

Engaging Citizens in Governance: Lessons from Brazil's Democratic Experiments

In the two decades since military rule ended in Brazil, there has been a remarkable flowering of new democratic practices and spaces for participation. Brazil's 1988 'Citizens' Constitution' created the legal basis for some of the world's most progressive democratic institutions. Democratic innovations such as participatory budgeting (*orçamento participativo*) have brought Brazil to the forefront of debates on tackling democratic deficits through participatory governance. Brazil's social movements and left-wing political parties have played an active part in this process of democratisation, engaging citizens in making demands on the state and claiming their rights, and promoting new, expanded understandings of citizenship and democracy.

What lessons do Brazil's democratic experiments offer other countries? This briefing shares some of the insights that arose from a DFID-Brazil funded project called *Olhar Crítico* – 'a critical look' – that brought together activists, academics and practitioners in an innovative research process, to enquire, with a critical eye, into Brazil's experiences with participation in governance.



Creating Spaces for Participatory Democracy

In Brazil, the words *democracia* ('democracy') and *cidadania* ('citizenship') are not just abstract academic concepts. In the post-dictatorship era, these words have acquired new meanings. Even though they may be used as often in bemoaning what is lacking as in celebrating the achievement of long-denied rights, their use by ordinary Brazilians reflects the expansion of a new democratic imaginary beyond the formal political arena and into everyday life. Instead of considering themselves as clients or beneficiaries, it is evident that growing numbers of Brazilians now feel a sense of entitlement as *citizens* who can make demands on the state – a radical shift from the culture of favours and lack of voice experienced under decades of authoritarian rule.

The 1988 Constitution was a defining landmark of the new democratic order. Dubbed the 'Citizens' Constitution' because of the new rights it accorded Brazil's citizens, it prepared the ground for the creation of hybrid governance institutions at each tier of government.

Olhar Crítico: ‘A critical look’

Olhar Crítico began with a paradox. ‘Participation’ and ‘citizenship’ were increasingly on the lips of the world’s most powerful development actors. Brazil was gaining international visibility for its radical democratic experiments. Participation in governance was becoming a new panacea to cure all manner of democratic ills. Participatory budgeting was being extolled and promoted by mainstream development institutions. But in the midst of all this, surprisingly little attention was being given to understanding quite how Brazil’s celebrated participatory institutions actually functioned or indeed what conditions had given rise to the democratic gains with which they were coming to be associated.

Funded by DFID Brazil, led by ActionAid Brazil and working closely with researchers from the Participation Power and Social Change team at the Institute of Development Studies in Brighton, *Olhar Crítico* sought to reach the parts that other research projects often did not reach. Activists and practitioners drew on their experience to frame the enquiry; they guided researchers, harnessing their skills in writing and analysis to making sense of practices of citizenship, accountability, participation and democracy in a part of Brazil that has been relatively under-researched: the impoverished north and north-east. This was complemented by a series of historical studies of Brazilian social movements, which located these stories of change on a larger political canvas.

Outputs from the project form the basis for two volumes: Jorge Romano, Maristela de Paula Andrade and Marta Antunes (2007) *Olhar Crítico sobre Participação e Cidadania: A Construção de Uma Governança Democrática e Participativa A Partir Do Local*, São Paulo: Editora Expressão Popular, and Jorge Romano, Renato Athias and Marta Antunes (2007) *Olhar Crítico sobre Participação e Cidadania: Trajetórias de Organização e Luta pela Redemocratização da Governança no Brasil*, São Paulo: Editora Expressão Popular.

These sought to embody the principle of *controle social* – public oversight – giving service user representatives a statutory right to participate in holding the state to account. The earliest and arguably the most radical of these new democratic spaces were those established in the health sector. The first *Olhar Crítico* case is of one of these institutions, the municipal health council of Cabo de Santo Agostinho, in the north-eastern state of Pernambuco.

Institutionalising *Controle Social*

Successful mobilisation by the health reform movement (*movimento pela reforma sanitária*) to embed the principles of *controle social* in the 1988 Constitution created the basis for the creation of health councils (*conselhos de saúde*) at municipal, state and federal levels. User representatives constitute 50% of each council’s members; the remaining 50% of the seats are divided equally between health workers and health managers, including private-sector institutions delivering contracted-out services. These councils have a statutory mandate to audit health plans, budgets and expenditure. Transfers from federal



health budgets depend on the *conselho* approving accounts and spending plans. Over 5,000 *conselhos de saúde* now exist across the country, engaging hundreds of thousands of Brazilian citizens acting on behalf of a multitude of social actors, from neighbourhood associations to social movements.

