

Reality Check on Children's Participation in the Governance of Barra Mansa, Brazil

Marta Barceló

*Development Planning Unit
University College, London*

Citation: Barceló, Marta. (2005). "Reality Check on Children's Participation in the Governance of Barra Mansa, Brazil." *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2): 169-184. Retrieved [date] from <http://www.colorado.edu/journals/cye/>.

Comment on This Article

Abstract

This paper comments on the direction in which the children's participatory budget council, established in 1998 in Barra Mansa, Brazil, has gone since 2001 when changes in the political party governing the municipality took place. Tracking the progress made, this paper argues that this once innovative and promising initiative has been watered down to the extent that its potential to recognize and draw on children's active citizenship and agency in processes of urban governance has been considerably weakened.

Keywords: **children's participation, governance, participatory democracy, participatory budgeting, urban policy**

Introduction

A major contribution of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has been its recognition of children as active agents able to exercise their rights, rather than mere recipients of protection. One of the manifestations of this recognition at the local level over recent years has been the formation of children's councils in many parts of the world (Hart 1992; Bartlett et al. 1999; Wyness 2001). However, there is little material available that actually follows the success of these political spaces over a period of time. Most accounts describe initiatives without looking at whether they have managed to survive, how they have changed over time or become institutionalized into local processes.

The purpose of this paper is to draw an updated account of the children's participatory budgeting council in Barra Mansa in the State of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.¹ First introduced in 1998, the council allowed children the opportunity to make decisions about their own neighborhoods, and, within the limits of available resources, to follow through the implementation of these decisions. Now in its eighth year, the council still functions despite changes in the political party governing this municipality. The first years of this council's existence were described in some detail in 2002 by [Guerra](#). By describing and commenting on the changes that have been introduced and by reflecting on the nature of the current Children's Council, this paper aims to contribute to the on-going learning about children's involvement in local governance processes.

The paper draws on sources obtained through Mr. José Valente Pereira² and Ms. Helen Luize Almeida,³ both of whom have been involved with the current council. These sources include internal presentations and reports from the different departments of the governing party and technical staff involved. Discussions were also held with Ms. Cida Damião, coordinator of the earlier participatory program "Citizenship Knows No Age," and Mr. Agostinho Silva, coordinator of the project "Youth Mobilization." Both held these positions while the Workers' Party was governing the municipality. Additional information about the children's participatory budgeting council and its evolution was gathered through individual questionnaires to people involved in the first (1998-2000) and current phases of the initiative. A report from the child delegates and councilors was also available.

In the course of analyzing this material, numerous questions arose, as relevant information was missing in the reports. Discussions and clarifications were essential to unveil crucial issues that were not obvious at first glance.⁴ This is a reminder of how difficult it can be for outsiders interested in the issue to get a clear picture of projects when experiences are not adequately documented. There is a danger of having a distorted view and of making assumptions that do not correspond with the reality.

Background

The Brazilian Constitution of 1988 recognizes the creation of participatory management councils enabling citizens to be included in the budget process and hence, to decide how resources are allocated (Schneider 2002, 14; IBAM 2000, 6-7). Such councils are considered "real fora for the practice of citizenship"

(Guerra 2002, 72). The tool of participatory budgeting was first implemented in the municipality of Porto Alegre in 1989. Currently, approximately 250 cities worldwide are implementing similar initiatives (Cabannes 2004, 27). In this context of democratization, the Brazilian Statute on the Child and Adolescent 1990 (Article 16) also acknowledges children's right to participate in political life. The municipality of Barra Mansa was a pioneer in the formation of a Children's Participatory Budget Council.

In 1997, the governing Labor Party in Barra Mansa introduced the municipal program "Citizenship Knows No Age" aiming to develop the responsibilities of citizens from childhood and to institutionalize children's participation in the governance of their municipality. The following year a Children's Participatory Budget Council was launched as a result of a city consultation supported by the United Nations Urban Management Program for Latin America and the Caribbean. This council was composed of a total of 36 councilors (18 boys and 18 girls) between nine and fifteen years old who had been previously elected as neighborhood delegates and then as district delegates (Guerra 2002). Children had discussions and deliberations in neighborhood assemblies during which they had to decide on priorities in their neighborhoods. They also had to establish their priorities at the district and municipal levels. As the city was divided into six districts, a total of 18 priorities were thus determined each year. The councilors had to choose among these priorities based on the budget available, and then follow them through the process of implementation (UMP-LAC 2003, 36; IBAM 2000, 17). Although this initiative had an impact on the city's physical environment, criticisms arose due to the slow implementation of projects. This was perhaps partly owing to limited technical and financial resources and little experience (UMP-LAC 2003, 47). Hence, the early stages of this initiative were characterized more by the deliberations among children rather than by the concrete achievements following on these deliberations.

