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Participatory Governance and the Challenge of Assumed Representation in Brazil
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Introduction

The participatory governance structures that have emerged alongside more conventional institutions of representative democracy in Brazil and elsewhere encompass not only direct citizen participation but also participation by collective civil society actors, claiming to represent their respective 'publics'. In contrast to political parties and labour unions, most of these collective actors do not operate formal electoral mechanisms, nor are they membership based. The challenge they therefore face is how they can claim legitimately to exercise representative functions vis-a-vis the state. Empirical research in São Paulo suggests that new concepts of representation are emerging within participatory governance structures.

The challenge of political representation in participatory governance structures

Inherent in the concept of political representation is a tension between the need for representatives to have autonomy to act (without which they cannot effectively govern), while remaining responsive to those they represent. In Brazil, there are few if any formal institutional mechanisms -- electoral or membership based -- to ensure that civil society actors are responsive to those in whose name they claim to operate. Yet in practice, large numbers of such collective actors are claiming to represent different groups of citizens through their engagement in a wide range of participatory institutions linked to the political executive. As yet there is no widely accepted historical or theoretical model for this type of political representation. It has been neglected, both by studies of comparative democracy that recognise only political representation based on elections or associational membership; and by studies of citizen participation that see the new governance structures as facilitating only direct citizen involvement, or that fail to differentiate between civil society and society itself. By contrast, this paper argues that the new forms of political representation emerging within participatory mechanisms need to be explored on their own terms, before assessing their compatibility with democratic norms and processes.

Assumed representation in São Paulo

Civil organisations active in participatory governance institutions are themselves seeking to define a new basis of democratic legitimacy for their role. The research takes these efforts as its starting point, focusing on the publicly stated commitments of civil organisations to represent the interests of particular communities or target groups. It recognises that such unilateral claims (or 'assumed representation') are not equivalent to effective representation, but argues that commitment to the interests of the represented is a vital component of representation. The research also looks at whether these unilateral claims are accompanied by actual practices of representation.

The research data were drawn from a survey of 229 civil organisations actively working with the urban poor in São Paulo. They were then classified by type of activity and the nature of the organisation's relationship to their public, as follows:

- *Community Associations* working on behalf of an 'imagined community';
- *Advocacy NGOs* that relate to a targeted population (but with no formal membership, and hence no exit option);
- *Coordinators* created specifically to link civil organisations to each other (often on the basis of formal membership), and to mediate relations with the state;
- *Service Non-Profits*, whose beneficiaries are individuals

Over half these groups asserted that their publics participate in the planning and execution of the organisation's activities.

Of the 229 organisations covered in the survey, 73 per cent asserted that they were representatives of the groups for whom they claimed to work. There is a close relationship between claiming to be a representative and undertaking activities which are likely to involve political representation, such as engagement in participatory governance institutions, mediating demands to government departments, supporting political candidates, and making demands on a municipal assembly.

Competing notions of representation

Six distinct notions of representation can be identified in the public justifications given by civil organisations for their assumed representation. 4 per cent of organisations based their claim on the existence of electoral mechanisms to select their leaders. 7 per cent claimed membership as the basis for representation. Less than 5 per cent argued that shared identity between leaders and those represented legitimised their claims to representation. Over 25 per cent (notably community organisations and advocacy NGOs) based their notion of representation on physical proximity to their public and openness to participation.

The argument most commonly advanced to support claims of assumed representation was the need to play a mediation role to connect excluded segments of the population to the state and the political-electoral arena. Mediation was most often claimed by coordinators and advocacy NGOs, but also by community organisations and service non-profits. The activity of mediation itself constitutes the basis of legitimacy of the representative (not their relationship to those represented, which remains unspecified). Finally, almost 25 per cent of actors, notably service non-profits and community organisations, based their claim to representation on providing expected and tangible benefits to those represented.

Mediation, the most commonly used argument to justify assumed representation, is the product of a long history of authoritarian rule in Brazil, and highly unequal access to the state. It is the only argument that all types of organisation make relatively frequently. In terms of aligning new notions of representation with democratic principles, the mediation argument appears the most promising. Implicit in it is the claim that representation exercised by civil organisations is not an alternative to that of traditional institutions of political representation, but rather an additional form of mediation that connects segments of the population otherwise poorly represented, and that remedies inequality in access to the state.

Implications for policymakers

The process of constructing and contesting new criteria for assessing the legitimacy of claims of representation made by civil organisations is ongoing. However the absence of a consensus does not justify dismissing, or ignoring, these new forms of political representation. The survival of the democratic current of which these new forms of representation are part depends in some measure on how well the challenge posed by assumed representation is met.