

Sustainability as a Measure of Success: Externally Promoted Participatory Budgeting in El Salvador Ten Years Later

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My paper examines the sustainability of externally promoted participatory budgeting (PB) over more than a decade and, given the results, considers the implications for inclusive practices for economic growth. PB refers to an inclusive, deliberative process of incorporating citizen priorities into local government decision making on public investment. Having expanded well beyond its origins in Porto Alegre, Brazil, more than a quarter of a century ago, PB remains popular throughout the developing world. In 2009, I investigated the continued utilization of PB that was introduced through a US-financed local government development project in post-war El Salvador. Through interviews with key actors, I examined PB in all 28 project municipalities--both urban and rural--five years after the project ended. I found limited but important PB sustainability. Last fall, I replicated the study, using the same process and parameters in the same 28 municipalities, more than ten years after completion of the project. This paper presents the findings of this latest study and compares them with 2009 results. PB continues to be utilized in more than half of the 28 municipalities examined--a striking example of long-term sustainability--though there is also little continuity of use among individual municipal governments. I conclude that PB in El Salvador is becoming institutionalized, due in part to the initial project. This experience with PB allows us to be more optimistic about the sustainability of socially inclusive economic growth and development programs.