In 2001, the Brazilian Socialist Party in Barra Mansa took over from the Workers' Party. The new administration decided to continue the previous initiative through the municipal program PlanePar (Participatory Planning), which included PlanePar Mirim, specifically targeting children.⁵ The objective was to continue providing an opportunity for children to participate in the municipal budget of their city, leading to the inclusion of programs and projects beneficial to them in the areas of culture and leisure, and to an improvement in how they valued their environment (Mayor's Office 2003). Moreover, the aim was to render the previous project more efficient, speeding up the process of election of delegates and councilors, the definition of priorities, and the approval and implementation of projects (UMP-LAC 2003, 47).

In Paris in June 2001, representatives from the governing party in Barra Mansa presented their project, PlanePar Mirim, to the European Union's Program for Urban Development in Latin America (Rede Urb AL) REDE 3 - "Democracy in the City" which promotes co-operation between the EU and Latin American cities through partnerships. In December 2001, the project was accepted by REDE 3 and a partnership was established uniting Barra Mansa with several cities: Rio Claro and Santo André (Brazil), Guanta (Venezuela), Rubi (Spain) and Le Lamentin (France), with the French city coordinating the partnership. A common project that focused on participatory budgeting for youth was also approved. In December 2002 in Le Lamentin, PlanePar Mirim was adapted to include the

suggestions from REDE 3. Barra Mansa was part of the network between 2001-2004.

Rede Urb AL is an exchange mechanism and was never intended to fund all project activities since responsibility for physical environment improvements belongs solely to the municipality. However, it made support available for human resources, materials for communication and learning, equipment for work places to carry out the project and the cost of a general assembly. During 2003, the municipality of Barra Mansa received the equivalent of approximately US\$5,000 from Rede Urb AL, which, in addition, funded two international meetings in Le Lamentin and in Santo André during which the mayors of the cities belonging to the network were present. However, a child councilor and a delegate from Barra Mansa were only able to attend the Santo André meeting, where they met other councilors and delegates from the network.⁶

PlanePar Mirim

The project is directed by a Management Committee comprised of representatives from the governing party interested in the project from various municipal departments (education, environment, health, social assistance and planning and public policies). Its role, according to Ms. Almeida, is to coordinate children's assemblies, plenary meetings and all other activities. In this committee, neither civil society nor the children themselves are represented, which is atypical for any participatory process in Brazil. Barra Mansa's Secretariat of Public Policies was responsible for the project between 2001 and 2004. This Secretariat ceased to exist in 2005, and currently, PlanePar Mirim is under the municipal Government Secretariat.

The Management Committee introduced some changes in the process of children's participation. These included shifting most of the activities to the school level (public and private) and eliminating neighborhood assemblies. There are 62 municipal schools, four state schools and two private schools in Barra Mansa. Apart from three municipal schools for those older than 16 years, three of the state schools and the two private schools, all schools have implemented the project.⁷ While this initiative targets all children attending school, only those aged between nine and sixteen can vote or be elected as delegates or councilors.

To understand the composition of the Children's Council, one has to bear in mind how the current administration has divided the city, redistributing the six previous districts into 17 administrative units in order to improve the efficient management of the municipality. The way these units have been established follows a specific rationale: there are 15 administrative units, each comprising neighborhoods or districts with the same quality of life index,⁸ one Differential Unit (Unidade de Planejamento Diferenciado) grouping only those neighborhoods with the highest quality of life index (that is, only the richest areas), and one Strategic Unit (Unidade de Planejamento de interesse estratégico) comprising the neighborhoods from the city center and the main areas of access (UMP-LAC 2003, 45). Since 2001, there have been 17 councilors, one councilor representing each administrative unit, elected by the delegates of the same unit.⁹ Moreover, the number of delegates is limited to 240, or four from each participating school. Hence, the number of delegates per administrative unit depends on the number of schools that each unit has. The elections of delegates

and councilors take place in the schools, while assemblies and plenary sessions usually take place in the auditorium of the Town Hall.

