

Social Movements and Citizenship: Some challenges for INGOs

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Introduction

This paper examines the way that the concept of citizenship might be used by social movements in developing countries to advance their claims for basic rights from the state. It is based on findings from a year's fieldwork with a social movement that organises around the provision of low-income housing in São Paulo, Brazil. In order to situate the discourse of the movement, the paper begins by discussing the varied interpretations of citizenship and how citizenship can be jeopardised by poverty. The paper then shows how the framing of basic rights as 'citizenship rights' has become a powerful weapon in the movement's campaigning that is focused on the state. There are a number of implications of using citizenship rights to frame a social movement's claims. Perhaps most importantly, it brings the law into play, as social movements and their supporters prosecute the state for not ensuring that the rights of its people, as outlined in the Constitution, are upheld. In a type of paradox, the movements also use radical and formally illegal types of protest in order to highlight what they perceive as the state's own illegality. The paper ends by presenting the significance of these findings for development work and international NGOs.

Understanding citizenship

When used in the UK, the term 'citizenship' is likely to evoke current domestic debates on how best to integrate recent immigrants into British society. Those wishing to naturalise as British citizens now must now take a 'Life in the UK' exam, in which they are asked a series of questions on the British judicial and political systems as well as more general questions on culture and everyday life. The US imposes a similar type of exam on those wishing to naturalise as Americans, who must further swear an oath of allegiance. Since 7 July 2005, when British-born Muslims carried out terrorist attacks on London, the debate turned to what it means to 'British' – a highly contested issue even among native Britons – and why this appears not to have reached some quarters of Britain's resident immigrant

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population. Tackling this exclusion and the fostering of a sense of belonging among British-born minority groups is now top of the agenda of the UK Home Office.

In developing countries, however, the idea of who is and who is not a citizen is different. In the case of Brazil, citizenship is a much discussed concept, with a variety of definitions, but it is frequently linked to the provision of basic services, such as housing, healthcare and education. Where a person lacks access to these services, they are often regarded as having 'limited citizenship', even if formally they have Brazilian nationality and the paperwork to prove it. This has led some authors to make a clear distinction between 'formal' and 'substantive' citizenship.

Few studies of citizenship fail to cite the work of T.H. Marshall, a British sociologist based at the LSE who gave a now famous lecture at Cambridge University in 1949 entitled *Class, citizenship and social development*. Marshall argues that there are three core elements that make up the notion of citizenship – the civil, political and social. Within each of these elements are a number of basic rights, the fulfilment of which is the key to the acquisition of full citizenship.

The civil element is composed of the rights necessary for individual freedom – liberty of the person, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property and to conclude valid contracts, and the right to justice (Marshall 1964: 71).

The political element involves the right to participate in the political process, either as a voter or as an elected member of a body invested with political power. Finally, the social element encompasses “the whole range from the right to a modicum of economic welfare and security, to the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society” (Ibid: 72).

Although some scholars have criticised Marshall's focus on England, and the chronology he sets out for the development of the three types of rights, few find argument with his categorisation. However, social rights are sometimes referred to by those writing on citizenship as *socio-economic* rights. This is perhaps an error, since it reduces the idea of social citizenship to the level of welfare and government sponsored benefits alone. For Marshall, social citizenship is built on much more than just basic rights in themselves; there are also important psychosocial elements at play. As Barbalet explains: “The development of citizenship rights may change the way in which people identify themselves and it may alter their feelings about social and class inequalities” (Barbalet 1988: 57).

Through genuinely equal access to citizenship rights, a type of 'equalisation of status' should occur, which will make all members of a society able to recognise themselves as 'first-class' citizens, regardless of differences in income. The provision of social rights, the *substance* of citizenship, can therefore have an important psychological impact upon perceptions of status, membership of society and, as a consequence, upon a sense of dignity (Dagnino 2005).

In the UK, where the majority of people have access to these three types of rights, commonly held notions of citizenship tend to centre on formal issues such as documentation through passports, and the rights that this brings, such as voting. However, in Brazil, where so many people's social rights are violated because of the difficulties of access to adequate housing, education and healthcare, academics, left-wing politicians and social movement members argue that poverty and social exclusion are limiting substantive citizenship.

