

**Urban Social Movements in Brazil
Briefing Paper No. 1**

**Protest
vs.
Institutionalised
Participation**

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Introduction

The following paper is the first in a series that will document the progress of a doctoral study being undertaken by Lucy Earle. Lucy was a full-time member of INTRAC's research team for 3 years, before leaving in October 2005 to begin her PhD at the London School of Economics and Political Science. She is still affiliated to the organisation, although the project is primarily funded through the UK government's Economic and Social Research Council. Over the next three years, she will write regular briefing papers on the research project, on emerging themes and findings relevant to the work and interests of NGO Forum members. A final report, in the form of an INTRAC publication, will also be made available to Forum Members.

The research project on Sao Paulo reflects INTRAC's core themes of **participatory development** and **civil society**, and will contribute to the debate on how to operationalise **rights based approaches**. The choice of subject matter and case study were chosen as a way to help INTRAC broaden its research focus within these thematic areas, by examining social movements, as opposed to NGOs, and, in particular, their engagement with the state. The movement to be studied is the Homeless Movement of Sao Paulo. The struggle for housing for the urban poor in Brazil has intensified in the last five years, after legislation was passed acknowledging housing as a right. The 'Statute of the City', as the law is known, broadly sets out notions of equality in urban areas and the idea of collective rights to the city. The movement uses the idea of rights to support demands for low-income housing in the centre of the city and has two principal strategies through which it engages with the municipal government. These are:

- (i) disruptive, confrontational protest, including the occupation of empty buildings
- (ii) involvement in participatory deliberative forums on housing.

Participatory budgeting experiments and thematic forums have been the focus of much academic, multilateral and INGO interest since the first reports of innovative experiences in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre emerged in the mid-1990s. However, the detail of these participatory spaces, and the ability of the poor and marginalised to engage actively in them, has yet to be adequately addressed. As such, one of the aims of this study will be to query whether these forums really are adequate spaces for dialogue and engagement between the urban poor and the State.

The Case Study

This study will examine the strategies and activities of the Homeless Movement. It will centre on an evaluation of the strategies employed by the movement to engage with and gain political leverage over the municipal authorities, in order to press for centrally located housing for low-income families and individuals. This will include an appraisal of benefits to members through the provision of housing, along with a particular emphasis on analysis of the movement's influence over policy-making procedures at the municipal level.

The movement campaigns to house its members and for housing policy reform through input into consultative and deliberative forums, primarily the Municipal Housing Council and the organization of mass invasions of empty buildings (an informal and confrontational channel). The core focus of the study will be, therefore, an examination of the differentials in outcome of the two main strategies employed by the movement in order to engage with government. In this way, the study will make a contribution to theoretical debates on state-society relations and deliberative democracy.

Using the idea of the right to the city as both a mobilising tool and a defence of their activities, housing movement members organise thousands of low-income families to carry out mass occupations of empty buildings in the centre of Sao Paulo. This is both to provide immediate shelter, and to protest at the lack of housing policy and provision in the municipality. The families involved are sometimes living on the streets, are housed in overcrowded and dangerous tenements or are unable to meet rent payments and are about to be evicted. The buildings chosen for occupation are generally privately owned, and have been left empty for speculative purposes. At present, the central districts of the city are not attractive either to business or to middle and upper income groups. As a result 17% of residential units in the central areas are empty – approximately 40 000 homes. These figures do not include the large numbers of empty commercial and industrial properties which have also been the site of housing movement occupations. According to the Statute of the City, buildings that are not considered to be fulfilling their 'social function' can be appropriated by the State and adapted for low-income housing. However, despite the efforts of the movements and supportive local lawyers and civil society groups, this has rarely occurred.

