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Participatory budgeting in a Sri Lankan urban council: A practice of power and domination



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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Bourdieu's triad, i.e. field, habitus and capital, the paper aims at unfolding the practice of participatory budgeting (PB) in one Sri Lankan urban council, which we have referred to as the "Costal Urban Council (CUC)", and in this process explores how such practice is framed and constrained by the structural and relational aspects of various forms of capital. The PB practice in the CUC has failed to achieve its fundamental objective—public participation in a manner of equality, justice, and transparency, or at least best partial success in some areas such as rates collection. We have demonstrated how PB has become a practice of power and domination rather than a means of fostering political emancipation in the CUC. The field-specific organisation of various forms of capital has allowed the chairman of the CUC to become dominant and take control of the whole budgeting process and PB, which is aimed at impeding such political practices, has become dominated by the same political dynamics. We argue that PB in the specific field of less-developed countries can have far greater effects than simply revitalising local democracy, including providing personal gains and potentially posing a threat to democracy.

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1. Introduction

This paper aims at unfolding the practice of participatory budgeting (PB) in one urban council (which we have referred to as the 'Costal Urban Council (CUC)' in order to preserve anonymity) in Sri Lanka, a less-developed country (LDC), and in this process explores how such a practice is framed and constrained by the structural and relational aspects of various forms of capital. Based on our knowledge, the CUC is one of the first local governments to adopt the very notion of PB in Sri Lanka, and perhaps also in South Asia. Following the CUC's endeavours, several other local authorities in the country have announced a transformation in their budgets leading to the adoption of PB (Ministry of Local Governments and Provincial Councils, 2011).

Implementation of PB in LDCs has become an important component of neoliberal reforms, which are termed as 'New Public Management' (NPM) and, more recently, 'New Public Governance' (NPG) (Osborne, 2006; Uddin, Gumb, & Kasumba, 2011). International monetary organisations such as the World Bank and other bilateral development agencies, for instance, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), are involved in disseminating this form of budgeting in the

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