

# Social participation as a democracy-consolidating process in Brazil

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## Introduction

In its recent history, Brazil has experienced over 20 years – 1964 to 1985 – of a military authoritarian regime where the participation of citizens in public decisions was limited and discouraged. This situation, however, did not prevent many different participatory and empowering experiences emerging from the roots of Brazilian society.

Most of the political and social forces which led Brazil's re-democratisation process in the 1980s were motivated by comprehensive democratic concepts that were not restricted to re-establishing a representative electoral system. The people had higher aspirations. The idea was to promote radical changes within the existing framework of a non-democratic, excluding, and authoritarian state. This was not to be done through institutional rupture or a revolution, but rather through gradual changes in the power framework. The aim was to enhance the participation of men and women in political decisions affecting their lives. But what could be done to turn these ideals into reality? What institutional mechanisms should be created to foster these changes?

This study seeks to provide some answers to these questions. It seeks to analyse the social participation framework created in Brazil after the democratic regime was re-established in the country, late in the 1980s. Today, Brazil is a melting pot of initiatives and ideas for promoting the participation of citizens, both men and women, in public decisions. Apart from having their voting rights assured, Brazilian men and women rely nowadays on many different standardised participation forums and mechanisms within the state bureaucracy as a result of the pressure applied by civil-society organisations.

Over the past 20 years, different formal participation spaces have been built at the federal, state, and municipal levels. As a result, it is estimated that there are over 40,000 public policy councils linked to different governmental structures that rely on the participation of thousands of civil-society organisations throughout the country today. This study describes this institutional innovation, as well as its impacts and challenges for consolidating and expanding democracy.

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## Social participation in a democratic scenario

The idea of ensuring the participation of individuals in public decisions, enabling them to discuss and deliberate on collective issues affecting their lives, has always been one of the key elements of democracy and politics. Besides the principles of equality and freedom, the democratic ideal presupposes actions, participation, co-responsibility, and interaction among different citizens (Ciconello & Moroni, 2005, p. 31). In the 1980s, the movements in society which forged Brazil's political democratisation process were clearly aware of the limitations of a representative democratic regime and, therefore, they began to look for theoretical benchmarks in the so-called 'participatory democracy' or 'deliberative democracy', which could contribute toward building new institutional models in the Brazilian state. Therefore, a recurrent question for social movements was: what elements characterised a participatory democracy and what institutional mechanisms could make it feasible?

In those days, the prevailing understanding was that participation should:

- be an educational process whereby citizens would learn how to exercise their rights, leading to the establishment of mutual links and influences between public and private spheres;
- allow for collective decisions to be more easily accepted by individuals, since they would be taking part in decision-making processes;
- lead to enhanced social integration, as each citizen feeling isolated from his or her community or organised group (association, union, social movement) would develop a stronger sense of belonging.

If they were to be effective and truly capable of ensuring the desired educational and transformational ideal, institutional mechanisms should be established at the local level, from which links would be developed with other mechanisms at state/regional and national level, so as to finally produce public policies at the state level. This was the idea behind the efforts to promote the participation framework that exists in Brazil today.

## Historical background of social participation in Brazil

In this section, the historical background of social participation in Brazil will be briefly analysed, based on a key question: how did the re-democratisation process, which began in the 1980s, manage to ensure social participation as a constitutional principle and as an integral element of the policy-making and control processes in the Brazilian state?

Although the military dictatorship imposed limits on the freedom of expression and association of those individuals and political and social groups, which criticised the authoritarian political regime, there was some room for mobilisation and debates at the base of Brazilian society. This space was strategically identified and used by thousands of both formal and informal organisations, militants, religious people, intellectuals, and social movements. These groups were mainly inspired by theoretical and moral benchmarks such as the so-called 'Liberation Theology' and a pedagogic movement created by the Brazilian Paulo Freire called 'grassroots education' (*educação popular*). Their actions were based on educational processes developed for low-income groups, with the aim of promoting their empowerment and awareness as citizens. The goal was to educate the population in order to promote social change. This strategy was in tune with another benchmark that was very popular among the opposition to the regime: the perspective of the Marxist thinker Antônio Gramsci, for whom changes could only be brought about as a result of a greater awareness of class divisions, and of the unequal and oppressive structures to which the Brazilian population was subjected.

