



Non-Governmental Public Action Programme

Preliminary Research Findings Brief

Parallel Lives, Different Worlds: Citizenship and Public Action in Rio

Project aims, objectives, methods

Aims and Objectives

The objective of the research has been to gain an understanding of how young people from different backgrounds perceive and practice citizenship and public action and create and engage in their political world in the context of a socially and economically divided society. As such we have been concerned in finding out what the terms 'participation' and 'citizenship' actually mean to young people in their everyday lives. Our research tackles these questions in a qualitative way, seeking to understand young people's engagement in the public sphere of the city of Rio de Janeiro and what we here term their cultures of participation. This research examines some of the initiatives in which young people today participate: community organisations, cultural groups, social movements. We also examine the historical processes that have come to shape this present field of public action.

Methods

In an initial phase we identified 16 key projects, out of an initial list of 20, organisations and social (and cultural) movements in Rio de Janeiro's civil society which focus on young people and the theme of inclusion, social justice and citizenship. Many of these organisations work with young people through cultural forms (such as music, dance, theatre, cinema, photography). Following this initial planning stage the team divided the research process into 3 stages:

1) After identifying each initiative, we approached the co-ordinators and educators from these organisations to understand their proposals, practices and challenges as well as how they viewed the participation of young people in their projects. In total we interviewed 24 people connected to the co-ordination or education side of these initiatives.

2) In a second stage of the research, we conducted 9 focus group interviews with a total of 59 young people between the ages of 16 and 24, with a few exceptions, who were participating in these 16 initiatives, projects, social movements, or other 'spaces of participation'. We always sought to focus on a range of groups that were representative in terms of gender, ethnicity and social class, of the diversity of young people in the city. Although regarding this last category, with the exception of the student movement, we noted that few initiatives directly targeted or sought to include middle class youth.

3) Based on our experiences with these groups we carried out a third stage of the research, in order to deepen our understanding of the trajectories of participation of 12 individuals. These young people were selected from the above group as well as based on indications from others we got to know. They were selected because of the levels of engagement and the length of their trajectory of participation, which even in the case of the youngest (at 16) already spanned a number of years. At this stage we were seeking the more subtle meanings and effects of their engagement with within the public sphere and we used a 'life histories' and participatory approach, with individual interviews, group debates, and texts written by this group of young people themselves with the goal of reflecting on their experiences. As a product of this third phase, we have created a joint publication with seven young people which has been published in Brazil.

During the three phases described above, we counted with the participation of around 100 people, including co-ordinators and young people. Our objective consisted of trying to better understand how young people actually participate in specific projects, as well as the meaning and

impact they attach to such participation. Besides the participation in 'projects' we also sought to understand what young people participate in more broadly and what they consider participation to be. In this way we sought to problematize an understanding of participation, often found in social projects targeting young people, that is too narrowly defined and related to formal institutions. Instead we sought where else participation may be found.

Key research findings

1. What is the historical, social and cultural context of young people's participation in the public sphere?

- Today the forms and spaces of young people's participation in the public sphere, as well as how the 'political' is understood, differs from the decades before the end of the Cold War.

- For many authors, journalists and politicians, the youth of today are considered consumerists, individualistic and apathetic, contrary to the youth of the 1960s, for instance, who were at the vanguard of social transformations.

- But such a perspective hides a generalised disillusionment with the political class and its traditional institutions, the ideological shifts that have occurred in the post-Cold War period, as well as the possibility of seeing new spaces (for example the Internet or the World Social Forum), forms (social movements, cultural groups, Hip Hop activism), and themes (ecology, citizenship, free-software, alter-globalisation) in which young people are key players.

- At the same time, the young people who today participate in such initiatives do not have the same profile as the youth activists of the 1960s, who were, to a large extent, middle-class students.

- Equally the young people of today, from the middle-class as well as from working-class backgrounds, differ from those of previous generations because of the particular social, cultural and economic context in which they are found. Here we point to three main points:

- a) a *new work culture*; an insecurity in the labour market and new pressures to become inserted into it. Whilst for some this may mean that energies that might have gone into activism in the past are channelled into time spent preparing for the job-market or for the university entrance exam, for others entry into the voluntary sector as project participants is seen as a possible route into employment.

- b) the emerging importance of *new forms of 'political' action*, through the New Social Movements, (feminism, ecology, ethnic minority rights, sexual diversity), *and forms of cultural resistance*, what we have here termed a new D.I.Y (do it yourself) culture.

A number of the initiatives we identified work with young people, through cultural forms, such as music, dance, cinema, theatre, photography, as means of engaging young people in a process of critical reflection, around citizenship and other topics, and as a means for personal and community development. In this, we identified a genealogy in the non-governmental sector of an alternative pedagogy that was much influenced by the work of Brazilian philosopher and pedagogue Paulo Freire.

