

Waste & Citizenship Forum: Waste Pickers and the State

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Introduction

State responsiveness to informal workers' demands is crucial to their livelihoods. Deliberate policies that favor livelihood protection on the part of government (at all levels) and openness to engage in multi-sectoral participatory platforms can shape inclusive solid waste systems, i.e. a system in which environmental and social concerns are addressed.

Treated as nuisances by authorities and with prejudice by segments of the urban population, waste pickers are most often ignored within public policy processes and thus frequently *suffer from low self-esteem*. Nevertheless, they are getting organized in varied ways: cooperatives, associations, companies, unions, micro-enterprises, regional networks, and alliances.

These notes are about an experience of a multi-stakeholder forum, in Brazil, in solid waste management – the so-called Waste & Citizenship Forum (W&C). This Forum has been a strategy to improve socio-environmental standards in the sector through the participation of a variety of political actors, including – previously voiceless – waste pickers' cooperatives, as well as government agencies in the implementation of integrated waste management systems at national, sub-national and local level.

As Fraser argues contemporary citizenship claims are challenging formal notions of citizenship rights and of formal democracy and are calling for an integrative notion of social justice. In this regard, Fraser has argued for a three-dimensional theory of justice. This means, in her view, the incorporation of the political dimension of representation, as well as the economic dimension of distribution and the cultural dimension of recognition¹. She argues for the need to think integratively as there is an interplay of political, economic and cultural injustices, which requires social arrangements that can simultaneously address claims for political representation, for redistribution and cultural identity. She postulates that these... *three dimensions stand in relations of mutual entwinement and reciprocal influence. Just as the ability to make claims for distribution and recognition depends on relations of representation, so the ability to exercise ones's political voice depends on the relations of class and status*. (2004:49).

Within the literature on governance and participation, Fung's contribution integrates concerns related to effectiveness and social justice, policy and politics. As he notes, *governance is effective to the extent that governance arrangements are capable of solving the substantive problems that they are set to address: providing education, caring for the indigent, creating security, and providing public goods and services* (2015:517). Whether through multi-sectoral participation or *individualized coproduction*, some innovations may help advance effectiveness, legitimacy, and social justice, three key values of democratic governance discussed by Fung.

These notes² will briefly trace the Forum's genesis, its achievements and challenges and critically address which lessons can be drawn to inform the debates around state transformations and governance, in the context of growing concerns about sustainability and claims for social justice. We claim that the W&C forum helped to address key dimensions of social justice as discussed by Fraser and contributed to more efficacy of (waste) governance one of the key elements in Fung's discussion.

¹ This means that her framework encompasses a distributive dimension (geared to class inequalities), a recognition dimension (focus on status hierarchies) and a political dimension – representation-which “furnishes the stage on which struggles over distribution and recognition are played out” (2007:313).

² The notes draw from Dias 2009 thesis “Trajectories and Memories - Waste & Citizenship Forums: Unique Experiments of Social Justice and Participatory Governance.

The Waste & Citizenship Forum

Up until the early 1990's, waste pickers in Brazil were subjected to a situation of greater vulnerability and/or social and economic exclusion; invisibility in politics, and a negative representation in the social imaginary. However, as they started to get organized into cooperatives in cities such as São Paulo, Belo Horizonte and Porto Alegre, in the late 1980's and early 1990's, they started to become much more vocal and influence in local policies. In the 1990's, two important cities in the country integrated waste pickers coops as partners in source segregation schemes – Porto Alegre and Belo Horizonte. These two cities became models for inclusive solid waste systems.

Organized waste pickers in Brazil were able to achieve greater responsiveness from the national state and also in some cities across Brazil when they joined forces with other organizations to create the Waste & Citizenship Forum a multi-stakeholders platform (public, private and civil society representation). The creation of the National Waste & Citizenship Forum stemmed from a need to consolidate a participatory approach to urban waste management in Brazil. In 1998, a study carried out by UNICEF estimated that 45,000 children in Brazil worked in waste picking, 30% of them without schooling. Some experiences in partnerships between local governments and the civil society in recycling projects were analyzed in this study. The findings pointed out that urban waste was a complex issue that could not be tackled properly without cooperation. It also showed social aspects of waste picking as a fundamental problem that needed to be addressed. This meant that improvements in the area required strong coordination of various interrelated sectors: governments - at local, state and national level, waste pickers' cooperatives, NGOs and the private sector.