The Management Committee also eliminated the gender equity criterion at all levels of the process. As a result, in 2001 only 4 out of 17 councilors were girls, in 2002 and 2003 there were six girl councilors and in 2004, five girls.¹⁰ Ms. Almeida argues that since democracy is not related to the gender or ethnic background of participants, all children can get involved in the project. Their participation depends entirely on their willingness to become engaged in the activities of their municipality. Similarly, Ms. Damiano and Mr. Silva from the former administration argue that the current administration believes that not establishing in advance a gender quota for the election of delegates and councilors makes the process more democratic.

The responsibilities of delegates are to link children from each administrative unit to the councilors by informing them about actions, organizing periodic meetings and exchanging experiences. In each participating school, children's demands are discussed and proposals are put forward to the delegates. They in turn present these proposals to the councilors, who decide by consensus in an assembly with the delegates on the main issues concerning the unit. According to Mr. Valente, councilors act as coordinators of the delegates of each unit.

Each year in June the councilors present the main concerns of their administrative unit in a plenary meeting. Local authorities, taking into account the amount of public funds available, have limited the proposals the children can make to one in each of three categories each year—public works, public policies and the participation of children as citizens.¹¹ During the June meeting, the delegates decide on the final three proposals that will be presented by the 17 councilors to the Management Committee (Secretariat of Public Policies 2002). Prior to 2001, it was the councilors who decided on the final priorities.

PlanePar Mirim was included in Barra Mansa's Multi-Year Plan of Investment (PPI) from 2001 which covered municipal investments for the next four years. The specific amount of the municipal budget allocated for PlanePar Mirim is decided every year in September. However, this allocation is only a prediction of future expenditure, a planned amount. In practice, funds may or may not be available as reallocations of funds from one municipal project to another are allowed. Hence, not all projects included in the PPI are actually implemented.

The percentage of the municipal budget allocated yearly for this project has been approximately 1 percent.¹² In 2001, R\$180,000,00 (US\$92,460¹³) was allocated. From 2002-2004 R\$150,000,00 was allocated each year (US\$63,300; US\$45,500; US\$53,300 respectively). Due to financial difficulties in the municipality, the budget for 2005 is only US\$12,000. From 2001 to 2004 the budget came from the Secretariat of Urban Planning. In allocating their funds according to their priorities, the children learn about the financial situation of their city and how to design a budget (Valente Pereira 2003).

The project also involved the introduction of the following related themes in 2003 in the school curricula:

1. Society, politics and democracy;
2. Spaces for youth;

3. Mechanisms for the exercise of citizenship: their rights as citizens;
4. Public administration and the mayor's office role

These themes were drawn from 13 themes included in a Rede Urb AL guide called "Academic Proposals." Each city belonging to the network selected those themes most pertinent to its context. These four were chosen in 2002 by the Management Committee after an evaluation carried out in schools on children's knowledge regarding these issues.¹⁴ Sessions were held to explain the objectives of the project to teachers, who then explained the topics to students. Debates and analysis of concrete situations followed. The topics were covered by all, regardless of age, so that students got to know the project at an early age and older students could advise others by sharing their experiences (Mayor's Office 2003). Although the partnership with the Rede Urb AL ended in 2004, according to Mr. Valente, they are looking into the possibility in Barra Mansa of including these topics permanently by increasing the school schedule.

The topic "Society, Politics and Democracy" explains the role of the executive, legislative and the judiciary branches of government and what elections mean. Some activities aim to identify potential leaders and the roles children can have within a group, reflecting on issues of social responsibility (Goretti 2003).

"Spaces for Youth" was developed through small research projects in 2003 in which students identified the places they would like for study and leisure.¹⁵ This resulted in a report handed to the delegates and councilors advising them on what they should prioritize.¹⁶ Consequently, during a general assembly in 2003 attended by approximately 200 delegates and councilors, it was agreed to prioritize building a sports and cultural facility in the city center and to bring computers into all schools.¹⁷

"Mechanisms for the Exercise of Citizenship: Their Rights as Citizens" aimed to inform students about the Statute of Children and Adolescents and Human Rights; and "Public Administration and the Mayor's Office Role," gave delegates and councilors the chance to talk to local authorities from various departments (Goretti 2003). Related to this topic was the project "Prefeitos Mirims" (Children Mayors). Every year, some elected students get the chance to accompany the mayor for a month to learn more about his activities. According to the mayor, this enables them to inform and raise awareness among fellow students about the importance of getting involved in PlanePar Mirim through visits to schools and lectures (Brasil Fonseca 2004). In 2003, a plenary meeting was created to discuss assessment of the students' knowledge of the four topics included in the school curricula.