Although many political groups (non-government organisations [NGOs], social movements, unions, etc.) carried out participatory experiences with low-income segments of the population, this movement only gained unity and became politically strong as a result of the actions of progressive sectors of the Catholic Church, through the *Comunidades Eclesiais de Base* (CEBs – Basic Christian Communities), groups linked to thousands of Catholic parishes spread throughout the country. In the

1970s and 1980s, the CEBs attempted to foster links between grassroots groups and sectors, and to strengthen their autonomy and organisation. The CEBs became known for their pedagogic approach, which emphasised participation, community links, and egalitarian ideals. It is estimated that, in the early 1980s, there were about 80,000 such communities in Brazil, totalling approximately two million people (Viola and Mainwaring 1987).

The CEBs influenced the organisation of workers in unions, and the establishment of the Workers' Party and of many associations which were set up for developing and ensuring rights (neighbourhood associations, community associations, NGOs fighting for rights, etc.).

In parallel to this movement, as a result of an intense process of urbanisation in Brazil since the 1950s, hundreds of neighbourhood associations were established claiming better public services for their communities, such as water supply, sanitation, transportation, and electricity services, as well as schools and health stations. The 'community association' movement of the 1970s and 1980s was 'perceived as a means for facing more pressing daily problems and for developing spaces for fostering democratic relations and establishing identities' (Boschi 1987, p.71).

During the same period, the first NGOs were set up in response to the loss of social and political spaces of organisations such as unions, universities, and political parties. These NGOs – which were focused on ensuring human rights and on establishing new rights – were intent on defining new political actions as well as new social processes, and they established a new dimension or segment in the history of Brazilian associations. In addition, these organisations were members of international solidarity networks made up of European and North American co-operation agencies, which ensured their financial and political sustainability.

As a result of the intense pressure applied by society, the military regime promoted a gradual political liberalisation process, beginning in the early 1980s, that made it possible for the Workers' Party and Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT, the largest trade union in Brazil) to be established on 10 February 1980 and 28 August 1983, respectively. These two events are landmarks in Brazil's re-democratisation process and contributed to promote more radical changes in Brazilian society. The Workers' Party brought together many social movements and managed to elect mayors for some important city halls, promoting emblematic participatory experiences in municipal management.

### **Participatory budget**

The participatory budget (OP) is one of the most widely known participatory mechanisms across the world. It was developed in different Brazilian municipalities, but has gained greater visibility since 1989 when it was adopted in Porto Alegre, the capital of the state of Rio Grande do Sul. According to a poll carried out in 2003 by the National Social Participation Forum<sup>1</sup> in Teixeira, Graziá, Albuquerque, and Pontual, 140 Brazilian municipalities had begun to implement an OP process. All of these initiatives aim to ensure the participation of the population in defining some priorities and in allocating budget resources to public projects and services, as well as in following up on the implementation of the municipal budget.

From the educational point of view, the results achieved by involving the population in the municipal management process are undeniable. However, the survey suggested that the main difficulties faced in OP processes are the relatively low amount of resources included in budget discussions (barely ten per cent of the municipal budget in most cases), and the not always effective implementation of projects and services deliberated on by the population in assemblies. Nevertheless, OP processes led to actual changes in the routine management of cities in one-third of the experiences.

These successful experiences at the community level – and now also at the level of municipal administrations – showed that it was indeed possible to create institutional participation mechanisms to enhance the influence of citizens on public decisions. However, it was necessary to increase the scale of these initiatives and to incorporate them into the policy-making process at state level. How

could a highly bureaucratic and authoritarian state be democratised? What kind of institutional mechanisms should be built? These were the challenges facing the constituent assembly and social movements when the federal constitution was discussed, in 1988.

