IDS RESEARCH SUMMARY

Research findings at a glance from the
Institute of Development Studies

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Creating Urban Reform in Brazil

Relentless urbanisation has fundamentally changed the composition of Brazil's population – today 70 per cent of Brazil's people live in cities compared to 30 per cent in 1900. Due to poor planning, this process was often unfair and chaotic, leading to the creation of vast urban slums. This Research Summary shows how a national urban reform movement – The Right to the City Campaign – emerged in the 1980s and successfully campaigned for legislative change. The Statute of the City was finally approved in 2001 and, despite certain shortcomings, it is increasing the slum dwellers' access to urban land, public goods and housing.

Role of civil society

Between 1975-1985, during the democratisation process initiated by Brazil's last military regime, civil society organisations began to organise to claim public goods and influence policy. A Constitutional Assembly was called in 1985 and established in 1987. An agreement to allow popular amendments opened up a crucial opportunity for civil society to influence the new democratic system. Millions of people subscribed to the popular amendment proposals between 1985 and 1986. Subsequently, the new democratic governments, and the growing strength of the Workers Party (PT) in city elections, created further opportunities for the urban reform movement. In addition to that, the impeachment of ex-president Collor de Melo changed the power correlation in Brazil and opened new opportunities for the approval of participatory arrangement inside the Brazilian Congress.

A national urban reform movement

The main actor driving the new legislation was the National Movement for Urban Reform (MNRU) which emerged during the National Constitutional Assembly and is still active in Brazil under its new name, the National Forum for Urban Reform (FNRU). The MNRU was formed in 1982 with the aim of developing a proposal for urban reform directed at the Constitutional Assembly. It is one of the few examples in democratic Brazil of a national civil society movement. Unusually, its membership included national professional associations, such as the National Federation of Architects (FNA) and the National Federation of Engineers (FNE), as well as more traditional neighbourhood associations, trade unions and popular movements, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs). The movement also developed important allies in national and local government, including a range of political parties.

A long struggle

The struggle for urban reform passed through two phases. In the first phase between 1982 and 1988, the MNRU's urban reform proposal had to pass through a number of different committees in the Constitutional Assembly, and then the constitutional text had to be approved by the entire assembly. This was subsequently followed by a 13-year battle in Congress until the constitutional text, including the Statute of the City was finally approved in 2001. The law requires Brazilian cities with more than 20,000 people to have a City Master Plan developed with popular participation. It also grants all cities the right to legalise occupations on state land, and to raise progressive taxes on urban property.

A number of factors contributed to the success of the MNRU/FNRU in driving through the reforms. A key factor was the way the movement was able to unify many of the disparate urban struggles for land, health, transport, sanitation, and education by framing the struggle as a shared concept of 'the right to the city'. The movement's focus on both the national and local level played a vital role in the success of the campaign. In the early stages the MNRU focused on getting the reforms through the Constitutional Assembly.

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Then between 1992 and 1997 the FNRU switched its focus to the local level as some of its personnel entered municipal governments in Sao Paulo, Santo Andre, Porto Alegre and Belo Horizonte. Participation at the local level was implemented in cites such as Porto Alegre and Belo Horizonte and became considered a successful form of local administration.

The local level experience subsequently helped shape the national reform agenda, but meant that at national level the reforms languished in the economic committee of Congress for five years, and suffered various set backs, until the leadership turned its attention back to the national level after the elections of 1996. When the Statute of the City was finally passed, the differing social and political contexts at local level conditioned the implementation of the city master plans and led to quite different impacts. The key conditioning factors included: the differing strength and composition of civil society; the make-up and continuity of local political administrations; and type and degree of interaction between civil society and local administrations.

The legitimacy, financial resources and connections of the various professional associations within the coalition were also crucial in helping mount an effective lobbying campaign with government, and mobilising the press. The movement astutely developed links with a range of left and centre parties and successfully mobilised the Workers Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores)(PT), the PSDB (Partido Social Democratico Brasileiro, Brazilian Social Democratic Party) and a large part of the PDMB (Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro, Brazilian Democratic

Movement) for the final approval of the Statute of the City in Congress.

Because of the length of the struggle, another crucial strength was the movement's staying power. At various points opposing conservative interests tried to dilute the movement's proposals, or shift the issue to certain committees, so it was vital that the MNRU was able to maintain a long-term influence. The movement's focus on a single issue also meant it could concentrate efforts and resources and maximise impact.

Insights

The research shows how national policy change has differential impacts depending on the local political context, which confirms the importance of local level advocacy. The study also shows how activist NGOs can enroll non-traditional allies, such as professional associations, to help drive change. It also suggests that developing alliances with a range of political parties can be important when the legislative branch plays a strong role in policy making.

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