Thus in late 1998, under the leadership of UNICEF, a National Forum called Waste & Citizenship was launched comprising, initially, of 19 entities with the objectives of eradicating child labor at open dumps, eradication of open dumps/ implementation of sanitary landfills, and promotion of partnerships between municipalities and waste pickers within recycling systems. The main strategies of the Forum were: creation of municipal and state level forums; support to the creation of waste pickers cooperatives; capacity building in technical and social aspects of waste of all its partners (cooperatives, government, businesses, NGOs); national campaign to eradicate child labor to create an ethical constraint towards it; development of pilot projects in different parts of the country focused on integrating waste pickers in formal recycling schemes, and the creation of sub-national and municipal W&C forums throughout Brazil to work in coordination with the national forum.

Some achievements of the Waste & Citizenship Forum can be cited in four dimensions: Recognition, Representation, Redistribution and Governance³:

1. **Recognition** (improvement of social imaginary; recognition of environmental role; professional recognition):
 - 2002: formal inclusion of the profession of “picker of recyclables at the National Classification of Occupations. This enabled waste pickers to be visible in the official statistics system in Brazil;
 - Law 11.107, passed in 2005 allowing municipalities to celebrate agreements with membership based organizations (MBOs);
 - Decree 5940 Decree “solidarity selective collection” in 2006, which determined that all federal institutions must donate recyclables to cooperatives/associations;

³ For an account of achievements of sub-national and municipal Waste & Citizenship Forums see Dias, 2009 and Dias, 2014.

- Approval, in 2010, of the National Policy of Solid Wastes⁴, that consolidates the government commitment towards integration of coops/associations as a State policy⁵.

2. **Representation** (focus on innovative forms of representation to increase the voice of the MBOs and support for its strengthening):

- The National Forum encouraged the organization of pickers' organizations in many municipalities and this helped in the formation and visibility of the National Movement of Waste Pickers (formed in 2001), contributing to its *semi-public status*⁶.

- Creation of the Inter-ministerial Committee of Social Inclusion of Waste Pickers composed of representatives from federal Ministries (Social Development; the Cities; Work and Employment; Education and the Ministry of Culture and from the national movement of waste pickers) for coordination of actions within the federal government

3. **Rights to Redistribution** (drafting of policies recognizing waste pickers as legitimate actors and the providing resources that follow from such recognition):

- Funds from government entities at different levels and other entities were made available for capacity-building courses for MBOs, recycling warehouses and many social programmes were created targeting informal recyclers.

- The Ministry of the Environment opened up, in 2003, a special line of funding (US\$ 2,6 million) for waste pickers' cooperatives.

- The Brazilian Bank for Economic and Social Development opened up a credit line for pickers' organizations for investment in infrastructure for operational support; technical assistance and capacity building; acquisition of equipments (for storing, baling etc); construction and/or improvement of warehouses; computing rooms; meeting places etc); ;

- Creation of the solidarity credit line: a national programme to enable access to credit for housing for waste pickers.

4. **Governance** (impacts related to improvement in the management of solid wastes):

- Around 46.742 kids nationwide, left work at the dumps⁷;

- For the first time the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) included in the National Research on Basic Sanitation (PNSB)⁸, year 2000, aspects concerning the existence of pickers in dump areas.

- Improvement in final waste disposal: data from the PNSB 1989 research showed that only 10,7% of the municipalities disposed their wastes in controlled and sanitary landfills, while the data available for the year 2000 was 32,2%. This improvement in final disposal of wastes, says the report, was due to the strong performance of the Prosecutor's Office and the increase on investments on the sector, all of these thanks to the influence of the National Waste & Citizenship Forum.

⁴ Inclusion of "catadores" in the reverse logistics system (extended producer responsibility) was made mandatory. For that, the policy determined that fiscal and financial incentives has to be made available for recycling industries and for the development of regional programmes in partnership with coops/associations, as well as financial support funds for the structuring of these organizations.