## **Institutionalisation of participatory processes since the federal constitution of 1988**

The democratic movement that emerged from the base of Brazilian civil society during the 1970s and 1980s developed sufficient political power and expression to bring about a true democratisation of the nation's political system at the institutional-legal level.

The federal constitution of 1988, which was influenced by many different political forces and subjects, established a democratic rule-of-law state in Brazil. It also promulgated a set of principles and guidelines to ensure the participation of citizens in the design, implementation, and social control of public policies that later on were regulated and implemented in different institutional mechanisms at the three levels of the federation (federal, state, and municipal levels). The constitution also recognised new responsibilities to be taken on by civil-society organisations within the Brazilian political system, highlighting their supporting role in the management of public affairs. For these reasons, among others, the National Constitution was nicknamed the 'citizen constitution'. Therefore, the two main mechanisms for collective deliberations, based on the constitutional guidelines of ensuring the participation of citizens in defining public policies, are the public policy councils and the conferences.

### **Public policy councils**

The public policy councils<sup>2</sup> were created for the purpose of implementing the participatory ideals provided for in the federal constitution, allowing the Brazilian population to participate more intensely in the definition, implementation, and social control of public policies. Governmental decisions were no longer restricted to members of the executive branch and public managers, as they began to be shared with civil society.

Although collegiate institutions such as councils were not new in the Brazilian state, their configuration after the passage of the 1988 constitution constituted a veritable institutional revolution. One of the first public policies to be fully redefined as a result of this participatory and decentralising approach was the health policy. The Unified Health System (SUS) was created to link all public and universal health-care services at the three levels of the federation (federal, state, and municipal). A deliberative and permanent health council was established in each of these administrative levels, half of which was compulsorily made up of civil-society representatives.<sup>3</sup> The council has many different legal responsibilities, which include defining strategies and priorities for the health policy and approving public funds earmarked for implementing governmental programmes and actions. Another major role of this council is ensuring social control of this policy by monitoring and evaluating governmental actions.

Later on, this model was extended to other social policies, particularly to those which, according to the constitution, should involve social participation; namely, social work policies and policies for children and adolescents.

It was agreed that a public policy council should ideally be based on:

- equal representation (same number of government and civil-society representatives);
- being deliberative (in charge of deliberating on the design of the policy and on its priorities and budget);
- shared management of the policy, allowing for its social control by civil-society organisations and movements (monitoring and evaluation);
- implementation at the three levels of the federation (federal, state, and municipal), ensuring a federative management framework for public policies;

- civil-society representatives elected in an appropriate forum and not unilaterally assigned by governments.

Since the 1990s, social movements have focused their efforts on building and defending universal public policies that could ensure rights through the creation of decentralised and participatory systems in the policy-making arena. This has resulted in the creation of thousands of different councils throughout the country, and in an intense regulation and structuring of public policies. In 2003, when President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, from the Workers' Party, was elected, a new generation of councils was structured for discussing new rights and topics such as: gender, youth, food security, cities, racial equality, and public transparency. These are usually consultative councils whose decisions are not binding for public managers. They are also national councils not necessarily linked to a participatory system at the state and municipal level.

Today, there are 35 national councils with civil-society representatives in the federal public administration alone. According to a recent study, these councils rely on the participation of over 400 organisations representing different segments of civil society. Of these, 31 per cent are NGOs focused on defending human rights; 23 per cent are organisations representing the interests of employers or corporations; 14 per cent are linked to rural and environmental social movements; 14 per cent are urban union organisations; eight per cent are urban grassroots movements; and ten per cent are other movements (religious, cultural, educational movements, etc.) (Institute for Applied Economic Research 2007).

Unfortunately, no national mapping of state and municipal councils is available. Information provided by the Institute for Applied Economic Research and the Brazilian Institute for Geography and Statistics show that there are about 20,000 municipal councils in Brazil today, discussing policies related to social work, health care, children and adolescents, rural development, housing, and the environment. This is more than three times the number of city councils, the *locus* of representative democracy (local legislative branch), which total 5,564 today. Besides these 20,000 collegiate institutions, there are other councils dealing with policy issues related to education, labour and income, food security, culture, and cities, among others, which could increase this figure to approximately 40,000.

