

## **Research Summary #10 - Who Participates? Civil Society and the New Democratic Politics in São Paulo, Brazil**

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*This paper forms part of a five year research programme under the Centre for the Future State, based at the Institute of Development Studies. Below is a summary of principal findings. Further details are available at [www.ids.ac.uk/gdr/cfs/index.html](http://www.ids.ac.uk/gdr/cfs/index.html)*

### **Introduction**

Arrangements for direct citizen participation in policymaking are being hailed as ways of democratising the state and giving poor people more access to decision-making fora. Whether that happens depends in part on *who* participates. This paper explores the factors that influence the propensity of collective civil society actors to participate in a variety of participatory spaces in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. A key finding is that collective actors with links to the state and to political parties are most likely to participate. Furthermore, the institutional design of participatory policy-making spaces exercises strong influence on who participates; and this also varies according to the type of civil society actor. Finally, there is no evidence that wealth of collective actors influences participation.

### **Approach and Methodology**

This work is based on a survey of 229 collective civil society actors in São Paulo in 2002. The research sought to identify which collective actors participate in three broad types of participatory institutions: (1) the participatory budget implemented by the Worker's Party in 2002; (2) the constitutionally mandated policy councils; (3) a category denoted as 'other' which includes the first two, along with a range of other local councils, committees and participatory programmes. The research explored whether propensity to participate was influenced by factors such as the wealth of collective actors, their institutional links, their organisational form and objectives, and the institutional design of participatory mechanisms. Rather than start with actors known to be participating (i.e. selecting on the dependent variable), this study started with a diverse universe of civil society actors, the first question being whether they participated at all. Five categories of civil society actors were used for this purpose: (i) advocacy NGOs, which turn social problems into public issues that become the focus of campaigns; (2) associations, which are geographically based organisations in the neighbourhood or community; (3) coordinators, which bring together other actors or represent interests of issue-based communities at the municipal, state or national levels; (4) service non-profits, which engage in direct service delivery to individual clients; (5) and 'others', including a broad range of corporate, philanthropic and religious organisations as well as Rotary or Lions Clubs, all of whom were less well represented in the study.

### **Who Participates? Key Findings**

The paper highlights several key findings: Firstly, contrary to mainstream assumptions about the importance of civil society autonomy, the actors in São Paulo most likely to participate in all three types of institutional arrangements for citizen participation are those with ties to political parties, and the state (for example through government contracts). Ties to the Catholic Church and to trade unions

do not increase the likelihood of participation. Thus, institutionally embedded actors have a greater propensity to participate. The fact that organisations with ties to the state are also the ones most active in public demonstrations and protests suggests that they have not, however, become co-opted. Secondly, the organisational forms that civil society actors take affect the likelihood of participation. Contrary to common assumptions, advocacy NGOs are no more likely than others to participate. By contrast, 'coordinators' and local associations have far greater propensity to participate. Thirdly, the wealth of civil society actors (measured by budget size) does not influence participation; this contrasts with the well established finding that wealth does influence individual participation, and underlines the importance of distinguishing between collective and individual actors. This finding supports the claim that, in São Paulo, the new participatory institutions have created opportunities for the inclusion of lower income groups. Fourthly, the design of institutional arrangements affects participation, and varies according to the type of organisation. For example, coordinators have higher rates of participation in policy councils, while local associations are most likely to engage in the participatory budget fora. The issue areas in which actors work have little impact on their rates of participation, except in the area of health which is a mandatory issue in the participatory budget, and where there are institutional mechanisms in place that encourage participation.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings suggest the need for a different way of thinking about civil society – not as an autonomous, democratising force in opposition to the state, but as a set of actors whose capacity to organise is influenced by their internal organisation, their links with other actors, and by the way institutions are designed. Participation is thus a contingent outcome, produced as collective actors negotiate relations in a particular institutional context. The paper highlights the key importance of distinguishing between individual citizen participation and collective participation by civil society actors, since the two obey different logics, and have different capacities for action. The important role of collective actors in turn raises the key issue of what forms of representation are being constructed by civil society actors in the new participatory institutions. This question is examined at greater length in another paper (IDS Working Paper "In Whose Name? Political Representation and Civil Organisations in Brazil" by Adrián Gurza Lavalle, Peter P. Houtzager, and Graziela Costello – forthcoming 2005).