



# Co-production and Voice in Policymaking: Participatory Processes in the European Periphery

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## Abstract

Co-production is now the gold standard in policymaking, characterised by national and international actors with different types of knowledge working together to contribute to a collaborative decision-making process. The benefits of co-production in policymaking can include improved knowledge generation that merges practice-centred, political and technical knowledge and incorporates local knowledges to provide complementary information and increase ownership over policymaking processes. Nevertheless, it can also present pitfalls such as multiple and diverging interests, incomplete and asymmetric information, and resource asymmetries and elite capture as highlighted by Bender in (Eur J Dev Res, 2022). By reviewing a case in the European periphery, we document and illustrate situations of collaboration and conflict, benefits and pitfalls resulting from policymaking co-production, throughout recent Portuguese history and in present-day participatory budget initiatives. From competing national actors to influences from the Global North and Global South, the final outcome reflects a learning process in collaboration but also underlying power struggles.

**Keywords** Co-production · Policymaking · Types of knowledge · Participatory budgeting · Conflict · Portugal

## Résumé

La co-création est désormais la référence en matière d'élaboration des politiques. Elle est caractérisée par des acteurs nationaux et internationaux dotés de différents types de connaissances qui travaillent ensemble pour contribuer à un processus décisionnel collaboratif. Les avantages de la co-création dans l'élaboration des politiques peuvent

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inclure une meilleure création de connaissances qui permet de fusionner les connaissances politiques et techniques centrées sur la pratique et qui intègre les connaissances locales pour fournir des informations complémentaires et accroître l'appropriation des processus d'élaboration des politiques. Néanmoins, la co-création peut également présenter des écueils tels que des intérêts multiples et divergents, des informations incomplètes et asymétriques, des asymétries de ressources et une accapartation par les élites, comme le souligne Bender in in (Eur J Dev Res, 2022). Par le biais d'une étude de cas dans la zone européenne, nous documentons et illustrons des situations de collaboration et de conflit, ainsi que les avantages et les inconvénients résultant de la co-création de politiques, grâce à l'histoire portugaise récente et, actuellement, dans le cadre des initiatives budgétaires participatives. Qu'il soit question d'acteurs nationaux concurrents ou d'influences issues des pays du Nord et du Sud, le résultat final reflète un processus d'apprentissage collaboratif ainsi que des luttes de pouvoir sous-jacentes.

## Introduction

In the age where policymaking is framed within a multi-stakeholder setting, co-production became a buzzword in the vocabulary of thinkers and practitioners advancing social innovations. This concept concerns generation of sound policies by mobilising human and technical resources to engage communities and ensure political legitimacy of the outcomes (Nabatchi et al. 2017). In particular, the concept has been used in environmental, urban and public administration research. In parallel, cognate concepts have come to the fore, such as co-governance, which implies an equally intensive involvement of citizens in policymaking (Ackerman, 2004). These concepts aim to involve multiple actors in policymaking and can be understood under the theoretical umbrella of “participatory processes”.

Commitments to co-production and participation in policymaking involve bringing together actors with diverse types of knowledge, interests and power. Universities, practitioners and politicians join together with citizens to deliberate over matters of public interest to influence decision making. A strand of the literature thinks on co-production as a collaborative process where actors are mobilised to improve public decisions. In contrast, others point out the challenges of research collaboration between academia and non-academic actors, which may lead to undesirable social outcomes. In this vein, Bender (2022) identifies three major pitfalls in international sustainable development research: multiple and diverging interests; incomplete and asymmetric information; resource asymmetries and elite capture. In addition, without conciliation and/or consensus, the confrontation between the different types of knowledge, including between internal and external sources of knowledge can add fuel to this complex set of dynamics.