What do citizens who participate in these new democratic spaces as user representatives make of them? How do they see their prospects

Struggles for Accountability in Cabo’s Municipal Health Council

Cabo de Santo Agostinho is a medium-sized municipality of around 150,000 people, located in the semi-urban periphery of Brazil’s fifth largest city, Recife. Its history includes a legacy of social movement activism and progressive government, both of which have contributed to shaping citizen–state engagement in the post-dictatorship era. Cabo’s health council was established in 1994, but only gained institutional vitality with the election in 1997 of a leftist municipal government committed to popular participation. The subsequent democratising reform of the governance of health services, led by a progressive health reformer within the state and a leading civil society activist, put in place key institutional design features that have strengthened its democratic potential. These include a chair elected by the council rather than assumed by the health secretariat and rules for selecting representatives that seek to secure broad-based participation from among Cabo’s diverse social actors in the two-yearly terms of the *conselho*’s user representatives. They also include dedicated administrative staff and resources for travel and events, vital for institutional memory, networking and engagement with the municipality at large.

Council meetings are a lively arena, in which user and health worker representatives gain the opportunity to actively question and challenge those responsible for providing health services. Yet the ideal of autonomous civil society holding the state to account is complicated in practice by a number of factors. Political party affiliations span the state and participatory spheres, leaving the council highly vulnerable to political manipulation. Civil society autonomy is compromised by the dependence of many civil society organisations on subsidies and contracts from the state. Health workers are committed participants, but many are on insecure employment contracts, which can affect their willingness to raise concerns or vote against the government. In the period of the study, the institutional design of the council ensured formal inclusion of a diversity of societal groups. But hierarchies of expertise, education, status, class, race and gender continue to present barriers to their substantive participation.

For all these challenges, those concerned with realising the promise of *controle social* have not given up their struggle for more accountable and responsive governance, within and outside the *conselho* itself. For its users and health worker members, the experience of being part of this institution has enabled them to gain access to information, skills and knowledge which they can carry into other spheres – whether to remind people in the community that health is a right rather than a favour given by politicians, or to find their voice in interactions and debates that would once have silenced them.

Source: ‘A Luta Por Participação e Controle Social num Conselho Municipal de Saúde’ [The Struggle for Participation and Accountability in a Municipal Health Council], Sílvia Cordeiro, Andrea Cornwall and Nelson G. Delgado, in Romano, Andrade and Antunes (2007).

for enhancing accountability and responsiveness? Silvia Cordeiro of the feminist organisation *Centro das Mulheres do Cabo*, who became one of the first user representatives to chair a health council, worked together with Rio-based researcher Nelson Giordano Delgado and IDS researcher Andrea Cornwall to reflect on her experience and seek answers to these questions from Cabo de Santo Agostinho's health councillors themselves.

The literature on participatory governance identifies three factors as critical for viable participatory sphere institutions: strong and well-organised civil society, a supportive state (progressive politics, enabling legislative and policy frameworks, and political commitment) and institutional designs that favour inclusive participation and deliberation.¹ The Cabo case complicates the narrative that pits virtuous civil society against the vicissitudes of the state and extols the democratising influence of civil society.² It shows what can happen when progressive elements within civil society are able to take up spaces opened up and sustained by progressive bureaucrats and make use of them to further a shared commitment to decent health services for all.

As 'schools for citizenship', institutions like the *conselho* have a more diffuse educative function. What made the creation of Brazil's *conselhos* possible – and what ensures their continued viability as democratic spaces – is this *coming together* of progressive elements around an agenda that is profoundly political: a vision for democratising governance that has long been at the heart of Brazil's leftist parties' social transformation agendas. Reducing participatory governance institutions to 'mechanisms' not only airbrushes politics out of the picture, it also removes those who animate these institutions: the people who create and sustain these new democratic spaces.

Power to the People?