Citizenship and housing: The role of dignity

The issues of social inclusion and dignity are crucial to an understanding of the Movimento Sem Teto – São Paulo's movement of the 'roofless'. This is a term movement members and leaders use to refer to those who are living in less than adequate conditions – in the *favelas* (shantytowns) and irregular self-built settlements on the peripheries or in inner-city slum tenements where families live in single rooms and share washing facilities. The way that the mega-city of São Paulo has grown since the beginning of the twentieth century (it now has around 18 million inhabitants), brought about severe spatial segregation, as the poor were continually pushed out of the 'urban zone' to the edge of the municipality by land speculation. Calculated neglect on the part of successive city governments meant that the vast majority of urban workers were forced to build their own homes on illegally occupied tracts of land that had no services, not even public transport. These areas are now gradually being regularised and most have basic services. However, the poorest settlements are two hours away from the centre by public transport, and today's government still fails to build low-income houses in established neighbourhoods, choosing to put up extremely limited amounts of low-cost housing in the furthest reaches of the city where land is cheapest. This further segregates and stigmatises the urban poor, who are living in one of the world's most unequal societies.

This situation will be familiar to many students of cities in the developing world, but Brazil is an especially interesting case, firstly because housing is a right, enshrined in the constitution, and secondly, because São Paulo's housing movement is large, organised and highly visible. Acquisition of decent standard housing is perceived as closely connected to the achievement of citizenship, by city residents, policy makers and academics as well as the movement. Here citizenship is tied to notions of dignity, self-improvement and social mobility which can be achieved through adequate housing. Having a place in the city in this way is contrasted with sub-standard, illegal housing outside of the 'urban zone' of Brazil's metropolises. Without a house, and an address in the 'legal city', urban residents will have difficulty claiming other rights – to education and health for example – that make up the fundamentals of social citizenship. Housing is extremely important for the way in which an individual will view themselves, but also impacts upon that individual's life chances and their ability to fulfil their potential.

There are significant consequences of the fact that the Movimento Sem Teto and other movements in Brazil such as the rural landless and the health movements, employ the discourse of citizenship rights, unlike many international NGOs and campaigning organisations that place their work within the

framework of human rights. The latter are seen to transcend national boundaries since they are fundamental to all humankind, and they are set out in declarations and conventions that are ratified by most nation states. However, the fact that these are supranational rights, closely associated with the UN system, may diminish their perceived immediacy and applicability in some countries, particularly in light of the fact that adherence to human rights legislation is notoriously difficult both to police and to enforce (for more discussion see Sen 1999: ch.10). Although they may cover similar issues, citizenship rights are different in this regard. It is clear who the duty-bearer is when rights are set out in national constitutions. Brazilian social movements take the constitution of 1988 as their lodestar, and place the blame for the 'limited citizenship' of a huge number of Brazil's poor squarely with the state. The state is failing to bestow citizenship on the *Sem Teto*, because it is not fulfilling its duties as set out in the constitution.

Social movements and the law: The State as 'law-breaker'

There are other implications of the framing of movement demands within the discourse of citizenship. Talk of citizenship, the constitution and its constituent rights automatically brings the law into play. In many people's eyes, the state is perceived as the 'law-breaker', and movements have taken advantage of legal aid offered by specialist NGOs, the city ombudsman and the public prosecutors' office to take the state to court. Recently, the housing movements scored a victory in São Paulo when they successfully prosecuted the municipal government for ceasing to pay housing benefits for families that had been evicted from properties declared unsafe. Since the municipal government failed to provide permanent housing solutions for these families as it had originally promised, a judge ruled that the municipality must continue to pay for their rented accommodation. Furthermore, many movement members are now training as lawyers so that in the future they are able to take on these types of cases themselves.