Since policymaking is frequently path dependent, thus, reliant upon the specific history and context where actors meet to deliberate, we discuss the case of participatory budgeting in Portugal, a European semi-peripheral country. The need to study the European periphery rests on that context needs to be embodied in the analysis much more consistently when studying policymaking (Pollitt, 2013). However,



over-simplified classifications frequently group Western Europe and Southern Europe, which can mask significant differences at the institutional and well-being levels. “European periphery” has been a useful working category to contrast with the development path of Western Europe, see, e.g. O’Rourke and Williamson (1997), Coppolaro and Lains (2013), Marques and Morgan (2021), or Santos and Teles (2021), even if using different concepts for the term. A significant part of this literature has been devoted to Southern Europe, often invisible from the onset in influential debates on types of governance such as “Varieties of Capitalism” (Hall and Soskice, 2001) or “Worlds of Welfare Capitalism” (Esping-Andersen, 1990). For the purpose of this piece, what matters is acknowledging that these countries are different from the rest of Europe and their specifics deserve to be studied as Ferrera (1996) does.

Our study allows to understand how the engagement of different actors, thus, the coming together of different types of knowledge, interests and degrees of power in co-production holds potentialities and emerging pitfalls, testing Bender (2022) in practice. Portugal shows peculiar characteristics of its recent history with significant discontinuity in the ways multiple actors have sought to influence policymaking. Portugal is equally interesting for providing a key example of how democratic innovations were leveraged from the Global South, thus, contrasting with mainstream theories on the dominance of the Global North and technical knowledge in this field of practice.

Participatory budgeting is a specific co-productionist practice that has gained political momentum in the last few decades. Through the involvement of multiple stakeholders, participatory budgets have opened the debate on the combination of different types of knowledge, as well as different degrees of power over policy-making processes. Furthermore, patterns of dissemination of participatory budgets shows the magnitude and reach of policy transfer from the Global South to the Global North (Peck and Theodore 2015; Falanga and Lüchmann 2020) through both convergence and divergence of multiple interests as described subsequently. Nevertheless, concerns remain regarding who is able to benefit from participation.

## **Types of Knowledge and the Challenges of Co-production**

Vigar’s (2017) knowledge typology identifies four types of knowledge relevant for policymaking. Practice-centred knowledge relates to policy diffusion based on what is done elsewhere or in the past, while technical knowledge refers to traditional top-down “scientific” or technocratic knowledge. Political knowledge addresses the issue that interests and strengths among actors may differ, while local knowledge relates to understanding local context and needs, namely through worker, user or citizen voice. While all can be important for effective policymaking, the weak episodic equality is an issue of concern (Heath and Mormina 2022).

The diffusion of democratic innovations worldwide has relied on the experimentation of a wide range of participatory initiatives (Smith 2009). In most cases, citizen participation has given the opportunity to trigger the co-productionist ethos in policymaking promoted by international agencies, public authorities, practitioners



and scholars. In a multi-stakeholder setting, ownership and participation processes are fundamental (Biekart and Fowler 2018). The engagement of citizens can support the provision of public goods for all instead of private benefits for a few, if transparency in government actions and outcomes are secured (Khemani et al. 2016). Berner (2010) summarises that participation may concede freedom, ownership and efficiency.

Participatory budgeting can be understood as a particular form of co-production of public policies where a share of the public budget is allocated by public authorities to allow citizens to decide how to spend public money. Porto Alegre, a city in the Global South pioneered the first Participatory Budget (PB) ever in 1989. Through the 1990s and 2000s, the PB has been disseminated with great support of civil society, academia and decision makers (Goldfrank 2012), with a large variety of institutional designs implemented worldwide (Sintomer et al. 2010). PBs are acknowledged for bringing together citizens and stakeholders by improving knowledge and empowerment (Roberts, 2002). However, PBs and participatory processes have, in practice, led to very different outcomes depending on the country case chosen (Gómez et al. 2010).

