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Waste pickers and the state in Brazil

Sonia Dias

Introduction

State responsiveness to informal workers' demands is crucial to their livelihoods. Deliberate policies that favour 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, social and livelihoods 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* (Dias and Alves 2008). Nevertheless, they are organised in varied ways: into cooperatives, associations, companies, unions, micro-enterprises, regional networks and alliances.

This chapter is about the experience of a multi-stakeholder forum, in Brazil, in solid waste management (SWM) – the so-called Waste & Citizenship Forum (W&C Forum). 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 the national, sub-national and local levels.

As Nancy Fraser (2004) 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 recognition.¹ 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 one's political voice depends on the relations of class and status.

(*ibid.*: 49)

Within the literature on governance and participation, Fung's contribution integrates concerns related to effectiveness and social justice, policy and politics (Fung 2015). 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" (*ibid.*: 517). The question is whether through multi-sectoral participation or *individualised coproduction*, some innovations may help advance effectiveness, legitimacy and social justice, the three key values of democratic governance discussed by Fung.

The chapter will briefly trace the Forum's genesis, its achievements and challenges and critically address which lessons can be drawn to inform the debates about state transformations and governance, in the context of growing concerns about sustainability and claims for social justice.² I claim that the W&C Forum has helped to address key dimensions of social justice as discussed by Fraser and has contributed to more effectiveness in waste governance, one of the key elements in Fung's discussion of democratic governance.

The Waste & Citizenship Forum: genesis

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

Organised waste pickers in Brazil were able to achieve greater responsiveness from the national and local governments across Brazil and they joined forces with other organisations to create the Waste & Citizenship Forum, a multi-stakeholder 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 per cent of them without schooling. Some experiences in partnerships between local governments and civil society in recycling projects were analysed in this study. The findings pointed out that urban waste is a complex issue that cannot be tackled properly without cooperation between the state and civil society. It also showed that waste picking is a fundamental issue that needs to be addressed in all its aspects. This meant that improvements in the

area required strong coordination of the various interrelated sectors: governments – at the local, state and national level – waste picker cooperatives, NGOs and the private sector.

Thus, in late 1998, under the leadership of UNICEF, a National Forum called Waste & Citizenship was launched, comprised, initially, of 19 entities with the objectives of eradicating child labour 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: support for the creation of waste picker cooperatives; capacity building in technical and social aspects of waste for all partners (cooperatives, government, businesses, NGOs); a national campaign to eradicate child labour; development of pilot projects in different parts of the country focused on integrating waste pickers into formal recycling schemes; and the creation of sub-national and municipal W&C forums throughout Brazil to work in coordination with the National Forum.

Towards transformative policies?

Following Fraser and Fung's theoretical frameworks, I examine the Waste & Citizenship Forum along four dimensions – Recognition, Representation, Redistribution and Governance – in order to assess in which ways the Forum helped advance social justice principles and effectiveness in problem solving in solid waste management. Policies promoted by the Forum addressing *recognition* focused on creating a proper term to designate the activity: this was achieved with the creation, in 2002, of the category “*catador de material reciclável*” (picker of recyclables) and its formal inclusion in the National Classification of Occupations. This enabled waste pickers to be visible in the official statistics system in Brazil. In addition, a legal framework recognising the right to work and access to recyclables was created, including among others: Law 11.107 (2005) that enabled municipalities to negotiate agreements with cooperatives for service delivery in municipal recycling programmes; Decree 5949 (2006) that mandated that all federal institutions must donate recyclables to cooperatives; and the landmark approval of the National Solid Waste Policy in which several mechanisms were created for the integration of cooperatives as a state policy. Thus, the dimension of *recognition* addressed the improvement of their social image, recognition of informal recyclers' environmental role, and the creation of their profession.

Under the dimension of *representation*, whose focus was on innovative forms of representation to increase the voice of the MBOs (membership-based organisations) and support its organising, the Forum contributed with incentives for the creation of cooperatives across the country and for the formation of the Movimento Nacional dos Catadores de Material Reciclável (MNCR) – the National Movement of Waste Pickers – in 2001. In 2003, the Inter-ministerial Committee of Social Inclusion of Waste Pickers was created, composed of representatives from federal ministries (Social Development; the Cities; Work and Employment; Education and Culture) and with representation of the MNCR.

Regarding *redistribution*, funds from government entities were made available for capacity building courses for MBOs, for construction and upgrading of recycling warehouses, equipment, and vehicles, such as: the 2003 funding line (US\$2.6 million) opened up by the Ministry of the Environment for waste pickers' cooperatives; the 2004 solidarity credit line for housing; and the 2007 credit line from the Brazilian Bank for Economic and Social Development for infrastructure investment in recycling warehouses, technical assistance and other improvement of waste pickers' spaces. These policies aimed to address the need to remedy the unfair distribution of investments in the sanitation sector, which had never been directed to this sector group.