This participatory institutional framework, created as a result of the pressure from organised civil society, has had an as yet unmeasured impact on the structuring of collective actions and on forming associations. The Brazilian state began to encourage civil associations and other civil-society organisations to take on a new role within the domestic political system; to ensure democratic social control of public policies and of influencing their formulation and design. However, this has been a difficult role, considering the fragility of official stimulus for the actions of Brazilian civil-society organisations, as will be discussed below.

#### **Economic and Social Development Council (CDES)<sup>4</sup>**

In the new generation of councils created in Brazil recently, the CDES deserves special mention. This council was set up in 2003 for the purpose of advising the president in the process of formulating specific policies and guidelines for establishing social pacts around major domestic issues, such as development issues, the tax and social-security system reform, infrastructure, bio energy, and social issues, among others. It is a council made up of 12 state ministers, the governor of the central bank, and 90 civil-society representatives appointed by the president (businesspersons, workers, representatives of social movements, and celebrities). The CDES has become an important space for political debates and dialogue around major issues on the domestic agenda, despite the fact that entrepreneurs and trade unionists are over-represented in it. Many decisions of the federal administration, including legislative propositions (for the industrial policy, the tax reform, etc.) were initially discussed and agreed upon at the CDES.

## Conferences

In parallel to the councils, other different but complementary participatory institutional mechanisms were created; namely, the conferences. These public policy conferences are held at regular intervals (every four years or two years), bringing together thousands of people from all over the country. More than just an event, these conferences constitute a process that begins in the municipalities, where the participants, besides discussing policy proposals, elect delegates to attend state conferences and, finally, the national conference.

One of the main potentials of this mechanism lies in the fact that its participants can contribute to creating policy agendas and priorities that will influence public policies to be implemented in future periods. This agenda is then monitored by civil- society organisations in different political forums, including in the councils.

During the past five years, the number of conferences held throughout the country has increased remarkably as a result of the greater stimulus provided by the federal administration to this participatory arrangement. Between 2003 and 2006, about 40 national conferences were held which were attended by over two million people, including civil-society representatives (unions, NGOs, social movements, professional associations, corporate associations, churches, etc.) and representatives of municipal, state, and federal agencies. In the national phase of these conferences alone, about 5,000 public deliberations were held. Most of their inputs were incorporated into the design of different sectoral public policies (Institute for Applied Economic Research 2007, p. 20).

In this scenario of intense activism, however, certain questions arise: to what extent has this quantitative increase in participatory mechanisms made it possible to truly incorporate demands from the people into state policies? How many of these deliberations have actually been considered or implemented by the federal administration through different policies? In what ways has this participatory framework been effective, or limited? To answer these questions, we will try to identify some of the outcomes and challenges of the deeper democracy experienced by Brazilian society through social participation arrangements in the next two sections.

## Outcomes of social participation in Brazil

Besides relying on representative democratic institutions, it is undeniable that Brazil also relies on many other forums, which play an important institutional role in ensuring grassroots participation in public decision-making processes. In a recent presidential address<sup>5</sup> to the national congress to present the 2008–2011 multi-year plan (Ministry of Planning 2007) – the main planning tool of the Brazilian state – President Lula declared that this plan ‘was built with the participation of representative segments of society in about 40 conferences, where many different public policies were discussed, and in many other forums and councils. This active participation, which will be strengthened in the evaluation of the policies to be implemented, will ensure tighter social control of governmental actions’.