As described by Mr. Valente, during their meetings in schools and at the mayor's office, students, and more specifically, delegates and councilors have discussions regarding the situation of schools, talking about such topics as the insufficient number of places available in schools due to registration quotas, the quality of school meals or the poor condition of some school buildings. Students also discuss their communities and their problems to identify changes that they would like to see happen and to increase their awareness about what is needed to make those changes (Goretti 2003). Some students had debates on the lack of water, electricity or asphalt on the roads of some of the neighborhoods and

problems with garbage collection. They also covered issues such as unemployment, racial and social discrimination.

Achievements

It is important to know what this initiative has achieved, in order to assess whether it goes beyond the accomplishments of projects that focus only on the educational benefits of including children and young people in local issues.

1. Impacts on the City's Environment

This initiative has had tangible impacts on the city's environment (see Table 1). Only some of these improvements were undertaken using the funds allocated for PlanePar Mirim, including a sewage treatment station in the neighborhood Santa Maria II in 2001 for R\$25,000,00 (US\$12,840) and a sports facility in the neighborhood Nossa Senhora de Lourdes in 2002 for R\$80,000,00 (US\$33,800).¹⁸ According to Mr. Valente, the river Bananal running through the neighborhood Santa Maria II was severely polluted as untreated sewage was being directly emptied into it. Children who went to school in this neighborhood demanded that the issue be tackled. The sports facility used the funds allocated for the initiative in 2001, which, according to Mr. Valente, constitutes an achievement as this particular sports facility had been pending since 2000.

Table 1. Achievements exclusively financed through the budget allocated for Planepar Mirim

Budget allocated/Year	Budget Implemented (Total)	Achievements at the City level	Achievements at the School level
<u>2001</u> R\$ 180,000,00	R\$ 100,000,00	Station for treatment of sewers: R\$ 25,000,00	Improvements in school buildings: R\$ 75,000,00
<u>2002</u> R\$ 150,000,00	R\$ 80,000 from 2001 funds	Sports facility: R\$ 80,000,00	Not applicable
<u>2003</u> R\$ 150,000,00	R\$ 100,000,00	Public services, including contributing to building sports facilities: R\$ 65,000,00	Increase the number of computers: R\$ 35,000,00
<u>2004</u> R\$ 150,000,00	R\$ 112,000,00	Not applicable	Improve some school buildings and quality of school meals and purchase computers

In addition to these projects, others were undertaken drawing on the general municipal budget. These included 12 sports facilities built in 2003 for R\$20,000,00 each (US\$6,000) in response to the children's demands. Currently, a culture and sport center in the city center under the Public Services Department of Barra Mansa has been prioritized through PlanePar Mirim, but this too will be funded from the general budget of the municipality. So far R\$40,000,00 has been spent on this center.

Furthermore, according to Mr. Valente, each year problems such as the lack of asphalt on some roads, poor lighting, and transportation were dealt with, thanks to children's involvement, as they made these issues a priority. As a result, the municipality repaired Avenida Presidente Kennedy and they made a free bus pass available for students living further than a kilometer from school.

Children from the rural areas of Barra Mansa have indicated their wish to carry out improvements in their communities, too—mainly involving better roads, better transportation and school buildings—and these are also dealt with through the general municipal budget. Since these rural districts only have primary schools, students wanting to further their education have to commute to the city. Because roads are in a poor state, children requested repair work on the roads leading to two of the rural districts (Distrito rural de Rialto and Distrito rural de Amparo) which were funded with the budget coming from the Secretariat of Agriculture.

An indirect impact of the project has been the creation in 2003 of 17 "Ecoclubs." Although they are independent of PlanePar Mirim, they focus on developing the aims of the project. These clubs involve approximately 500 students, and address issues such as the quality of the water, the planting of trees and recycling (Brasil Fonseca 2004).