The remarkable success of the redistribution of municipal resources in the city of Porto Alegre – with very real gains for poor communities – has inspired hundreds of municipalities throughout the country to adopt participatory budgeting (*orçamento participativo*). Delegates are drawn directly from the neighbourhoods where they live and in their thousands they debate the relative gains to be had from investments in actions that can make a difference to the lives of their communities.

Even though the lion's share of the municipal budget continues to be consumed by recurrent costs and statutory allocations, the involvement of citizens in determining the allocation of a proportion of investment funds and in auditing their use – what the Brazilians call *fiscalização* – has served to reduce corruption within local government. Participatory budgeting and Porto Alegre have thus attracted significant attention internationally and participatory budgeting has found its greatest admirers amongst advocates of participatory democracy.

In their *Olhar Crítico* study of participatory budgeting in Recife, Evanildo Barbosa da Silva and Ana Claudia Chaves Teixeira show how

participatory budget sites need to be understood as spaces steeped in the political culture of the city, and in the histories of different administrations and of citizens' encounters with government.

Participatory budgeting has provided thousands of Brazilians with a completely new way of engaging in municipal governance. The very process of coming together in groups to gain access to the budget process can be viewed as one of extending the possibilities of citizenship, creating new political subjects and subjectivities. At first sight, it appears to offer a solution to a whole range of democratic deficit



Producing 'Civil Society' through Participatory Budgeting in Recife

Recife's participatory budget opens a space for representatives of civil society organisations and ordinary citizens, elected as delegates in equal measure, to participate in determining the allocation of a proportion of investment funds from the municipal budget. Introduced in 1993 and building on earlier experiments with democratic city governance, participatory budgeting has continued through three changes of government, including a period of three years of conservative rule. Maintained as much by the strength of civil society organisations in the municipality as by political will, it has given rise to a diversity of new local collectivities. During 2001–4, the first years of the tenure of a radical democratic Workers' Party (PT) government in the city, the number of people taking part in the participatory budget (*orçamento participativo*, or OP) increased by over 50%, to 69,500, and the number of local organisations registered to participate doubled as inclusion criteria were broadened.

According to the Recife municipal government, some 26% of the groups who participated in 2001–2 had been formed as a result of the opportunity to participate in OP. This shows that popular participation can lead to the creation of new collective actors, which in turn stimulates the production of new political subjectivities and expands meanings and practices of citizenship. This process is being stimulated by the participatory budget and by the radical democratic policies of the municipal administration. Yet this is not without dangers. Da Silva and Teixeira cite housing rights activist Reverend Marcos Cosmo da Silva, who notes that people are abandoning traditional community organisations to form their own, without any clear idea of aims beyond gaining access to the budget process and a voice for their immediate needs. This in turn, he argues, weakens the prospects for defining policies for the city as a whole, and for strengthening social movements which are fighting for the realisation of rights.

Nevertheless, the gains that have been made are significant. The durability of OP through a period of conservative rule, surviving threats by city councillors who saw it as undermining their power and attempts by the central administration to find ways to close it down – as has happened in other municipalities when there has been a change of political leadership – is a sign of the vibrancy of this institution, and the forms of citizenship it stimulates and affirms.

Source: 'A Experiência do Orçamento Participativo do Recife' [Recife's Experience of Participatory Budgeting], Evanildo Barbosa da Silva e Ana Claudia Chaves Teixeira, in Romano *et al.* 2007.

¹ See Heller (2001); Avritzer (2002); McGee *et al.* (2003); Fung (2003); Gaventa (2006); Coelho (2007).

² See Chandhoke (2003) and Houtzager (2003) for critiques of this narrative.



dilemmas. And yet the path to realisation of this promise is far more complex than the popularised representations of this institution that are currently gaining favour in the UK and elsewhere would have us believe.

Da Silva and Teixeira's analysis reveals the extent to which old political practices resurface in these new arenas. It serves as a reminder that any newly created democratic spaces take shape in institutional landscapes crowded with older institutions, with political cultures that may be far from democratic. Anyone who engages in these spaces brings with them understandings, relationships and practices from other political spaces – many of which bear the distinctive traces of the clientelism and authoritarianism that are pervasive in Brazil's political institutions.