Apart from having been integrated into Brazil’s current democratic model, social participation has produced many results, particularly in terms of expanding, at least formally, the social rights of the Brazilian population. Some examples of the positive results achieved as a result of society’s contribution in the form of actions and mobilisation efforts are:

- Any citizen, regardless of whether or not he or she is a taxpayer, has free-of-charge access to all health-care services. Universal access to this basic social right through the SUS has made it possible to promote substantial improvements in the country’s health indicators. This is why Brazil has become a global benchmark in treating and preventing sexually transmitted diseases and HIV and AIDS.
- The population living in poverty receives cash transfers from the state through a set of programmes and actions designed for different audiences, such as families, children, young people, elderly people, and disabled people. According to official data, these interventions have

contributed to fighting poverty and, particularly, to reducing social inequalities in the country (Institute for Applied Economic Research 2006).<sup>6</sup>

- Every rural worker has the right to a minimum retirement pension, even if they never contributed to the social-security system. Millions of families have enjoyed this benefit, with a strong impact on poverty reduction in rural areas.
- A higher minimum wage as a result of the pressure from union movements. This increase in the minimum wage has reduced poverty and diminished the gap between the rich and the poor, as the minimum wage is a benchmark for the income of most Brazilian workers, as well as for certain social rights (i.e. social-security benefits and the continued income of poor elderly people and disabled people).
- The coverage of programmes and resources earmarked for family agriculture has increased substantially in recent years. As an example, the volume of resources earmarked for the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (Pronaf), which is designed to provide credits to family farms, increased from R\$2.376bn to R\$7.507bn between the 2002–2003 and 2005–2006 harvests; that is, its resources more than tripled in only four years.
- The main deliberation of the Fourth National Social Work Conference held in 2003 – building a Unified Social Work System (SUAS) – is being implemented by the federal administration, leading to a comprehensive reorganisation of the coverage and quality of social work services in Brazil.
- Inclusion of key mainstreaming topics for fighting social inequalities, such as those related to gender, racial/ethnic group, young people, disabled people, elderly people, sexual orientation, and food and nutrition security, in the national political agenda. The mobilisation of society made it possible to launch and establish, in an unprecedented way, a set of measures and governmental institutions to implement public policies designed to tackle these issues.
- A more open-minded attitude of sectors that traditionally resisted the idea of social participation, such as the ministries of external relations and planning. In a very innovative fashion, the Brazilian government has been involving social movements and civil-society organisations in processes for drawing up official documents and in discussions in international dialogue forums. This is the case, for example, of the cycle of UN conferences (i.e. on environment, population, social issues, food, funding for development, women, racial discrimination, young people) and in World Trade Organization negotiation rounds. Recently, the Ministry of Planning created a committee made up of an equal number of government and society representatives through a decree to discuss and monitor the definition and implementation of all the federal budget cycle.

### **The participation of women in drawing up the National Women's Policies Plan**

Despite the many challenges yet to be faced in terms of consolidating social participation in Brazil, some experiences deserve special mention. One of them is ensuring social participation in the process of drawing up the National Women's Policies Plan. In fact, it was only recently that a federal agency was set up to implement public policies for women. The institution in charge of such matters in the past was the National Council on Women's Rights (CNDM), which was established in 1985 and during the 1990s became a consultative forum that lost much of its influence. However, in 2003, when the Special Secretariat for Women's Policies (SPM) was created, the council was revamped and most members assigned to it were civil-society representatives with a consultative role.<sup>7</sup>

In the following year (July 2004), the government organised the First National Conference on Women's Policies in Brasília, which was attended by 2,000 women and involved 120,000 women in its municipal and state-level preparatory steps. The conference defined a set of guidelines for drawing up the first National Women's Policies Plan, which would be used to guide the actions of the federal administration as a whole for promoting gender equality.

After this important event, a governmental working group was set up to draft the plan, based on the guidelines issued by the conference. This working group included two civil-society representatives, who were members of the CNDM. In December of the same year, the SPM launched the plan, and a committee for articulating and monitoring the plan was established shortly thereafter, whose members included civil-society representatives who belonged to the council.<sup>8</sup> In August 2007, the Second National Conference on Women's Policies was held to evaluate and revise the plan.