As well as organising the occupation of buildings, the movements also fought hard for the establishment of a municipal housing council. Whilst some deliberative councils – on health, education and children's rights – are compulsory according to the federal constitution, those on housing are not. Its inauguration in 2002 was seen as a triumph by the civil society organisations that had long lobbied and negotiated for the council. However, it does not seem to have lived up to expectations. Unlike participatory budgeting, which focuses on neighbourhood level issues, sector councils cover the whole municipality. As such, many different interests and stakeholders are represented on the council. One third of councillors come from local organisations (mainly residents' associations and the housing movements), another third are representatives from municipal and state-level government bodies and the final third are from other entities and organizations with an interest in housing. This includes powerful property developers and pro-business NGOs. Whilst in theory all councillors have equal weight in the decision-making processes, levels of education and experience of this type of forum vary greatly. Perhaps more importantly, in a highly polarised society in which the poor are marginalised and, increasingly, criminalised by the middle and upper classes, there are other important power dynamics underpinning the functioning of the council. The fact that protests and building occupations are ongoing, clearly suggests that the housing council is not functioning in the interests of the poorer sectors of Sao Paulo society.

Taking these two strategies together, this study will explore the ways in which the urban poor, through their representative social movements, attempt to engage with the State.

Why Social Movements?

INTRAC recognises that the term 'civil society' does not refer solely to the NGO organizational form and it has in the past, been critical of certain types of research that tend to 'count' NGOs, and take their very existence as a measure of civil society, rather than look more closely at what they do. However, research on social movements has been limited, partly perhaps because INTRAC's main client base, European NGOs, have also shown a reluctance to work with more radical grassroots groups. There are a number of reasons for this and they have been discussed in a previous briefing paper, but one of the most salient is that social movements are perceived of as 'too political'. INGOs, it seems, prefer to work with their own kind. Indeed, one faction within the

housing movement of Sao Paulo has set up its own NGO, so as to receive funds from international development agencies.

Supporting overtly political and confrontational organisations is clearly difficult for international bodies that require the goodwill of developing country governments in order to maintain a presence in a particular country. However, the emphasis on the *non-governmental* aspects of partner organisations has perhaps been taken a step too far, and discourages interaction with the apparatus of the state beyond advocacy campaigns. This situation has perhaps been compounded by the use of the 'three circles' model, in which civil society stands apart from the state and the market. While those that use this model in capacity building exercises do stress that there is overlap between each of the three circles, researchers in the developing world have noted that civil society groups continually stress their 'autonomy' from the state, with the implication that any engagement would be conceived of as some kind of contamination of organizational principles and goals. The same researchers note that it is precisely through personal, institutionalised and/or party political links between civil society and the state that objectives are often achieved.

This depoliticisation of civil society organisations is also visible in much of the more recent social movement theory which creates a dichotomy between new and old social movements. New social movements are seen to revolve around identity (ethnicity, gender, sexuality) and despite the fact that many movements in developing countries centre around access to basic rights and needs ('old' issues), influential developing-country theorists have adopted fashionable theorising around identity. This tends to draw analysis inwards, and removes the focus on movements' external confrontations with the state.

This study will argue, however, on the importance of bringing the state back into the analysis. This seems particularly crucial in a country such as Brazil, classified as higher middle-income and clearly in command of considerable resources, but where a quarter of the population live below the poverty line. Multilateral institutions are also calling for the state to be brought back into the processes of development. This is perhaps one reason why deliberative and participatory forums, which encourage negotiations between the state and citizens over policy-making and budgeting priorities, are being given such widespread support.

It is through a study of social movements in Brazil that this doctoral project will examine the state-civil society interface in more detail. Social movements are particularly relevant in this regard, since their activities generally centre around the state. Government, whether at local or national level is firmly in social movements' sights as both the focus of their protest, and also the solution to their demands. As such, one question the research project will be asking, is how this delicate balancing act between protest and engagement, disruption and dialogue is achieved.

Why Brazil/Sao Paulo?