Whilst it may appear as though the movements are becoming institutionalised and 'de-radicalised' as they become involved in the formalities of legal process, the movements also use the discourse of citizenship to undertake activities of questionable legality. The housing movement in São Paulo is widely known for its daring occupations of abandoned buildings, of which there are thousands in the central districts of the city. These occupations are justified by the movements as a way of highlighting the fact that the state has reneged on its duty of care towards its people by allowing millions to live in sub-standard housing on the outskirts of the city whilst the state's own property languishes abandoned for decades. Where occupations are of privately owned but empty buildings, the movement juxtaposes the right to housing of the urban poor alongside the right to individual wealth creation through property speculation. This helps the movement to gain public support. They also highlight the illegal status of buildings where owners fail to pay property taxes, and that have been left empty in contravention of the national constitution that states that urban infrastructure must fulfil some 'social function'. Interestingly, in a couple of cases the rights-based argument of the movement has been upheld, and property has been expropriated and renovated to provide permanent housing solutions for the occupiers.

NGO support for social movements

Within Brazil, many social movements count local and national NGOs among their key partners. Social movements are widely regarded as having played a key role in the democratisation of the country in the 1980s after two decades of military dictatorship, and their continued dynamism is generally considered by other civil society actors to be contributing to the deepening of democracy. The focus on citizenship adopted by social movements across Brazil has a number of implications for international donors who might consider supporting such organisations. As these movements target their demands directly on the state, they have also become highly politicised. Their discourse posits the state as the 'enemy of the poor' and they challenge the state through the illegal occupation of buildings and through the formal processes of the legal system. At the same time, they also rely upon the state for much needed investments in housing and urban infrastructure. Furthermore, whilst movements in Brazil put a great emphasis on their 'autonomy' vis-à-vis the state, the ruling government and the trappings of politics, there are strong informal ties between the movement and left-wing parties. This is perhaps inevitable in a country where the main left-wing party, the Workers' Party or PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores) emerged out of trade union organising and neighbourhood movements on the outskirts of São Paulo. Movement members see the need to 'fight on all fronts', including in formal politics by supporting parliamentary candidates who they believe hold their interests at heart. This leads them to negotiate a difficult terrain where they are accused of cooptation and partisan scheming against incumbent governments. Many NGOs are uncertain about funding organisations with links to political parties. But it could be argued that in a country like Brazil, where massive levels of inequality are a result of state negligence and outright discrimination, these are political issues and social movements will look to other groups that share their evaluation of these problems.

Social movements may sometimes act illegally in order to get media attention and force the state to engage with them. They therefore move between the highly formalised world of legal process and involvement in acts that in theory break the law. Some forms of protest that contravene the criminal code are, however, now considered legitimate, but a number of social movement leaders have been accused of crimes such as 'breaking and entering' and 'forming a criminal gang'. There is also entrenched stigma against the urban poor who live in slum tenements or in *favelas*. They are often assumed to be criminals and are treated as such by the police and authorities.

Social movements' radical nature can bring them into opposition with the ruling government, and their innovative use of protest that teeters on the edge of legality can lead to confrontation with the police and the legal system. This can prove problematic for international NGOs that might otherwise want to support the work of social movements. These issues aside, NGOs need to respect the flexible and reactive way that social movements work – responding to sudden and critical needs of members who are being evicted, for example, or mobilising against changes in government policy, such as the example above when the municipality cut off emergency housing benefits. This means that funding rigid programme activities may not be appropriate. If an NGO attempts to fund specific activities, such

as protest marches or building occupations, it risks skewing the natural rhythm of the movement. This happened in São Paulo where a breakaway wing of the housing movement that relies on a foreign funding would carry out building occupations at inappropriate times as the European donor was asking for 'activities' and 'results'. It may also have led them to undertake occupations so they could claim to have 'housed' people, and in this way provide concrete evidence to the NGO of the way it is benefiting the poor local population, even though accommodation in occupied buildings can be more dangerous and insalubrious than *favelas* or slum tenements.

More appropriate ways of assisting are probably less exciting, but of greater potential benefit in the long run. This could involve supporting running costs for communication amongst members and other allies, improving communications strategies, including through the internet, to appeal to new, younger members. Movements could also benefit from greater levels of internal organisation and record-keeping, so that they can easily draw on their organisational history for future planning and strategising. Funding for support NGOs, that provide legal advice and training is crucial, and media training could also help movement leaders take greater positive advantage from the newspaper and television coverage that their activities inevitably incur. Finally, movements would benefit from easy access to relatively small amounts of money, to fund *ad hoc* protests and emergency meetings.

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