth and migrants

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## ORGANISATION NAME

International Observatory on Participatory Democracy and UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights

## CITIES/COUNTRIES IT COVERS

Mexico City and Iztapalapa (Mexico), Rafah (Palestine), Barcelona (Spain), Yaounde (Cameroon), Cuenca (Ecuador), Penang State (Malaysia), Sousse (Tunisia), Buenos Aires (Argentina), São Paulo (Brazil), Athens (Greece), Berlin (Germany), Montreal (Canada), Turkey

## CHAPTER

9: Democratizing

## SUMMARY

Local and regional governments have been at the forefront of a participatory process consolidating democracy at a time of global pushback against democratic and human rights values. As institutions of proximity, local and regional governments have always practiced informal forms of citizen engagement, from dialogue with individuals and organized groups to the promotion of forums and neighborhood assemblies. For several decades, various local governments have promoted more formal forms of participation through neighborhood councils, assemblies, participatory budgets, public hearings or other regulated forums to incorporate citizens in public deliberation, decision making and evaluation of public policies. These practices have been developed with different objectives and purposes, such as achieving greater legitimacy of institutions or policies, better allocating public funds, including vulnerable population groups or achieving more transformative policies. The last years have seen a consolidation and deepening of local participatory democracy practices, triggered also by the COVID-19 crisis. In this compilation we would like to highlight the experiences of civic participation most focused on building pathways for the advancement of urban and regional territorial equality. **Local and regional governments should not hesitate to promote citizen participation and co-creation practices that include diverse audiences and help to shape urban equity.**

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# 1. Introduction

Citizen participation practices promoted by local governments aim to incorporate the knowledge, ideas, aspirations and needs of the citizenry in the elaboration and implementation of public policies. They are also an opportunity to generate and strengthen the social and community fabric, by fostering meetings and dialogue among citizens, especially among social groups that may live segregated. **Participation is a way of creating citizenship, a school of democracy and coexistence, which is also a fundamental right that can be used to vindicate and defend other human rights.**

When local governments promote citizen participation practices, they must be careful to design inclusive mechanisms to achieve the participation of all groups in terms of age, socio-economic status or cultural origin. Efforts should be made to design participation taking into account the numerous gaps that exist in cities and territories: age, accessibility, income, digital access, origin and languages spoken. **Inclusive participation can provide a pathway to urban equality.**

## 2. Local institutions for civic participation

**Mexico City** (Mexico) has adopted a new law for citizen participation that recognizes an ecosystem of mechanisms of direct and participatory democracy like citizen's Initiatives, referendums, citizen assemblies, and community participation commissions, among others. The institutionalization of citizen participation mechanisms is an important democratic guarantee and should facilitate the inclusion of citizens in decision making, since citizens can claim the rights recognized in the law and the alternation of government affects the practices of participation less.

Local institutions for civil participation **Turkey-wide** involve citizen assemblies and live broadcast municipal assembly meetings. City councils (citizens' assemblies) in many Turkish cities act as a non-official consultative body which provides suggestions to the local authorities on planning. Founded within the framework of Local Agenda 21, they are the main instruments to ensure participatory decision making at the local level.

The municipality of **Rafah** (Palestine) established neighborhood councils in 15 different areas. The councils participate in municipal council meetings and also play an active role in the budgeting process. Besides, the councils also act as mediators between the private sector and local government.

The city of **Barcelona** (Spain) launched the Decidim.Barcelona platform in 2016. The digital participation and democratic platform gives citizens a voice so that they may decide on the future of their surroundings. It is a digital space forming part of a participatory process in which to debate, respond and gather proposals. The tool is put together using open-source software and open code, so that it can be reused and improved upon. "As pluralism has seemingly increased without dislodging existing social capital, it seems that the increase of participation has led to an improvement of democracy, especially in what concerns the legitimacy of the decisions made."

### 3. Participatory budgeting

The first participatory budgeting system in the world started in the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil in 1989, and it has spread to all over the world. Participatory budgeting (PB) is considered one of the most successful democratic innovations of the last 25 years, as underlined by Allegretti and Hartz-Karp. The practice works as follows: individual or organized citizens propose investment projects in municipal facilities (educational, cultural, sports centers...), renovation and improvement of public spaces (paving, gardens, lighting) or other basic investments (sanitation, economic development, housing), followed by a phase of project definition and prioritization in workshops or other sessions, and finally the projects to be implemented are submitted to a vote of the citizens.

Citizens' participation in the budget decision process improved direct democracy and increased financial efficiency and transparency. The success of Porto Alegre made the United Nations and the World Bank to praise the system as one of the most innovative ways to get transparency in administrative works. Participatory budgeting provides an opportunity to prioritize investment spending in the most deprived neighborhoods and communities.

Since the first experience in 1989, this system of participation in the definition of investment projects has expanded throughout the world and has been evolving and mutating. Most of these experiences are territorially based, i.e. participatory budgets that are organized in neighborhoods, villages (e.g. Cuenca) or districts (e.g. Barcelona), which can facilitate redistribution. But there are more and more thematic participatory budgets: for example, focused on sustainable development (e.g. Bordeaux), local development planning (e.g. Medellín), gender projects (e.g. Penang) or for youth (e.g. Boston).



