

## **12 • How styles of activism influence social participation and democratic deliberation**

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### **Introduction: Why study styles of activism and participation?<sup>1</sup>**

In Brazil, as in the rest of the world, participatory governance is a means of improving the distribution of social services and facilitating the implementation of development projects. As participatory governance has grown more popular as an idea, so it has grown beyond the decision-making and representative structures of democratic states and has begun to be part of the more interactive democratic spheres that are the domain of social movements. In the process, a series of crucial questions has been posed, concerning the association between participation, democracy and development. How can marginalized sectors of society be included in decision-making processes? How can they engage in politics? How can democratic spaces and institutions be strengthened so that diverse people can effectively and fairly express their opinions and particular needs?

The main argument in this chapter is that social movements can develop different styles of activism, even when functioning in the same sorts of institutional frameworks. These different styles may, in turn, confirm or refute the expectations presented by the normative ideal of democratic deliberation. Once it is assumed that the performance of participatory governance is influenced by the conditions present when participatory spaces are established, it becomes essential to look at and combine various aspects of the trajectories taken by social actors. These include the networks and ties they have established and prioritized over the years; the role of the state in framing the group's opportunities and claims; the role of non-institutionalized norms and cultural habits; and the characteristics of the leaders who have coordinated social action within particular groups.

The better to understand these connections, our research developed two combined approaches. The first was to investigate the styles of four social action groups whose roots originated in conflicts involving land issues, and the trajectories of activists working within them. The

second was to analyse how these styles and trajectories relate to greater or lesser support for the participatory governance project being pursued by the organizations representing these groups. In this way, we expect to go beyond the typical limits imposed on structural, institutional or contextual studies, which are usually strong in their descriptive analysis but weak when it comes to explaining dynamic aspects linked to the innovation and transformation of collective action. The model does not completely ignore the structural determinants of collective action; rather, it moves towards merging them with rationalist and constructivist approaches.

This chapter is organized into three sections. The first presents a theoretical framework and a system of hypotheses for the analysis of activism styles, the reasons for their existence and their repercussions for participatory governance. The second is a discussion of the main findings of the study, which examines the styles and trajectories of four local organizations and their leaders as representatives of different styles and types of activism in a poor and socially diverse area of Brazil. Finally, a relationship is depicted between the trajectories of the groups, the styles of activism they practise and the role of the state in its greater or lesser support for the project of participatory governance.

We chose as our case study the Ribeira Valley, an area in south-eastern Brazil with a regional population of around 350,000 (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2000). We did so because it is unusual in combining a low level of economic dynamism and poor social indicators with an active social movement and a reasonable history of initiatives aimed at sustainable development of the region. In terms of social organization, the region has a large concentration of traditional communities, such as the *ribeirinho* (riverside), *caiçara* (artisanal fishermen and smallholders of mainly indigenous descent) and *quilombola* (rural Afro-Brazilian) communities. The identities of all these groups are closely linked to their land and environment, not only through their cultural roots but also through their dependence on local natural resources.

In this area, there are at least two different types of citizen activism. On the one hand there are organizations and social movements that oppose a particular policy or event; on the other there are organizations and social movements concerned with economic and environmental issues, formed on the basis of common community identity. Of the four organizations and movements that are the focus of the study, the Movimento dos Ameaçados por Barragem (MOAB – Movement of Those Threatened by the Dam) falls firmly into the first type: it was created

amid the conflict that grew up over a proposal to build a series of dams along the Ribeira river.

At the other end of the spectrum are two other groups – the Associação dos Residentes de Mandira (ARM – Mandira Residents' Association) and the Associação dos Residentes de Guapiruvu (ARG – Guapiruvu Residents' Association). These come from communities where part of the land falls in a designated conservation reserve. The ARM and ARG have their roots in a discourse that emerged from the legal formation of conservation reserves during the 1970s and 1980s, which associated household economic production with environmental conservation. These two residents' organizations access organized markets for their natural resource-based products, and are applying the principles of sustainable natural resource management to their productive activities.

The fourth organization, the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores na Agricultura Familiar do Vale do Ribeira (SINTRAVALE – Union of Farming Families of the Vale do Ribeira) brings family farmers and producers together in defence of their common interests.

The two most important participatory forums in the Vale do Ribeira operate at the regional level: the Comitê de Gestão de Recursos Hídricos (Committee for the Management of Water Resources in the Ribeira river basin) and the Consórcio de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional e Desenvolvimento Local (CONSAD – Consortium for Food Safety and Local Development). They discuss local development plans, accompany the implementation of the public policies to which they are connected, and allocate a considerable percentage of available resources to projects that are considered priorities and in line with the development plans. Previous research that we carried out with local leaders (Coelho et al., 2007) left no doubt in our minds that these forums are part of everyday life in the region, and that, given the intensity of political debate, it is important for leaders to guarantee space for their own activist group within them. Nonetheless, the forms of mobilization and organization in these forums vary considerably. While all four of our case study organizations have their origins in social conflicts involving access to land and natural resources, they have very different positions with respect to the ways in which they view the forums and how they act in them. Consequently, each social group and its respective organization have different possibilities for its own practices to be coherent with expectations of democratic deliberation. What could explain the differences observed in the style of activism of each of these organizations and, by implication, of social movements more broadly?