The case of Recife's participatory budget offers insights into a number of critical issues for participatory governance. One is the challenge of insulating progressive institutions against adverse changes in political administration. That participatory budgeting in Recife survived a period of conservative municipal government suggests that it had become embedded in the city's political culture. Citizens had come to expect a voice. The routinisation of participatory budgeting appears to have been sufficient to ensure its political durability. A second issue is the challenge of sustaining and broadening participation. What worked in this case appears to have been a mix of forms of representation in a hybrid democratic design that drew on a range of elements of established democratic practice. The participatory budget created space for the emergence of new social actors. But it also engaged established civil society organisations, from neighbourhood associations to social movements, as those with the legitimacy and experience to represent a range of constituencies in the budgeting process.

One important lesson from this experience is that far from a 'tool' that can be exported to any context, participatory budgeting needs to be understood as a dynamic set of practices that may produce very different results in different contexts. What works in any given context may well be a hybrid institutional form that reflects the best fit with that context's political cultures, political opportunities and existing democratic institutions.

Putting Democracy to Rights

With new, expanded, conceptions of citizenship in Brazil have come a new awareness of the rights that exist – and those that still need to be struggled for and claimed. Brazilian social movement activists talk with pride of the 'conquests' that have been made in advancing social justice through legislation, effortlessly rolling statute numbers off their tongues as they describe the rights they have and define the rights they now want. However, there is a very real gulf between the elegance and comprehensiveness of Brazil's many laws and the realities of access to justice. Poor people may have scant recourse to the legal arena, and laws



described as things of beauty fail to find any real expression in everyday life. Yet for social movements, the law and the rights it defines have symbolic as well as practical value, as a form of defence against the old Brazil and its culture of favours and dependency on powerful patrons.

For families in the far northern states of Brazil, whose livelihoods have long depended on having customary usufruct rights to *babaçu* – a variety of palm nut that is broken by women and used to make oil, soap and charcoal – gaining a legal entitlement guaranteeing these customary rights is critical to their very survival. Local women's groups created by the Catholic Church became vehicles for women's organising in the 1980s and 1990s, as access to *babaçu* was made more difficult and dangerous by the often violent process of land enclosure which accompanied the expansion of cattle-ranching into the Amazon frontier. In the struggle for their rights, these women came to define themselves as a new collective actor, the *quebradeiras de côco*, and their fight to put a law on the statute books that turned their customary rights into legal rights has become legendary in Brazil.



Participatory Practices and Rights Struggles in Rural Maranhão

For poor families in the rural areas of one of Brazil's most impoverished states, Maranhão, access to the palm nut called *babaçu* provides a vital source of livelihood. Faced with the increasing difficulties and dangers of exercising traditional usufruct rights, poor women and men in rural Maranhão began to create collective means through which they could continue to maintain the *babaçu*-based livelihoods on which they and their families depended. Adapting an indigenous institution, *mutirão* – a term used for a form of collective labour that benefits the community – groups would assemble and break into large landholdings, gathering as much *babaçu* as they could carry.

Women and men developed different strategies in the struggle for their rights. In *empates* (literally, 'blockades') groups of women came together to exercise their usufruct rights and sought to negotiate the protection of *babaçu* stands threatened with deforestation using non-violent means; in *greves* (literally, 'strikes') men's struggles for rights turned to more conventional tools of mobilisation and resistance.

Struggles for *babaçu* turned into struggles for access to land itself, as women and men came to see themselves both as citizens and as social and political actors. Through a range of forms of collective action, a new identity was born: the *quebradeiras de côco babaçu*. Soon a movement had sprung up, and one of its members came to be the first *quebradeira* elected as a municipal councillor. She took the struggle into the legislative arena and was able to get a law on the statute books that turned customary usufruct into a legal right, which was later amended to make cutting or in any way damaging *babaçu* trees illegal. The battleground has now shifted to the arena of implementation: the struggle to ensure that the law is translated into practice has only just begun.

Source: 'Na Lei e Na Marra: A Luta Pelo Livre Acesso aos Babaçuais no Maranhão' [By Law and By Force: The Struggle for Free Access to Babaçu in Maranhão], Maristela de Paula Andrade and Luciene Dias Figueiredo, in Romano *et al.* (eds) 2007.

The origins of this movement are the focus of the third *Olhar Crítico* case study. Anthropologist Maristela de Paula Andrade and activist Luciene Dias Figueiredo show how the struggle of the *quebradeiras de côco* was one in which participation played a central role – but in ways that went beyond the kind of ‘invited participation’ orchestrated by the state and development organisations.