PlanePar Mirim has also had an impact on schools (see Table 1). In 2001, R\$75,000,00 (US\$38,500) was used to carry out improvements in school buildings. In 2003 approximately R\$35,000,00 (US\$10,600) was spent to increase the number of computers in schools, and R\$65,000,00 (US\$19,700) was spent on public services, including building sports facilities in some neighborhoods. In 2004, R\$112,000,00 (US\$39,800) was used to improve some school buildings and the quality of school meals, and to purchase more computers for schools. Another R\$70,000,00 (US\$25,900) from the general budget of the municipality will be allocated to increase the number of computers in schools.

Regarding the influence on public policies, Mr. Valente claims that while the children did not request specific policy changes, their requests for improvements in school buildings, leisure areas, the quality of education and the number of computers in schools, in fact constituted activity in the policy realm. Children's demands for participation were mainly requests to ensure that PlanePar Mirim continues over time.

2. Impacts on Children Themselves

According to Mr. Valente, being able to prioritize public works and use public funds has had a positive impact on children's development. Some children were not interested in the project in its early stages, distrustful that their demands would be recognized. This feeling, he claims, changed when their demands were finally presented to the mayor. Moreover, the project contributed to their better knowledge of the situation of their neighborhoods and their city and the complexity of the problems that citizens have to face. According to Ms. Almeida, parents have witnessed a positive change in children's behavior, as they have become more critical and proactive towards social problems. According to the mother of a 12 year-old delegate, her daughter feels like an authority and

enjoys what she does very much, and if she sees something wrong she speaks out (Mother of Kerolin Quete 2003).

The current mayor claims that one of the most important achievements is the greater degree of awareness that children attending school have regarding their rights and responsibilities related to their city and country as a result of this initiative (Brasil Fonseca 2004). Diego de Paula Castro Pereira, a 14 year-old councilor, claims that the project has increased his sense of responsibility, maturity and respect, but above all his knowledge. One child describes himself as a lucky child because he managed to be elected as a delegate and attended an international meeting in Santo André (Participating Children 2003).

3. Degree of Institutionalization

Currently PlanePar Mirim is part of the Public Policy for Childhood and Youth and is endorsed, according to Mr. Valente, by the citizenry. What was decisive for the institutionalization of this initiative, he claims, was that both parents and teachers understood that learning does not have to be limited to the traditional subjects such as geography or math, but that knowing about the exercise of citizens' rights is also crucial. Adult councilors also support the project, but with restrictions; they tend to see the consultation with children about what should be done in the municipality as something which reduces their own decision-making space, and this constitutes an obstacle for the institutionalization of the project.¹⁹ The now primarily consultative nature of the process is a clear step backwards compared with the situation prior to 2001. Then, the process, while it had limitations, was one of power sharing.

Challenges

Reports and internal documents on the project point to various practical problems with its implementation. Including all students in all schools, for instance, means that for the project to function effectively, numerous people—teachers, assistants and technical staff—have to be involved, and they do not always have enough time.²⁰ Moreover, school homework and holidays are said to affect the implementation of activities (Valente Pereira 2003). Other practical difficulties include convening meetings, choosing venues, organizing the means of transportation when children have to gather outside their schools, and getting materials needed for the meetings (Goretti 2003). But other more fundamental problems are also apparent when the current project is compared to the previous one.

1. Inclusiveness

The issue of inclusiveness has suffered a setback with the elimination of the gender equity criterion at all levels of the process by the Management Committee. Girls' political representation has been considerably undermined. The former mayor, Ms. Pandeló,²¹ claims that the gender equity criterion had been fundamental to building up new values and relations among the citizenry.

Moreover, although Mr. Valente claims that all children are adequately represented in the process,²² taking into account issues such as poverty²³ and discrimination would have been desirable in a context characterized, as Barra Mansa is, by social exclusion. According to Mr. Valente, very few afro-descendants enter professions such as engineering or medicine. Moreover, there

is only a private university which makes it impossible for a majority of students coming from poor backgrounds to pay the fees.

Lastly, the dependence of the number of delegates per administrative unit on the number of schools in each unit triggers further inequalities. Some units may have too few delegates to represent adequately the reality of their neighborhoods, and this limits the potential for debate about issues of concern. According to Mr. Valente, children from poor backgrounds attend schools which generally have more students. As a result, these schools may yield fewer representatives per capita.

2. Losing the City and Neighborhood Perspective

The elimination of the neighborhood assemblies has been one of the most damaging modifications of the previous process. Because they do not always attend school in the administrative unit where they live, children no longer have the same opportunity to associate themselves as part of a community, which was one of the main objectives of the previous experience (Guerra 2002, 75; Damião 2001, 6).

