

Special contribution to the 7th Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VII) on the **Economies of Equality and Care**

# **Local democratic innovations expanding the notion of care:**

Participatory Budgeting as an enabler  
of care-based local development

## **Executive Summary**

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## Context and Framework

To contribute to the GOLD VII research process on the “Economies of Equality and Care”, it is important to study which democratic and participatory practices local and regional governments (LRGs) are testing to define, construct, and finally implement caring approaches in local policies and local development.

This report sets out to investigate **Participatory Budgeting (PB)** as an inclusive tool enabling the creation of caring communities. Fundamentally understood as a form of decision-making process that actively involves the citizenry in prioritizing spending of public resources, PB has constantly been rising as a tool to effectively mix direct and representative democracy and increase the democratic participation at local level. It collects and organizes different approaches and definitions of care “at work” in local and regional settings.

The research adopted a robust methodological approach, including a comparative analysis of 27 PB practices from various countries and government tiers. The majority of the case studies were chosen among the 2022 & 2023 OIPD Award entries. It utilized tools such as data profiling, interviews, and questionnaires to gather insights on PB’s potential to expand the notion of care and its responsiveness to emergent global crises. Overall, around 60 million people live in the cities and regions selected in the context of this report (see Table 1), making this study one of the most comprehensive analyses ever produced on PB and its relation with care.

*Table 1. Location of PB practices analyzed in this report (Source: Authors)*

Europe	Africa	North and Latin America	Asia and Eurasia	MEWA (Middle East and West Asia)
Trogir (HR)	Talatona/Luanda province (AO)	Córdoba (AR)	Chengdu (CN)	Tehran (IR)
Brno (CZ)	Djougou (BJ)	General Pueyrredon Provincia B.A. (AR)	Perm Region (RU)	
Barcelona (ES)	Velingara Department (SN)	Rosario (AR)	Naga City (PH)	
Comunitat Valenciana (ES)		Universidad Nacional de Rosario (AR)		
Las Palmas, Gran Canarias (ES)		Provincia de Manabí (EC)		
Vitoria-Gasteiz (ES)		Estado de Jalisco (MX)		
Amadora/Região Metro. Lisboa (PT)		Zapopan (MX)		
Região Autónoma dos Açores (PT)		Denver (US)		
J.F. Massamá e Monte Abraão (PT)				
Fagersta (SE)				

This report's focus is twofold:

- To analyze how the projects that are connected to PB processes are conducive of caring approaches at the local level
- To examine how the very PB processes can be care-based and produce truly participatory and inclusive practices

## Findings

This report finds that complex emergencies (such as the covid-19 pandemic) laid the ground for PB to contribute to care outcomes. Cities demonstrated a strong ability to adapt their PB to changing conditions by using online tools and developing hybrid online/offline systems that could better adapt to the situation. Additionally, the reports finds that PB practices seem to have contributed to the mitigation of some of the negative effects of covid-19 in local contexts.

More specifically about the connection between PB and the development of caring cities, this report compiles a set of definitions of care among PB practitioners. This exercise shows how different conceptions of care present common key points, such as:

- the necessity to understand care **beyond the traditional lenses of healthcare**, and expand its scope;
- the necessity to consider the **multiple dimensions of care**: personal, inter-personal, societal, and with respect to the environment at large.

Additionally, the research shows that PB processes hold great potential for **expanding the notion of care in local contexts**, due to their ability to bring into play discussions over the scope of care (e.g., caring for public spaces, the planet), and their capacity to unveil the interconnected nature of different topics (e.g., social issues, ecological challenges, and democratic ones too). In this sense, PB allows addressing and solving issues that are very close to the needs and the every-day life of all citizens, and thus to develop context-based caring practices and policies. Values such as solidarity, mutual aid, "buen vivir", quality of life, conviviality, compassion, empathy and respect are critical and founding principles to the success of PB in creating caring cities.

In the case studies analyzed, out of 3,918 PB projects conducted **32% were directly related to care**, thus testifying the importance of this approach to local governance.

Care is considered and interpreted in PB projects along four main axes. Firstly, the **care of people, the neighbours, and the most vulnerable and underserved.**

Secondly, the **care for the planet** in a broad sense, encompassing nature and all living beings. Thirdly, the **care for spaces and contexts** that are identified as “**left behind**”. Finally, through the strong participative and democratic component of PB, **the care for projects** that affect the local community and the immediate environment. The sum of these four categories highlights how the notion of care through PB in the case studies is conducive to a more generalized **care for urban governance, care (and trust) for democracy and the co-production of solutions.**

Lastly, this report finds that PB and participatory democracy are crucial to expand the notion of care and to create caring cities in a variety of ways. In fact, PB not only works on the personal level by putting the citizens at the heart of the decision-making, enhancing transparency and accountability, and strengthening trust, but also manages to generate spaces for dialogue around care for oneself, one’s surroundings, the broader community, and about how to better care for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Furthermore, in a similar way, through participatory democracy it is possible to give visibility to context-based needs and thus put the spotlight on different care practices that often remain hidden or confined to the purely domestic sphere. It is thanks to these features that PB strongly contributes to the “3 R” of care: **Recognizing** care, **Redistributing** it and **Reducing** its burden, altogether to overcome local and territorial inequalities.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

The relevance of PB as a tool for care cannot be understated. Indeed, this report finds that, in the most recent period analyzed, a notable portion of the projects funded through PB are care related. Such a shift represents a huge and unmissable opportunity for UCLG theory of change towards care as an enabler of equality, justice, democracy and sustainability.

PB has proven to be a flexible tool that can be implemented in multiple levels of government, can withstand and adapt to the impact of a pandemic, and thus has a strong potential still to be explored in the context of other crises (e.g., climate change, housing crisis, etc.).

Another crucial conclusion of this research concerns the capacity of PB processes to address systemic challenges and interconnected issues through the perspective of care. This is done via different PB types that, despite their differences, often manage to mobilize and promote fundamental ethical values such as mutual aid, quality of life, conviviality and empathy.

For these reasons, PB processes can be considered as a powerful tool not only for introducing and expanding the notion of care in local and regional contexts, but also as enablers for better, more democratic and more caring local governance. The outputs and the conclusions of the present report draw a clear path towards the necessity of including PB and care approaches in local and regional governance. To contribute to this decisive transformation, a set of recommendations are presented here below:

- It is important to deepen **inclusive and human-rights based participatory democracy** at the local level in order to develop caring territories. Empowering citizens and enhancing deliberative processes has proven successful in creating caring communities and cohesive cities.
- Institutions must design a **legal, political, and financial environment that can enable the expansion of care perspectives** through PB, both through hard infrastructures (laws, investments, etc.) and soft ones (activities, targeted initiatives, relationships, etc.).
- All PB processes should involve **transparency and accountability** in two senses: the set up of monitoring and evaluation tools (to improve local governance, knowledge production, and connection with peers and other levels of governance), and the communication of outcomes and benefits to foster ownership and care towards the projects.
- **Training and capacity building**, also in the framework of **international cooperation**, initiatives should support the actors involved, both public and private, and thus facilitate the development of PB that shape care-based local developments and the **creation of caring societies**.

In conclusion, participatory budgeting emerges as a vital mechanism to reimagine governance through the lens of care. It fosters inclusivity, trust, and sustainability, enabling communities to co-create solutions that address their unique challenges. Governments are urged to adopt the recommendations outlined to fully realize PB's potential in building caring and resilient societies.

***“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world: indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.”***

*Quote attributed to Margaret Mead*