Youth participation policies in Lima, Peru  
Source: IOPD

In Cameroon, the ASSOAL association promotes participatory budgeting at the local level to favor equitable economic development. For example, in **Yaoundé**, the participatory budget allows the residents to promote the investments they consider most necessary for their basic needs: sanitation systems, paving of roads, access to drinking water, development of renewable energies. Participatory budgeting allows the allocation of resources for the further development of the most disadvantaged communities.

In the city of **Cuenca** (Ecuador), the participatory budget is the tool chosen by the municipality to transfer resources to the rural parishes (the decentralized entities of the municipality with less infrastructure and facilities). The citizens organized in local assemblies prioritize the investments that serve to balance the economic development and opportunities of the population wherever they live in the municipality.

The Gender Responsive and Participatory Budgeting Programme in **Penang State** (Malaysia) and two local councils – Penang Island City Council and Seberang Perai – seeks to promote gender equality and social justice. The methodology analyzes decision-making on public expenditure in the context of implications on gender equality and attempts to bring development and changes that will make budgets more gender-equal.

## 4. Inclusion of youth and migrants

Citizen participation mechanisms are an opportunity to empower groups that are often excluded from decision making and that may live in situations of marginalization and exclusion. Citizen engagement is in itself something positive by increasing self-confidence, reinforcing community and achieving recognition in society, as well as an opportunity to generate transformative and positive policies for these groups.

A classic way is the creation of permanent councils for these groups or collectives, such as the municipal youth council in **Sousse** (Tunisia), where young people debate, make reports and contributions on local policies. It is a way to give a voice to youth in local policies, and to compel local authorities to think about youth when defining priorities and actions. In **Buenos Aires** (Argentina) the municipal government has launched the children's participation program *Playing and participating. When children are the protagonists of urban planning*. The main objective was to achieve greater levels of equality in participation and to

incorporate diversity as a criterion for inclusion. In other words, to guarantee the effective fulfillment of children's right to be heard and to actively participate in the transformation of the city.

In striving for urban equality, we must not forget any group of residents, especially migrants, who are very often excluded from political participation. Several cities have foreseen various ways of involving the migrant population in the city's democratic process, either by helping associations, creating municipal councils for migrants or incorporating the migrant population in the participatory processes. The city of **São Paulo** (Brazil) created the Municipal Council of Immigration in 2018, an elected body consisting of refugees and migrants. It was created to enable refugees and migrants to take part in the city's life and participate in political decisions affecting their own lives. Cities such as **Athens** (Greece) or **Berlin** (Germany) have created councils including representatives from migrant communities and CSOs which meet regularly to assess migrants' needs and adequate service provision.

Youth participation policies in Lima, Peru  
Source: IOPD



## 5. Programs and public consultations for equality

In **Barcelona** (Spain) we can also highlight the *Neighborhood Plan*, an extraordinary program for the most disadvantaged neighborhoods of Barcelona, which aims to reverse inequalities through the implementation of new public policies, involving citizens in the development of projects to revitalize their neighborhoods and with an extraordinary and intensive budget allocated for a limited time.

On the path to equality and against discrimination, we can also highlight the broad consultation held in **Montreal** (Canada) on “Systemic Racism and Discrimination” within the Jurisdiction of the City. The goal of this public consultation was to draw a portrait of the current state of affairs, to highlight the solutions proposed by the collectivity and to enlarge perspectives in order to guide public decision making. Citizen participation can indeed be an effective democratic instrument to achieve more equitable cities in socio-economic terms and in terms of social recognition.

In a metropolitan environment with strong urban inequalities, the City Council of **Iztapalapa** in Mexico City (Mexico) has promoted the

program *Dialogues for well-being and peace. Planning and transforming Iztapalapa*. It seeks to generate a new government-citizenship and citizen-community relationship, based on the interrelation of diverse participation mechanisms such as: the generation of voluntary community links in various areas of action (peace and welfare, health, civil protection, women, youth, children, older adults); the recovery, recreation and strengthening of community assemblies in the neighborhoods; the implementation of processes of dialogue and participatory community planning for the development, co-management and self-management of local development agendas.

These cases we have described, and many other initiatives, are proposals that should inspire local and regional authorities to promote in their cities and territories mechanisms for participation, deliberation and co-decision that include the diversity of the citizenry and make it possible to build paths towards urban equality. **Local and regional governments should not be afraid of opening these mechanisms, which should be an opportunity to create better policies and reinforce democratic legitimacy.**

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In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 9 on “Democratizing”, which focuses on the challenges and opportunities for local and regional governments in implementing meaningful participatory processes, and democratizing decision-making, unpacking asymmetries of power and the underpinning trends affecting processes of democratization. The chapter explores how local and regional governments can promote more egalitarian, participatory and democratic processes, giving voice to marginalized groups of society, minorities and other groups, and thus contribute to urban and territorial equality.

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