⁵For an assessment on the legal framework focused on social inclusion in Brazil and the newly approved National Policy see Dias, 2011c.

⁶ I refer to Claus Offe's discussion about the "institutional forms and practices that are provided to the interest group by the political system and that confer a particular *status* as its basis of operation" (1989:224).

⁷ This was made possible due to the cash benefits provided by the "bolsa-escola" programme given out, mainly, by the Programme for Erradication of Child Work ("PETI") from the National Secretariat for Social Assistance - federal government (41.148 "bolsa-escolas"), those from the NGO "Missão Criança" (1.482), both partners of the National Forum, and also from municipalities (either from their own resources or from UNICEF's).

⁸ Questionnaires were applied to public and private institutions working in the sanitation sector (state and municipal companies, foundations, consortiums, private companies and community associations). Data are available at: www.ibge.org.br

- The Ministry of the Cities created, in 2005, a National Training Program in cooperation with universities to address the need for capacity building in SWM;
- Stronger coordination amongst the different federal financing programs started to take place, as well as reformulation of government policies as a way to incorporate the principles of the National Waste & Citizenship Forum. The Federal Government invested from 2000-2002 up to US\$ 188 million on SWM projects for eradication of open dumps (with components on waste pickers).
- The Brazilian Bank for Economic and Social Development created a Social Fund for waste pickers collectives to be used for infrastructure such as warehouses, meeting places, equipment etc.

One of the key challenges of the W&C forum was and still is to address the issue of non-organized (autonomous) waste pickers working for the middlemen. To date, some municipal Waste & Citizenship Forums, such as Belo Horizonte's has started to focus on this issue.

Concluding Thoughts

The case of Brazilian waste pickers show how through engaging in participatory spaces organized workers have managed to advance the notion of public and contribute to greater state responsiveness to their demands.

This process was possible due to some key *enabling conditions*: the existence of organized collective actors (first level cooperatives mobilized into a national movement of waste pickers); the engagement of a respected UN agency – UNICEF which lend visibility to the waste pickers demands; state actors responsiveness: local democratic governments and change agents in key federal government agencies committed to a transformative agenda; a political culture: openness from civil society and state actors to engage with each other; the right institutional design: National forum entailed the creation of sub-national and municipal forums and ensured representation of waste pickers organizations, private and public actors and NGOs; three clear goals, i.e. eradication of child labor, eradication of open dumps and integration of coops in recycling schemes and clear strategies (a child labor eradication campaign, capacity building and pilot projects); an ethical appeal: to eradicate child labor as entry point to raise waste pickers' rights as service providers in recycling systems.

The main lesson we may draw is that by engaging in participatory platforms informal waste pickers might be able to re-signify how they are perceived (*recognition*) and create a channel for dialogue with government (at different levels) in which to *represent* their demands. Also participation in such forums may translate itself into effective changes in solid waste management (better governance) and poverty reduction (*redistribution*).

Although the case of the Waste & Citizenship Forum has contributed to greater empowerment of waste pickers in Brazil and to state responsiveness to their demands more critical perspectives raise important questions regarding power relations, the internal dynamics, representation and other key issues within these forums. Meagher, for instance, notes that *social marginalization and livelihood pressures often leave the associations of the poor vulnerable to opportunism or political capture by public officials, NGOs, or even by their own leadership* (2011:51). Her critical perspective serves as a beacon to avoid romanticized or idealized views about popular agency and its ability to provoke transformative change within the state.

In closing, there are gaps in the literature of multi-stakeholders platforms regarding: the understanding of the rules that structure participation (of different actors) in different formats of multi-stakeholders platforms; assessment of platforms' contribution to increasing effectiveness in problem solving; creation of new forms of exclusion: organized x non-organized informal workers.

The Waste & Citizenship platform brought about changes towards more effective management of solid wastes and on the empowerment of the informal recycling sector. The Waste & Citizenship platform was an innovative institutional arrangement that contributed to put the issue of the eradication of open dumps and claims for social inclusion of informal waste workers on the national agenda in Brazil. New challenges lie ahead to further the agenda of coupling waste and citizenship.

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