This experience marked the beginning of a new stage in participation processes in Brazil in terms of the institutionalisation of plural accountability mechanisms: the idea from then on was to improve accountability tools, based on the same model applied to the system for monitoring and evaluating public actions implemented by the special secretariat for women's policies.

Notwithstanding these clear advances, four key challenges stand out:

- the resistance of different public sectors to the idea of sharing power with civil-society organisations;
- the large gap between formal and actual participation outcomes (so far, achievements have been observed in the legal realm; it is now necessary to consolidate rights, making them available to everyone);
- the threat hanging over civil-society organisations both from the financial and political point of view;
- the difficulties of extending social participation to the economic policy field.

## Challenges for consolidating social participation in Brazil

### The challenge of opening up the state

Within the state bureaucracy, there is no unanimous position in relation to social participation. Many public managers are not willing to share power outside the space of representative democracy. These managers are reluctant to engage in a dialogue with society and to accept the deliberations of collegiate institutions such as the councils and conferences. According to Enid Rocha,<sup>9</sup> a former National Deputy Secretary for Social Articulation of the General Secretariat of the Office of the President of the Republic, 'the more responsibilities a council has, the lower its governmental representativeness'.

Following the same line of thought, an observation made by Tatagiba (2004, p. 366) when she analysed the municipal public policy councils of São Paulo should be mentioned. She said that:

*'if power correlations within the councils are very unfavourable, they can be isolated and become mere formal bodies that exist only because of official requirements. When this happens, instead of acting in such a way as to promote institutional innovations, managing councils can become parallel institutional mechanisms with little or no bearing on efforts to promote more democratic state institutions. This is one of the problems often mentioned in case studies: weak councils which fail to legitimise themselves as participation forums end up having their role of legitimising the decisions of executive agencies denied'.*

This low level of commitment from governmental sectors also contributes to poor integration and co-ordination of participatory processes. Deliberations made in conferences or councils in different areas are often not consistent with one another. In an attempt to overcome this challenge, President Lula's administration created a specific forum inside the Planalto Palace (the seat of Brazil's executive branch). It is a secretariat charged with, among other things, 'ensuring closer links and synergy in the political relations between the government and organised civil society, and among all existing sectoral social participation mechanisms and initiatives, and following up on and controlling public policies'<sup>10</sup>. It should be noted, however, that this objective has been only partially achieved so far. According to some critics, the logic of the federal administration has been that of social governability and consultations and it has failed to build participation forums which can truly deliberate on public policies.

### The challenge of enforcing rights

Although the federal constitution set forth guidelines for a participatory democracy, particularly in the realm of social policies, the managerial reform of the state – inspired by neoliberal ideas – carried out in Brazil since the 1990s led to institutional changes in another direction.

During the 1990s, a policy for reducing the size of the state, valuing the 'market', and outsourcing the implementation of public policies to civil-society organisations and the private sector was implemented throughout Latin America. According to Nogueira (2004), the so-called 'state reform' enhanced the efficiency and rational use of the public apparatus, but it affected the image of the state in the eyes of citizens and disorganised its technical and administrative apparatus. The author says that 'the reforming movement took no measures to link its rational-legal dynamic to an empowering dynamic open to a political democracy and to the promotion of social and citizenship rights. This is the main reason why it failed.'(p.52).

A participant in the seminar 'New strategies for expanding democracy and participation', which was sponsored by various civil-society networks and organisations and held in December 2005 in Recife, state of Pernambuco, reached the following conclusion in relation to the effects of the reform of the Brazilian state in terms of social participation:

*'We placed excessively high hopes in channels for participating in the state, but we failed to consider the state as a whole as we should. Building "tunnels" in the state is not enough. We created participation channels in a state that no longer exists. The state reform implemented since the 1990s changed the Brazilian state by privatising agencies and companies, creating regulatory agencies, outsourcing the implementation of public policies. This type of state is not in tune with the idea of participation that we had been striving to promote' (Ciconello 2006).*

That is, the capacity of the Brazilian state to implement public policies and ensure the rights provided for in legal instruments is decreasing more and more. Apart from this, Brazil is still a country controlled by a political and economic elite structured around privileges. This situation largely explains why laws and rights (even those provided for in the law) are complied with only partially, and poor people are always excluded. Social participation made it possible for the population to break away from this pattern formally and to build an extremely progressive legal framework. However, due to unequal power relations and the fragility of the Brazilian state, this progressive legal framework has not been applied in practice. This is a new challenge for social participation: consolidating an appropriate institutional framework for enforcing rights.