Following Bender (2022), a first critique regards multiple and diverging interests, which may lead to ineffective rituals or questionable representation (Berner, 2010). Policymakers may also not listen in settings with perceived conflict between relevant actors or low salience of the topic (Busemeyer et al. 2020). A second critique is incomplete and asymmetric information with citizens having less access to information or difficult in understanding relevant technical information (Ostrom 2011). A third critique regards resource asymmetries and elite capture, which in the limit may lead to exploitation of who should be heard (Berner 2010). Often unequal power relations between the involved parties question the effectiveness of participation, with risks of capture and manipulation by economic and political elites that use citizen engagement to disguise market-friendly interests and goals (Cooke and Kothari 2001; Cole 2018; Carvalho et al. 2019; Manahan and Kumar 2022). In the following sections, we highlight the application of these critiques across the Portuguese experience.

## **A Recent Account of Policymaking in Portugal**

### **During the Dictatorship**

A long dictatorship moulded policymaking in Portugal during almost five decades. The initial years were inspired in fascist Italy and personalised by the dictator Salazar in the conservative motto “Deus, pátria e família” [God, motherland and family]. Self-reliance and enhancing the ties with the colonial empire were important strategies in this first phase when agricultural interests prevailed. With frail public institutions, the dictatorship enjoyed the stability to modernise and consolidate public administration through imported practice-centred knowledge subordinated to Salazar’s political ideology. Building statistics and setting a reliable administration were important landmarks. With almost half of the population rural and illiterate (Goulart



and Bedi 2017) and contrasting interests between landlords and farmworkers, there was strong political repression and the majority were excluded from policymaking.

The post-second World War represented a shift from agricultural interests and trade with the colonies towards industrial interests and trade with Europe. Four development plans (Planos de fomento) implemented from 1950 onwards embodied national and international practice-centred knowledge. The first (1953–1958) focused mostly on infrastructure, but the investment in the productive sectors increased thereafter and took over in the following plans after 1964. These plans inherited the experience of the “Economic Reconstitution Law” of 1935 and benefited from the discussion of Russian, Spanish and particularly French plans (Ferraz 2020). The plans became an integrated set of policies and reinforced top-down decision making.

With Salazar’s stepping down in 1968, there were promises of involving more population sectors in the decision making, but the leopard could not change its spots. The continuing colonial impasse, the political repression and the unresponsiveness to basic social needs such as housing certainly contributed to further alienate support (Pinto 2009), even if social investments became more relevant after 1965 (Lains 1994). With an expansion of education and training to reply to changing labour needs, the majority was being trained to implement, not co-produce. In the universities, the future elites increasingly refused to play a part in the continuing of the regime or even mobilised against it (Accornero 2013). They felt it was their time to build their future.

## The Democratic Period

After the revolution of 1974, universal social rights and redistribution goals were at its heyday. With a view to guarantee minimum standards for all, the government set, for example, a high minimum wage. For a brief moment, there was an explosion of popular participation and Portugal was a lab where revolutionaries from all around the world came to observe or intervene. An innovative domestic programme included gathering interdisciplinary teams and participation of the future residents to solve complex problems such as housing issues through SAAL initiatives (Sealy 2016; Mota 2019). The mix between different types of knowledge for co-production was truly unique, in a country with a tradition of top-down initiatives.<sup>1</sup> While this programme would be discontinued as the politics changed towards a liberal democracy, these multidisciplinary programmes would become the gold standard for social policies years later, e.g. minimum income, child labour or child protection programmes, even if then the voice component of users would be smaller.

From the 1980s onwards, there was gradually a shift towards market economy, reversing most of the nationalisations following the revolution (Noronha 2022), in the road to EEC accession in 1986. Since then, much of the knowledge for

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<sup>1</sup> The programme complemented the training of many. Some architects would later become world recognised. For example, Siza Vieira (1992) or Souto Moura (2011) became Pritzker prize holders, for some the Nobel for Architecture.



policymaking has a source in Europe and timely legislation transposition has become a research topic (Steunenberg and Rhinard 2010). The increased membership in European associations of organisations and individuals allowed for practice-oriented knowledge sharing. The increased training of elites in exchange programmes across Europe and more general student mobility allowed for a great increase in technical and imported practice-oriented knowledge. However, the forging of a European intelligentsia somewhat overlooks their origin countries' different local specificities. While in Portugal, there is a traditional reverence from what comes from "abroad" or "Europe" (Global North) in view of Portugal's self-perceived inferiority, the conflict for power between local knowledge and the returning intelligentsia has been increasing and it has been now at its heyday.