As the case of the *quebradeiras* suggests, participation is about more than responding to invitations from the state. It is also about forms of mobilisation and collective action, forms that have long histories in popular struggles for self-realisation and survival in Brazil. From the *quilombos* established by runaway slaves seeking to create a new society no longer governed by the rules and norms of the colonial masters, to the land occupations organised by the MST landless people’s movement and the *mutirões*, *empates* and *greves* of those involved in the struggle for *babaçu*, these forms of participation are more than forms of resistance. They are also practices that help to create new dimensions of citizenship, an awareness of the right to have rights, and a sense of political agency. And they give shape to ideals of how to organise society that break with old constraints and overcome the potent forms of oppression that remain part of the lives of poor Brazilians, from the slums of São Paulo to the large landholdings of the Brazilian interior.

Negotiating Citizenship

Brazil’s Constitution makes provision for the realisation of the right to health. But what rights do people have if what *they* define as ‘health’ lies outside the domain of biomedicine? How are different knowledges negotiated as health policy is defined? And what happens when policies designed to implement the principle of universality that underpins the national health system are in direct contradiction with the expressed needs of a particular group? *Olhar Crítico*’s fourth case study, of the interface between the Brazilian health system and the system of medicine practised by indigenous traditional healers, known as *pajés*, raises fundamental questions about citizenship and the paradoxes of inclusion.

For Brazil’s indigenous population, the interface with the Brazilian state – the character of which over the centuries has oscillated between genocide and paternalism – has never been easy. For the Brazilian government, administering health services in regions where access to biomedical care can involve several days’ journey by canoe provides a whole host of logistical dilemmas. Opportunities for dialogue were opened up with the establishment of Special Indigenous Health Districts (DSEIs) and a system of district health councils in which indigenous people and representatives of the Brazilian state could come together to define ways to improve health, wellbeing and access to services for the indigenous population. It is in these spaces, however, that



Participation at the Interface of Knowledge Systems in the Brazilian Amazon

For the indigenous peoples of the Brazilian Amazon, one of the principal sources of healthcare is their own indigenous medical system, of which different groups of traditional healers, collectively known as *pajés*, are the custodians. A complex system of ritual practice, indigenous medicine utilises a variety of resources to ensure health and wellbeing, from protective incantations and preventive dietary taboos to curative herbs and shamanic interventions.

The efforts of the Brazilian state to provide healthcare to the indigenous population have rarely taken account of the possibilities of integrating traditional medicine into the services delivered by government agencies. In 1993, the Second Conference on Indigenous People’s Health produced a model for an indigenous health system in which there would be participation of indigenous people in planning and implementation at every level. This raised a number of challenges. Levels of organisation among indigenous people in different regions varied greatly; some groups had well-established movement organisations, while others lacked anything resembling the kinds of formalised institutions through which the Brazilian state was accustomed to engaging with citizens.

Even in areas with strong indigenous organisations, such as the Rio Negro region of the Amazon, official spaces for participation such as the district health councils tend to be dominated by technical–bureaucratic concerns leaving little space for discussion about how indigenous medicine might be incorporated into service delivery. In the Rio Negro, this trend has been aggravated by the involvement of the regional indigenous peoples’ organisation, FOIRN (Federação das Organizações Indígenas do Rio Negro), in managing primary care services outsourced by the government. This has left FOIRN’s leaders bogged down in administration, as they struggle to deal with centrally set targets and budget frameworks. The *pajés* of the Rio Negro, who are beginning to press for official recognition of the importance of their traditional medical knowledge after decades of repression by missionaries and the state, are finding that they must develop new skills and find new allies in order to influence both their own representatives and the non-indigenous professionals and bureaucrats who dominate the health service.

Source: ‘Saber Tradicional e Participação Indígena em Políticas Públicas de Saúde’ [Traditional Knowledge and the Participation of Indigenous People in Health Policy], Renato Athias, Alex Shankland and Raimundo Nonato Silva, in Romano *et al.* 2007.

the challenges of inclusive participation are thrown into sharp relief. The principal concern of those who administer the DSEIs is with the delivery of biomedical health services; for indigenous people, however, a key concern is whether these services respect their own system of preventive medicine and healing. Implementation of the principle of universality embedded in the Brazilian national health service has been addressed by rolling out a series of standardised biomedical packages – an approach which reaches its limits as it meets with indigenous peoples’ desires for a medical system that respects their way of life.