### **The challenge of strengthening civil-society organisations**

A framework for ensuring participation in public policies presupposes the existence of strengthened and autonomous civil-society organisations. Skilled human resources are required for representatives of society to participate in councils and conferences in a technically and politically appropriate way. These representatives of society must have a minimal understanding of elements of the state bureaucracy such as planning, management, and public budget tools. For this purpose, it is necessary not only to make information available to these representatives, but also to train them in these subjects, which in most cases doesn't happen.

Today, there is a gap in the offer of political training and grassroots education – which used to be strong in the past – for three main reasons:

- international co-operation agencies fail to give priority to financing rights-defending and advisory NGOs for training leaders and providing political education;
- progressive sectors of the Catholic Church which support 'Liberation Theology' have been suppressed, as a result of the rapid and successful conservative 'counter-revolution' promoted by the Vatican;
- sufficient resources for the institutional funding of civil-society organisations are lacking. In fact, the so-called progressive sector of civil society involved in the World Social Forum process has been facing difficulties in ensuring its financial and political sustainability as a result of the decreasing funds made available by international co-operation agencies, which have been historical partners in actions to strengthen Brazilian civil society and in the struggle for ensuring rights. Moreover, limitations are also faced in terms of raising funds locally for actions designed to

promote deeper changes through educational processes. On the one hand, this situation is caused by the lack of a culture of donating in Brazilian society. When people donate funds, they do so for assistance and charity actions, who's potential to change the current scenario is low. On the other hand, the Brazilian state prefers to finance civil-society organisations engaged in delivering basic social services.

It should also be mentioned that the legal framework governing the relations between civil-society organisations and the Brazilian state is outdated and was historically based on the instrumental perspective of providing services (and of collaborating with the state). As a result, there are virtually no public incentives in the Brazilian law for strengthening the autonomous organisation of different social groups and for expanding the actions of public agencies. On the contrary, organisations are faced with intense and complex red-tape requirements which make it difficult, among other things, for different social groups to be represented and express their ideas in institutional forums designed to ensure their participation.

Due to all these hindrances, many civil-society organisations have to decide between focusing resources and efforts on their institutional struggle within the state (through policy councils and conferences, and participatory budget mechanisms) or on political mobilisation and training processes in society. For many of them, the so-called 'institutional struggle' can only be supported by professional militants with enough time and willingness to understand and act as required inside the state apparatus. It should be said, however, that, considering the financial difficulties faced by civil-society organisations, high-qualified militants are hard to find in the grassroots organisations.

### **The challenge of social participation in the economic arena**

While different councils and conferences were created for discussing and deliberating on social policies, no mechanisms were implemented to ensure participation in decisions related to economic policy. In fact, economic decisions are increasingly made by a handful of people. This has been a real contradiction and a barrier hindering participation, since the restrictions imposed by macroeconomic policies affect the reach and design of social policies. Any argument in favour of making economic measures more transparent and subject to social influence and control is rejected by the increasingly commonplace discourse that they are essentially technical measures to be taken by experts. This is why it can be said that the economy has colonised politics, considering that, in the final analysis, indisputable 'technical' decisions affect spaces available for political decision-making, including the councils and conferences.