In spite of the extensive changes following the democratisation and the rise of new elites, often forged in the opposition, civil society took time to find a voice, after the abnormally loud post-revolutionary years. Regarding the type of organisations, social welfare organisations and neighbourhood associations have been historically more involved in policymaking, while workers' voice has been more neglected (Fernandes and Branco 2017). Recent years have seen a revival of social concertation role and its visibility, though a limited social dialogue between leaders at the top and far from being a community following Heath and Mormina (2022).

The emphasis has been a positivist approach in reinforcing the acquisition of technical knowledge with a vast increase in school attainment and university graduates. Political knowledges have historically gained a negative connotation as irrational or inefficient, but with a rise in the post-austerity and Gerigonça years (Goulart and Veiga 2016). The transport sector is paradigmatic, with a high-level of conflict at the intra-organizational, inter-organizational, local and metropolitan levels (Goulart and Tavares, forthcoming). In contrast, local knowledge has actually been promoted by initiatives with different levels of citizen participation, e.g. public consultations are now compulsory/good practice before law approvals, even if worker participation declined. The new century saw further developments with the expansion of participatory experiences, including deciding on budget priorities.

## Participatory Budgeting (PB)

Portugal has played a major role in the dissemination of PBs (Falanga and Lüchmann 2020). The country has held the highest rate of local PBs until 2019, as the outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic counteracted this trend in the last couple of years. In addition, Portugal was the first country hosting three national PBs addressing different publics since 2017, namely the entire population, young people and schools' pupils (Falanga and Fonseca 2021). More recently, the two autonomous regions of Madeira and Azores implemented regional PBs too, which added a layer of complexity to understanding patterns of dissemination. In fact, local, regional and national PBs have been implemented out of any mandatory requirement from governments.

PB's dissemination unfolded through three main historical stages. At a first stage, in the early 2000s, the country drew inspiration from Brazil under the echoes of



social movements and alter-globalist groups claiming for more social justice and inclusion in the influential World Social Forums (Teivainen 2002). In Portugal, the implementation of the first ever PB was in 2002 in Palmela, a small city of the Lisbon Metropolitan Area led by the Communist Party. The popularity of PBs was soon embraced by other political parties, and in mid-2000s, the Lisbon city council led by the Socialist Party started its own PB. This was the first ever implemented at the city level by a European capital that approached the PB by providing citizens with power to co-produce local policies. The third stage of dissemination started around mid-2010s and was characterised by a high rate of local PBs and the creation of a new national “network of participatory cities”. In the same period, the central government endorsed this practice through the three national PBs in 2017, followed by two regional PBs in 2018 and 2019.

As Falanga and Lüchmann (2020) put it, the main drivers of dissemination in the country mostly related to academia and the third sector, which influenced the public debate on the opportunity to carry on such a democratic innovation in the country. The role of specific political parties was less relevant overall, as the main discourse was more focussed on the need for proximity democracy at all levels of governance which aligned with a global shift in the discourse on citizen participation from social to governance goals. However, the outbreak of the COVID-19 led to more than 50% of PBs in Europe either suspended or postponed (Falanga 2020a).