The reason for choosing Brazil as a focus for the study are various. Firstly, the country's recent political history has been influenced by the activities of social movements. They played an important role as an opposition force to the military dictatorship (1964-1985) and the subsequent transition to democracy. Social movements based in Sao Paulo were also instrumental in the establishment of the Workers' Party, known as the PT, that is currently in power at the federal level. The current political situation, however, further

problematizes the balancing act that social movements must negotiate, between protest and cooperative engagement. The country's president, Luiz Ignacio Lula da Silva, was elected in late 2002 with the full backing of the nation's social movements and it was anticipated that 'Lula' would give priority to reducing levels of poverty and inequality in Brazil. His presidency and those of his left-wing counterparts across the continent, has drawn intense scrutiny from international economic and political observers, as well as from the grassroots of his party. However, by appearing to place the demands of international financial capital above those of the nation's poor, he is beginning to alienate some of his most ardent social movement supporters. Apparent inaction on his part leaves social movements in a particularly difficult position and increasingly aware that they must 'do the unthinkable' and protest against a government for whom they had fought for decades. It is, therefore, a particularly opportune moment to study the state-society interface in Brazil, through an examination of social movement activity.

Although Brazil is also home to one of the world's most famous social movements, the Rural Landless Workers, or MST, this study will focus on urban collective action. Development academics and NGOs tend to give priority to rural poverty in their research and project work. However, the planet is becoming increasingly urbanized and the majority of urban growth is taking place in the developing world. As a result, urban poverty is also on the rise. Further, in urban areas, social movements representing the urban poor are closer to the centre of power and must navigate an institutional and political arena far larger and more complex than that of rural areas. For example, in Sao Paulo there is a multitude of stakeholders with interests in the centre of the city, which is precisely the area where the homeless wish to be given housing. Furthermore, the extremes of social differentiation in the city and the criminalisation of the poor and their organizations problematize state-society relations and force an examination of the extent to which formal, participatory channels can provide an adequate space for the voicing and meeting of demands of excluded sectors.

Research Methods

Research into the Movimento Sem Teto will take the form of a case study of the movement from 1997 (when the first mass invasions of buildings in the centre of Sao Paulo first occurred) to 2007. This will involve both a historical study of the movement's activities over a ten year period, and ethnographic work during the fieldwork stage of the PhD, from October 2006 to September 2007.

The study will build up a historical profile of the movement and its activities through archival work on newspaper reports, internal organizational documents and review of published and unpublished studies produced by research institutes and university departments in Brazil, as well as official reports from the mayoral office and department of housing. This will permit the elaboration of a timeline of movement activities which can be mapped alongside the changing party political make-up of the municipal council and the mayor, the dynamics of the economic situation in Brazil and Sao Paulo and housing policy produced by the municipality since 1997. This will facilitate a preliminary analysis of the extent to which housing policy appears to respond to the activities and demands of the social movement and how the political and economic context might shape their choice of strategy.

Alongside archival work, which has been at the core of most research on the effects of social movements, the study will involve an organizational ethnography component, in

order to gather data on the procedural aspects of movement-state interaction. Participant observation of movement activities such as planning meetings, occupations, attendance at housing councils and negotiations with government officials and policy makers, will generate understanding of the nature of the movement, its strategy, members' perceptions of and visions for the city, the way housing and housing policy is conceptualised and how members prepare for councils, occupations and ongoing negotiations with the government. The study will be enriched by an insight into the way that social movement members perceive their relationship with the state, and with those in positions of authority and how individuals see their needs mediated by involvement in the movement.

Participant observation will be backed-up with semi-structured interviews with movement members and activists, municipal officials and politicians both past and present. Interviews with all informants will involve an element of event analysis, in order to generate data on the perceived significance of movement activities and events. Oral history interviews will also be held with movement members and leaders.

Tools of interpretive policy analysis will be employed to explore issues relating to the different interpretations of housing/housing policy and to examine the quality of the interface between the movement and mayoral administration. In particular, there will be a focus on the opportunities or constraints in the formal and informal channels, for discussion of housing in the terms formulated by the movement: housing as a right and a condition of full citizenship.