Evanildo Barbosa da Silva, a collaborator in the Federation of Social Work and Educational Organizations and a member of the National Social Participation Forum, said in the seminar mentioned above that:

*'a key shortcoming observed in existing participation tools and mechanisms is that they have not managed to ensure democratic discussions on the economic policy so far. The existing mechanisms emerged from the need to generate consensus against a backdrop of insufficient resources. We manage scarce resources by consensus. The posture of civil society in these forums is limited by the basic notion of prioritising actions and policies to be funded with budget leftovers'.*

The government itself admits how difficult it is to create spaces for ensuring participation in economic decisions, including in the definition of priorities for allocating resources. Enid Rocha admits that ministries dealing with economic and infrastructure issues and development banks are the ones which resist the idea of participation in the government most. According to Rocha, 'society wants to participate in decisions on investments and on where they should be applied and there is no culture or willingness on the part of these ministries and banks to accept such participation. They see this participation as a complete hindrance'. It can thus be seen that the path to creating participatory

spaces in these areas – which define the core of the state’s development model and significantly affect socio-environmental impacts – is a long one.

## Final considerations

No one can talk about democracy in Brazil today without considering its abundant participation experiences and the huge institutional framework set up in the country for discussing social policies. Dialogue forums involving the government and society, particularly the above-mentioned public policy councils and conferences offer the following advantages:

- they contribute to developing closer relations between public authorities and citizens at large, both men and women, and to weakening patronage networks, bringing alliances and conflicts of interests to the public decision-making arena;
- they allow for a higher rate of correct decisions;
- they are instrumental for identifying problems and building alternatives;
- they enhance administrative transparency and press governments to produce actual results.

The achievements ensured by the more intense presence of civil-society organisations in the state apparatus are even more remarkable if one considers that representative and participatory democracy was resumed barely two decades ago. These are processes which, albeit very recent, have gained an increasingly institutional status. However, there are still problems to be faced that are not small, especially if one considers the high social exclusion rates prevailing in Brazil.

However, despite these problems, social participation still holds a strong promise. As Pedro Pontual, the co-ordinator of CEAAL/ Brazil – the Latin American Education Council – stresses, ‘participation is not an end in itself. It is a strategic requirement for building an effective democracy which represents the interests of society at large and creates spaces for tolerance and recognition. Participation is also a strategic requirement for ensuring rights (civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights) to the population as a whole, as well as for promoting development’ (Ciconello, 2006).

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The National Social Participation Forum (FNPP), created in 1990, is made up of NGOs and civil-society organisations which joined efforts to foster exchanges of experiences in terms of participation in public management, and discussions on major challenges for democratising the exercise of public power at all levels. For more information, visit [www.participacaopopular.org.br](http://www.participacaopopular.org.br).

<sup>2</sup> Also referred to as management councils or rights councils.

<sup>3</sup> Law 8142/90 - Art. 1° The Unified Health System (SUS) provided for in Law n. 8,080 of September 19, 1990 will be composed of the following collegiate bodies in each governmental sphere, without prejudice to the functions of the Legislative Branch: (...) Paragraph 2 - The Health Council shall be a permanent and deliberative collegiate body made up of government representatives, service providers, health professionals and users in charge of defining strategies and controlling the implementation of the health policy at the corresponding level, including in its economic and financial aspects, whose decisions shall be ratified by those in charge of the legally established branch in each sphere of government.

<sup>4</sup> [www.cdes.gov.br](http://www.cdes.gov.br)

<sup>5</sup> On 30 August 2007.

<sup>6</sup> In this regard, see Institute for Applied Economic Research (2006) 'On the recent fall in income inequality in Brazil', [www.ipea.gov.br](http://www.ipea.gov.br).

<sup>7</sup> According to Decree 4,773/2003, the National Council on Women's Rights (CNDM) is a consultative collegiate body making up the basic framework of the Special Secretariat for Women's Policies in charge of promoting national policies for women from a gender perspective with the aim of eliminating prejudice and discrimination, including economic and financial discrimination, by ensuring greater social control of these policies.

<sup>8</sup> [www.presidencia.gov.br/spmulheres](http://www.presidencia.gov.br/spmulheres)

<sup>9</sup> In an interview held on 26 July 2007.

<sup>10</sup> General Secretariat of the Office of the President of the Republic web site ([www.presidencia.gov.br](http://www.presidencia.gov.br))