In 2007/2008, the Lisbon PB marked the mainstreaming of the process with an eventual spread across the country and the political spectrum from left to centre right. Lisbon is the largest city and capital of a centralised country with a recent history of social innovation, cosmopolitan nature and multiple influences. By giving centre stage to citizens, the Lisbon PB became a role model for other local and supra-local experiences. In general, citizens have shown significant interest in taking part in the co-production of both district and city-wide policies funded with 5 million euros in the first four editions and 2.5 million euros since 2012. From 2008 to 2019, the Lisbon PB collected almost 7 thousand citizen ideas, 317 thousand votes and 162 implemented projects covering slightly more than 36-million-euro budget.<sup>2</sup>

The co-productionist ethos of Lisbon is now pioneering a participatory initiative that, unlike the PB, builds on theories of deliberative democracy (Dryzek, 2002). Deliberative experiments aim to constitute collective settings with a focus on the quality of the deliberation through sharing—and changing—opinions by learning from each other. Inspired by the spread of mini-publics and citizens’ assemblies worldwide, the city council announced the new “Citizens’ Council” in January with 50 stratified random sampled citizens per year. If the start of the Citizens’ Council pilots new forms to engage citizens aiming to enhance mutual learning processes on

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<sup>2</sup> A participatory programme called BipZip (2011–ongoing) is aimed to stimulate regeneration practices in critical neighbourhoods, acknowledging the need to reach out disadvantaged communities in the line of criticisms on traditional programmes of elite capture (Bender 2022) and community participation (Heath and Mormina 2022). Lisbon City Council funded local partnerships composed of local organisations and social groups for the engagement of local communities (Falanga 2020b).





key urban topics, earlier concerns of conflicting interests, unbalanced information and elite capture still apply.

Nevertheless, PBs and other participatory initiatives can nurture the public debate on matters of public interest in multiple ways, with the outcome of some participatory initiatives showing the frictions among different forms of knowledge, interests and degrees of power. In this way, PBs aim to unlock either latent or manifest conflicts and promote consensus-oriented processes, in some cases seen as trends of depoliticization. However, the lack of any formal intermediation between public authorities and civil society often results in the self-organisation of interest groups around specific topics, ideas and projects to be funded.

A paradigmatic example was the National PB 2018 edition, when two of the most voted projects regarded bullfighting, with one project promoting it, while the other favoured its abolition. In a context where most Portuguese do not belong to any association and, therefore, competition is low, existent interest groups can easily organise themselves to see their ideas outvote the others. This dynamic can also lead into controversial, if not oppositional as in the example above, results. While one could say that this outcome confirms that there is space for everybody in a democratic practice as the PB, the opposite is also true, by giving a disproportionate power to some as the bull fight issues has not been a public priority for most. A blind spot emerging from this empirical analysis is that this specific institutional design adopted by PBs does not necessarily ensure public awareness and quality of deliberation.

As Bender (2022) puts it, elite actors can have easier access to shape processes to better serve their interests, questioning the legitimacy of PBs based on the real inclusion and consideration of multiple perspectives. PBs rely on the assumption that citizens can take part to the co-production of public policies out of any restriction and/or limitation. For example, gentrification in Lisbon with hiking house prices and rents is reducing the probability of poorer inhabitants continue participating in a leading social innovation county.

## Concluding Remarks

Co-production in policymaking can bring significant advantages to both public authorities and citizens. The case of participatory budgeting in Portugal shows a positive trajectory that starts with the formal participation in the democratic period and the effective empowerment with the widespread of schooling and social benefits. Once the formal venues and the political support were available, co-production flourished in the last decade and Lisbon played a key role. Contrasting with the overwhelming general European influence, PBs reverted traditional colonial unidirectional flows, with Portugal receiving influence from Brazil. Scaled up PBs at the regional and national scales have been implemented by showing the concrete possibility to integrate citizens in policymaking at different levels. Nonetheless, the coming together of multiple actors is necessarily a complex task as asymmetries emerge in access to these initiatives due to different degrees of education, income, knowledge, interest and power, illustrating Bender's (2022) concerns. At the local





level, topics chosen have privileged local interests, while at the national level scale allows that engaged but diffused constituents have an advantage. The new deliberative democracy form may accentuate the identified potential pitfalls, including representation issues. Time will tell whether co-production and new forms of deliberation will strengthen the power and knowledge of the many or reinforce the will of the few.

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