Given the obligations of the health districts to involve

indigenous people in planning and implementation, how are they to respond to the calls to include indigenous medicine in healthcare delivery? If the terms of inclusion – for example, administering herbs without the accompanying ritual that *pajés* see as a vital part of the healing process – strip away much of the power of this form of medicine, how can indigenous practices best be accommodated in biomedical hospitals and clinics? Can a health system that has pursued universalisation through expanded access to standardised services adjust to recognising the rights of indigenous people to demand special and different treatment – treatment that would place them apart from other Brazilian citizens, including those who would prefer acupuncture or homoeopathy to allopathic medicine?

The questions that arise here are complex, and have implications for the inclusion of any marginalised group within spaces for participation that are shaped by the cultures and practices of the dominant majority. As this case shows, effective participation may well come to depend on the ability to establish links with spaces beyond the participatory sphere, through which marginalised social actors can build confidence, arguments and skills with which to participate. At the same time, it demonstrates the need for state-created spaces to recognise the diversity of styles and cultures of participation if they are to achieve genuinely inclusive deliberation.

Mobilising for Change

What is it that has enabled hundreds of thousands of ordinary people, many of them poor, unemployed and uneducated, to bring the ideals of participatory governance to life and mobilise to press for change? *Olhar Crítico*'s stories tell of the engagement of diverse organisations working in the interests of social justice – from progressive church agencies to social movements and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) – in mobilising people to recognise the rights they have and the power that is theirs to use. And they tell of bureaucrats and politicians who have championed democratising reforms and given sustenance to the new democratic spaces that have been opened up in the post-dictatorship era. And they offer a number of broader lessons that extend beyond Brazil's borders.

Olhar Crítico's 'critical look' went beyond the kind of orchestrated, institutionalised, *invited* participation that has become a familiar part of development practice. We considered not only what can be learnt from looking more closely at what animates people to participate in invited spaces, but also what comes into view when we pay closer attention to other forms of participation that people initiate for themselves.

Looking more closely at what poor people do when they come together to attempt to influence the decisions that affect their lives highlights other forms of 'popular participation' – for example the strikes



and protests of the *quebradeiras de côco*. It also shows that the spaces of the participatory sphere, institutions such as the health councils and participatory budgeting, exist alongside not only other political, bureaucratic and legal spaces, but also alongside other domains of association where people come together with others like them. These other domains are especially important for historically marginalised people.³ They can become more than sites for solidarity and self-help: they can provide a space for those who have never had a voice to gain the confidence and skills in the art of public speaking to raise their voice in the public arena, and develop a sense of collective power and purpose.

One lesson that can be drawn from this study is that more contentious forms of social action are vital for democratic vitality. Interactions with the state outside the participatory sphere – in the courts, in the streets – can strengthen the accountability of participatory institutions. Another lesson is that getting the institutions right is only part of what it takes to deepen democracy. What is also needed are measures that can strengthen the voice, confidence and political agency of historically marginalised groups so that they can enter and make use of these institutions, and claim their rights.

Such measures may consist, as in the case of the *quebradeiras*, of mobilisation that takes place outside the participatory sphere. But mobilisation can also take place within and through participatory sphere institutions. The potential of these institutions as 'schools for citizenship' becomes evident in the cases of Recife's participatory budget and Cabo's health council. But these schools not only teach citizens about what is due to them, they also enable state actors to get a better understanding of what citizens care about. They are also places in which citizens learn what it means to be democratic. Those who come from civil society organisations that reproduce societal hierarchies and prejudices gain access to a whole new world within participatory spaces where everyone has the right to speak and to disagree, where turns are taken, monologues cut short and decisions made by consensus or voting. These institutions have a potentially profound contribution to make to changing the culture of Brazilian politics.

A further lesson from extending the gaze of this study beyond 'invited participation' is the need to locate the new democratic spaces of participatory governance on institutional landscapes that may be crowded with existing structures and etched with the power relations, alliances and political cultures that shape other political spaces. 'Old' political practices – contesting power, brokering deals, driving political bargains – are part of the everyday experience of democracy of those who enter these spaces. Such practices, and the expectations and dispositions associated with them, cannot be expected to disappear overnight. And yet change *is* happening. Participatory institutions have provided significant opportunities for historically marginalised groups to participate in greater numbers than ever before, contributing to the creation of new political subjects and subjectivities.⁴



³ Nancy Fraser (1992) and Margaret Kohn (2000) both draw attention to the significance of these other spaces for marginalised groups.