This change overlooks that children are rooted in their physical surroundings, and that many of the improvements they care about are directly linked to their local living environments. According to Ms. Almeida, the elimination of the neighborhood assemblies has undermined the utility of the project, in that they had been useful in bringing the reality of each community to the municipal government. Ms. Damião and Mr. Silva also argue that these assemblies enabled children to discuss and define the priorities in each community.

Having schools as the setting for most activities risks watering down the quality of deliberations and discussions about the city in a number of ways.

- According to Mr. Valente, some teachers' lack of familiarity with the culture of participation was one of the main obstacles when this initiative was introduced.
- The focus in school tends to be more on acquiring theoretical knowledge about citizenship than on developing concrete proposals; it is questionable how much time was in fact allocated within schools to reflect on the situation of local neighborhoods. Hart, who is critical of the suitability of schools as venues for the practice of citizenship, argues that too much emphasis on children's theoretical knowledge and awareness rather than on what they can actually do to improve their communities may hinder their right to political self-determination. The children's councils created within schools generally have a consultative nature. Hence, he argues for the engagement of children in community projects where they are better able to contribute their insights (Hart 1992, 43).
- Although the four curricular themes were introduced after an evaluation of children's knowledge, these were predetermined, an approach which can hinder the scope of children's debates. Children are less likely to relate to standard materials on issues of citizenship than to what they experience in their daily lives (Bartlett et al. 1999, 172).

The current administration claims that in case of disagreements an assembly with children and local authorities is called to find out more about the necessities

of each neighborhood or school. According to Ms. Almeida, decisions are then made after considering the priorities of each community and the city as a whole with the budget available.

3. Budget

Although this project is based on the concept of the participatory budget council, the budget allocated for this initiative was never available in full (see Table 1), and this was due, according to Mr. Valente, to past debts from the previous administration. Budgets in Brazil, he claims, are "authorizing" but not "mandatory" in nature, and they do not oblige municipalities in any way. This is one of the key weaknesses of this process, and it makes the process less transparent.

In 2001, even though R\$180,000,00 was allocated for public works prioritized by the children, only R\$100,000,00 was actually available. From 2002 to 2004, R\$150,000,00 was allocated each year. However, in 2002, the construction of the sports facility was carried out using the remaining funds allocated in 2001. In 2003, only R\$100,000,00 was available and in 2004, R\$112,000,00.²⁴

According to Ms. Pandeló, in the case of participatory budgeting in Brazil, budget changes need to be discussed with the councilors. Moreover, she argues that the budget allocated for the previous children's participatory budget council was never changed and that it was used exclusively to develop the projects selected. Hence, the children's scope for prioritizing public works using their budget has been diminished since 2001. As indicated by Mr. Valente, the National Congress is working to eliminate the potential for changes in budgets. However, a change in the legislation is difficult as politicians, he claims, do not have a "planning mentality."

Thus, in effect, since 2001, the general municipal budget funded most project achievements, not the budget specifically allocated for PlanePar Mirim. This has made it difficult at times to distinguish what has been achieved solely through children's involvement and what the municipality would have prioritized had the project not existed. This affects the accountability that councilors and delegates have towards those they represent. Clarity is essential here if children are to acquire a sense of ownership. Ensuring that budgets are not decreased is also critical if councils are to go beyond being merely consultative in nature and are to act as "catalysts" (UN-HABITAT 2004, 11).

Another budget-related concern is that, although there is an overall amount for all administrative units, in practice, not each of them received funds from PlanePar Mirim. This raises questions as to how "redistributive" (Schneider 2001, 14) PlanePar Mirim really is. According to Mr. Valente, due to the limited amount of available funds, an overall allocation was deliberately made so that children could decide themselves how to redistribute municipal funds towards the poorest areas. This, he claims, is what actually happened, as funds were used in the most deprived units following children's decisions.

4. Role of Civil Society

From 1998-2000, parents, local NGOs, different religious groups and local associations all took part in the children's participatory budget council project (Guerra 2002, 74). The ex-mayor, Ms. Pandeló, argues that it is necessary to

involve such civil society organizations, as they can help with the organization and mobilization of plenary meetings, and hence, with the implementation of the project, but without attempting to influence children's discussions. According to Ms. Pandeló, the citizenry highly respects them.