Finally, on the *governance* dimension, one of the key goals of the Forum was eradication of child labour at dumps as a key indicator of effectiveness in problem solving. The creation of "*bolsa-escola*" cash-in benefit enabled many children to stop work at dumps and enrol in schools. Improvement in data was another key indicator of governance, thus the mapping of waste picking at dumps in the National Research on Basic Sanitation (PNSB) in 2000 was a landmark as the waste pickers previously were invisible in statistics and in main databases. Due to the strong performance of the Prosecutor's Office for the Environment (a partner in the W&C Forum) and the increase in investments in the solid waste sector, all of these thanks to the influence of the National Waste & Citizenship Forum, there was an improvement in the final disposal of waste with a rise in the share of sanitary landfills as the main method of final disposal as opposed to open dumps, from 10.7 per cent (1989) to 32.2 per cent by 2000.

Also, from 2000 onwards, stronger coordination among the different federal financing programmes started, as well as the reformulation of government policies as a way to incorporate the principles of the National Waste & Citizenship Forum. The Federal Government invested around US\$188 million from 2000–2002 on SWM projects for the eradication of open dumps (including funds to support waste pickers' livelihoods).

The process that led to the formation of the Waste & Citizenship Forum and the developments towards greater inclusivity of informal waste pickers that ensued were possible due to some key enabling conditions. First of all, the creation of the first cooperatives and their ability to influence policy-making in the cities of Porto Alegre, Belo Horizonte and São Paulo showed the possibilities of integration of informal recyclers into municipal recycling systems. These city examples inspired a respected UN agency – UNICEF – to lead the process of formation of the Forum aiming at disseminating such examples nationwide. UNICEF's backing lent visibility to the waste pickers' demands, as well as encouraging the formation of other cooperatives across the country which eventually led to the formation of a collective actor – the national movement of recyclers (MNCR).

Another enabling factor is the fact that these processes took place during the period of Brazil's re-democratisation which promoted greater responsiveness by state actors to social justice. Forum advocates also managed to forge alliances with many change agents in key federal government agencies committed to

pursuing a transformative approach to solid waste management. There was also a change in the political culture with more openness from civil society and state actors to engage with each other. Another key factor refers to the right institutional design for the Forum as the formation of the National Forum entailed the creation of sub-national and municipal forums (multi-scalar) and ensured representation of waste pickers' organisations, private and public actors and NGOs. Finally, there were four clear goals for the Forums: that is, eradication of child labour, eradication of open dumps, introduction of sanitary landfills and integration of coops in recycling schemes. There were also clear strategies (a child labour eradication campaign, capacity building and pilot projects), and a clear ethical appeal, i.e., to eradicate child labour as an entry point to raise waste pickers' rights as service providers in recycling systems.

The Forum's goals and strategies point to concerted efforts to address the main dimensions of social justice and governance in solid waste management. The policies under its influence aimed at restructuring the distribution of investments in the solid waste sector towards fairer allocation of financial and technical resources that benefited informal workers. It also challenged the social image and visibility of informal recyclers, thus challenging their invisibility and non-recognition.

The existence of the Forum itself and the support given by the Forum in the creation of other participatory instances, such as the inter-ministerial committee for inclusion of recyclers, signal that participatory parity is crucial in addressing calls for social justice, i.e., the representation of workers in committees and forums that design policies targeted at their segment is crucial in tackling the multiple dimensions of injustice, which, as Fraser notes, needs to be done with a combination of redistribution, recognition and representation remedies. In addition to addressing social justice claims, the W&C Forum aimed at improving governance in solid waste management, which is crucial, given the current environmental crisis in the world.

The Waste & Citizenship Forum was an important platform in Brazil because it was an instance where an extremely marginalised group that suffers from extreme lack of recognition and low self-esteem became actively involved in participatory governance and, therefore, the case of the forum sheds light on key issues related to the forging of participatory governance and social justice struggles.

Concluding thoughts

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

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 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 participatory forums. Kate Meagher, for instance, notes that “social marginalisation 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 romanticised or idealised views about popular agency and its ability to provoke transformative change within the state.

In closing, there are some gaps in the literature of multi-stakeholder platforms worth mentioning. Peter Houtzager, Ruth Berins Collier, John Harriss and Adrian G. Lavalle., for instance, note that one of the challenges is to identify the competing notions of representation that different types of NGOs, popular organisations and networks deploy in their contests with state actors within platforms (Houtzager et al, 2002: 4). It is important to understand the dynamics of participation and representation and their impact on furthering citizenship rights. There is, also, a need to investigate the rules that structure participation (of different actors) in existing municipal Waste & Citizenship Forums across Brazil and also to assess these platforms’ contribution to increasing effectiveness in problem solving in solid waste management at the local level (Dias 2009).

The Waste & Citizenship platform brought about changes for more effective management of solid waste and the empowerment of the informal recycling sector. The Waste & Citizenship platform was an innovative institutional arrangement that contributed to putting 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.

Notes

- 1 This means that Nancy Fraser’s 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 This section draws on Sonia Dias (2009).