⁴ Baiocchi (2003); Baierle (2003); Avritzer (2002); Coelho (2007); Cornwall (2007).





Preconditions and Possibilities

Brazil's new democratic spaces, *Olhar Crítico* suggests, need to be seen as spaces of power that are in a continuous process of construction. They are reshaped as actors come and go, as governments change, and as new political configurations come into being and fade away. As the case of Recife's participatory budget shows, embedding innovations in a new culture of citizenship can lend them durability as political institutions, enabling them to last beyond changes in government. Arguably, this has less to do with enabling laws and institutional designs than with the social and state actors who create, sustain and populate participatory governance institutions, and their shared ideological commitment to popular participation that has been so much a feature of the Brazilian experience.⁵

What drives many of these social actors is not only a desire for more efficient management, but also for social justice. Those who are now progressive health bureaucrats may well once have been student radicals in the health reform movement. Today's NGO leaders may well have been involved in Catholic base communities or leftist political groups, mobilising against the dictatorship. Even those who enter the participatory sphere for the first time, as elected representatives for their communities or representing new associations, may well have trajectories that include some experience of mobilisation – whether joining up with neighbours to march on the local government to demand better services, or identifying with black, feminist, indigenous or other movements.

While *Olhar Crítico*'s studies focus primarily on the role played by social movements and progressive civil society organisations in the process of democratisation, they also demonstrate the critical role that the progressive state can play in creating and sustaining spaces for

participation. This, again, is not simply a matter of doing politics the 'right' way, as the 2006 DFID White Paper on governance (DFID 2006) would have it. It is more profoundly about a politics of social justice to which government, as well as oppositional social movements and NGOs, is committed.

Understanding the dynamism of Brazil's experiences of participation and citizenship calls for an approach that takes history, as well as politics, seriously. The vibrancy of Brazilian democracy owes as much to two decades of repressive dictatorship, which had a profound effect on the present generations of political and civil society leaders, as to an active and plural field of leftist political parties whose influence can be felt at all levels of government. Transplanting Brazil's institutions to an environment that lacked any of these vital *political* ingredients would produce very different results.

The innovative ways in which Brazilian social movements and progressive governments have sought to address the challenge of democratic renewal is a source of inspiration. As DFID and other international agencies seek to build more effective states (DFID 2006), and engage 'civil society' more effectively in processes of governance (DFID 2007), lessons from Brazil can be extremely valuable. Yet care must be taken to avoid doing what powerful development institutions have always sought to do, and that is to extract from Brazil's rich and complex experience a set of simple 'best practice' recipes to be replicated elsewhere.

The challenge for policy is to identify what it takes to build the preconditions for effective citizen engagement – rather than to reproduce institutions that rely on these preconditions being in place. Perhaps the most crucial lesson is the importance of getting to grips with context, rather than assuming that a similar set of institutional recipes can have the same effects in different places. Development agencies ignore this lesson at their peril.



⁵ See Baierte (2003); see also Heller (2001).

Sources

The case studies referred to here are available in Portuguese from ActionAid Brazil (www.actionaid.org.br) and in the edited volume, Jorge Romano, Maristela de Paula Andrade and Marta Antunes (2007), *Olhar Crítico sobre Participação e Cidadania: A Construção de Uma Governança Democrática e Participativa A Partir Do Local*, São Paulo: Editora Expressão Popular. See Cornwall, Romano and Shankland (2008) for longer summaries of the case studies and a synthesis of project findings in English.

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Brazil's democratic experiments have attracted the attention of those seeking new ways to engage citizens in governance and tackle democratic deficits. This briefing looks at what can be learnt from Brazil's experiences with participatory democracy, and what lessons this might have to offer other countries. To make participatory governance work, it suggests what's needed is not only the kind of good institutional designs that Brazil has developed. It also calls for efforts to build the preconditions for meaningful citizen engagement, so that the spaces for participation that new institutions open up can be taken up and used by citizens to achieve greater accountability and voice.



Engaging Citizens in Governance: Lessons from Brazil's Democratic Experiments

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