The project, Ms. Almeida and Mr. Valente argue, is an expression of the government's awareness of the importance of involving civil society in decisions about the use of public funds to provide services and build public works. However, by shifting the activities to the school level and excluding civil society organizations from the Management Committee, students in fact miss out on cooperation with civil society and there is a risk that their relations with their fellow citizens will be forgotten. According to the mother of one of the delegates, the project should be publicized in a better way, as many people in the city are not aware of it (Mother of Kerolin Queite 2003).

Ms. Almeida and Mr. Valente claim that the involvement of civil society groups was ended because previous actors tended to politicize the project. Ms. Pandeló maintains that the current mayor regarded the past experience as being too closely linked to the Pandeló administration, and there were claims that children had been manipulated politically. However, the kinds of improvements that children request inevitably raise questions of a political nature as they involve an assessment of what local authorities are doing to tackle their concerns.

These two approaches to participatory process demonstrate that the inclusion of civil society is a key point of contention between different conceptualizations of children's roles in processes of urban governance. Children's councils have been characterized as having an "actor-centric" perspective (UN-HABITAT 2004, 12), but if children are to be regarded as citizens, then as members of civil society they should have the opportunity of support by local organizations interested in the promotion of their well-being and representation.

According to Ms. Damião and Mr. Silva, since the new administration took over, the government's connection with the wider civil society has generally been weakened. (This, they claim, has also been the case in adults' participation in processes of participatory democracy.) As a result, they say, the children's participatory budget council has lost the quality of being an arena of popular participation, and the aim of promoting participatory democracy has been diluted.

The exclusion of different sectors of civil society from this process also raises concerns about the capacity of the project to reach beyond the schools and public institutions involved. This ultimately affects the sustainability of PlanePar Mirim, as it weakens the possibility of changing people's mindsets, and of "institutionalizing" children's participation in urban governance as a phenomenon widely accepted by local society. Currently, the project's strengths depend on the degree of interest and awareness of the various departments of the government.

Regarding the sustainability of children's own involvement over time, it is noteworthy that of the children who were councilors in the first phase of the project, only one was re-elected as councilor in 2004. From 2001 to 2003, none was re-elected.

Concluding Comments

While the continuity of the project, despite changes in the political party governing the municipality, is in itself an achievement, local authorities have not provided solutions to tackle past deficiencies, primarily the slow implementation of projects. Currently, because the budget allocated for the activities of PlanePar Mirim can be changed, decisions made by the Children's Council may not be implemented at all.

Although PlanePar Mirim is based on a participatory electoral approach, like the project that preceded it, the evolution of this experience shows how within this one concept there may in practice be different conceptualizations of children's agency and citizenship which determine what children can achieve.

Even though municipal law specifically recognizes citizens' participation in decisions about the municipal budget, the existence, development and efficiency of children's councils still depend to a great extent on who is in power. The final decision as to whether PlanePar Mirim continues to exist still lies with the executive at the local level, as the project must be established by a municipal decree. According to Ms. Damião and Mr. Silva, how the project is implemented, the number of councilors it has, and its mechanisms of discussion all depend on the ideology of the government that is in power. Ms. Almeida claims that it is the mayor who has the prerogative of introducing amendments if it is believed that reforms are necessary. This is crucial because there is a risk within municipalities of concentrating power in the mayor and thus eliminating not only participatory democracy but representative democracy as well. The decision-making capacity of citizens implied by the participatory budgeting process can cause city councilors to feel that their power is at risk (Cabannes 2003). Hence, the current Children's Council is far from being a body that defines and modifies its own rules of operation (UN-HABITAT 2004, 11). Having this capacity would help the council's continuity, as then its way of functioning would remain no matter who governs the municipality.

Iacofano describes citizen participation as depending on "the degree of interactivity" (what they learn about their surroundings and political structures) and "the degree of actual influence" (the influence they exercise over decisions.) Most participatory projects, he claims, while having a high rate of interactivity, fail to have much impact on decisions (cited in Chawla and Heft 2002, 203). In the case of the Children's Council, while there has been a relatively high "degree of interactivity," children's ability to influence decisions has been undermined. This gap between learning and action is a setback, as previously children had the opportunity to influence the process of decision making at the neighborhood level. When the process became more consultative, the council no longer gave children what Hart calls the chance to find "solutions to real problems" (Hart 1992, 43). If children are to understand what democratic participation is and develop their competency to engage in it, they have to practice (Hart 1992, 5). As Holland argues, "rights become most meaningful in the process of efforts to achieve them" (cited in Bartlett et al. 1999, 172). This account demonstrates how children's influence over decisions within their municipality has been weakened by the new approach to their participation, threatening their active citizenship and agency.

Recommendations for a Way Forward

- There should be a clear definition of the Children's Council goals and framework by children themselves. For instance, children might determine that besides developing concrete projects they would also like to participate in finding solutions to tackle long-term problems affecting their municipality.
- Neighborhood assemblies should be re-introduced in the process of decision-making in order to incorporate the reality of every community.
- Civil society organizations with an interest in the promotion of children's rights as citizens should be represented in the Management Committee and whenever children feel that their cooperation is needed.
- The budget allocated for the activities of the Children's Council should be protected by municipal law. As a result, children would know what can realistically be achieved.
- After each budgetary cycle, there should be an evaluation by children themselves to assess the results and limitations, so as to increase the effectiveness of their council's work.

Marta Barceló (MA in Social Development, University of Sussex) will undertake doctoral research on children's participation in urban governance at the Development Planning Unit, University College London.

Editor's Note: This paper was accepted for publication after revision by the author in response to comments from anonymous reviewers.

Endnotes

1. The Federative Republic of Brazil is divided into 26 states. This administrative division is equivalent to what other countries call provinces.
2. Local coordinator of the EU Rede Urb-AL-Barra Mansa (2001-2004) and currently coordinator of the Program "Consumer's Defense" (PROCON)
3. Assistant to the Secretary of Public Policies—responsible for the administration and organization of activities of the project PlanePar Mirim (2001-February 2005) and currently assistant to the sub-Secretary of Education
4. Special thanks are due to Mr. José Valente Pereira and Ms. Helen Luize Almeida for responding to my queries, and to Miss Mayra Carbone for her support with the Portuguese language.
5. While the program targets all children attending school, most documents refer to *jovens* which is synonymous with adolescents, that is, in Brazil those between 11 and 16 years old. *Mirim* means children.
6. Data provided by Mr. Valente and Ms. Almeida.
7. See endnote 6.
8. The city's quality of life index was established by the University of Barra Mansa
9. From 1998 to 2000, there were 36 councilors.
10. See endnote 6. The 2005 elections had not yet taken place at the time of writing.
11. Regarding the public policy category, Mr. Valente argues that in Brazil this can be understood in a broad sense to refer to any participation in matters of government. When children, for instance, inform the authorities about a street with poor lighting, or a neighborhood with no leisure facilities, or the need for a better quality of education in schools, these are considered public policy matters.
12. Discussion with Mr. Valente.
13. Exchange rate as of January 15th: 2001: US\$1.00= R\$1.9467; 2002: US\$1.00= R\$2.3697; 2003: US\$1.00= R\$3.2975; 2004: US\$1.00= R\$2.8118; 2005: US\$1.00

- = R\$2.7066 (Source: Banco Central do Brasil; www.bacen.gov.br/?TXCOTAÇÃO). Data provided by Mr. Valente.
14. See endnote 6.
 15. Using research projects to identify these places only happened in 2003. Typically, priorities are determined by students through discussions.
 16. Discussion with Ms. Almeida.
 17. See endnote 6.
 18. Where not otherwise referenced, all budget figures were obtained from Mr. Valente.
 19. See endnote 11.
 20. See endnote 6.
 21. Discussion with Ms. Maria Inês Pandeló Cerqueira (Workers Party), who was mayor between 1996 and 2000.
 22. In Brazil, 44.6 percent of the Brazilian population are afro-descendants (IGBE- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2000). In Barra Mansa, 73.35 out of 174.74 inhabitants are afro-descendants, approximately 42 percent (IGBE- Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2000). Data provided by Mr. Valente. According to Mr. Valente, the number of afro-descendant delegates is approximately 90 out of 240 delegates each year. Regarding the councilors, he claims that 8 councilors out of the 17 councilors are afro-descendants.
 23. In Barra Mansa 40.25 percent of the population are poor (Fundação CIDE, Centro de Informações e dados do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, 2001).
 24. See endnote 6.

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Relevant websites relating to the subject of the article:

<http://www.childfriendlycities.org>

<http://www.pgualc.org/>