- c) a *horizontality in the forms of participation* (that is, a tendency towards non-hierarchical groups and those that meet face-to-face), an emphasis on the politics of the day to day and in actions that have immediate results (rather than long-term).

2. How is the category of 'youth' perceived?

- We identified three perspectives of how the media, and the governmental and non-governmental agencies tend to see youth in Brazil. It is important to note that the vision an organisation has around youth, also reflects its values, goals and its idea of citizenship, this may be expressed in mission statements and documents, but also through interviews with its leaders and what the project does in practice:

- a) youth as a population at risk – especially those from the working classes. Risk of entering the world of drugs and crime.
- b) youth as a phase of experimentation.
- c) youth as a population with a revolutionary and transformative potential.

3. What is participation?

- We identified four key components important for a better understanding of participation:

a) **the context** - historical, social and cultural - offers different opportunities, spaces and forms of participation. The geographical context of participation is also important (whether this takes place at the level of the community, school, social movement, national or international); as is the level of institutionalisation (whether in an NGO project, or a Hip Hop posse, a student council, youth parliament of the World Social Forum). [as seen in point 1 above]

b) **the movement** this includes; the motivations which induce people to participate (such as solidarity, indignation, the desire to learn), how this mobilisation occurs (the identification with the group, the struggle for rights and resources, through a provocation of outside agents), and the resources that are available in order to participate (such as time, experience and opportunities). [as seen in point 4 below]

c) **power**; we understand that every participation involves power relations which have to do with the dynamics and spaces of participation, with who has access to these spaces, as well with how some forms of participation come to be considered legitimate whilst others are not, or are ignored. [as seen in point 5 below]

d) **the effects**; we understand that participating produces practical effects (like greater control, freedom, resources or capacities), symbolic effects (such as the recognition of others, the expression of values, the increase in knowledge) as well as affective effects (such as solidarity, confidence and self-esteem). [as seen in point 6 below]

4. The three key ingredients for participation:

a) **Motivation** – Answers the question: why do young people participate? We found a spectrum of motivations and incentives; from the financial represented by the grant that some youngsters may receive whilst frequenting the project, the incentive for personal growth such as through training, the possibility of entering the labour market, the curiosity or desire to learn about certain activities, to the motivation that emerges through indignation and the desire for change, though also found were some ‘accidental’ entries into initiatives.

b) **Resources** – Answers the question: what are the conditions for this to happen? Here the important aspects are time, money, the pressures of the labour market, as well as personal abilities and self-esteem.

c) **Mobilisation** – Answers the question: what are the local conditions that provoke the individual to act in collective spaces to effect change? Is there a negative relation to authority (that is, a cause or indignation), the feeling of a lack, the desire for change? Important here is the presence of opportunities to effect change.

5. Participative processes are marked by power relations

- Power relations manifest themselves in group dynamics and are influenced by social and historical constructions between people from different social classes, ethnicity, gender and generation.

- Many initiatives that are made up of young people seek not to reproduce hierarchical power relations that exist in society, and seek to involve people in the management of projects.

- In cities marked by inequality and social segregation, like Rio de Janeiro, there is the challenge of a lack of spaces for encounter between different groups and for the construction of collective projects around social, cultural and political issues. Having said this, for young people who are part of a number of initiatives, the most valued experience has to do with the possibility to meet and exchange with other young people and to work as a group.

6. Transformations

- One of the most important aspects young people spoke of as regards their participation in projects and organisations related to affective and symbolic themes: the possibility of meeting, exchanging with and getting to know other young people, of feeling a sense of solidarity, feeling valued and a sense of belonging. Three key terms stood out when young people and project co-ordinators spoke about the effects of participation in their day to day lives:

a) *Self-esteem* - A common theme amongst a number of initiatives that work with young people is the concept of self-esteem. This is described as the feeling of recognition, confidence, of being respected and valued by others, of being capable of carrying out certain actions and activities, of relating to others in a gratifying way which result through the processes of being part of particular groups or projects.

b) *Solidarity* - was another important value mentioned by young people and co-ordinators when asked about what for them was the key thing about participation. Solidarity, was also spoken of as an antidote to the growing tendency towards individualism in consumer society.

c) *New visibility* – Another significant theme, which is here termed ‘new visibility’, related to the way in which many initiatives were involved in a project of re-representing groups that have been historically marginalised and misrepresented – young *favela* residents, young black men and women. A significant number of organisations focus their actions on the means of communication such as radio, TV, cinema as well as the printed press. The focus of these initiatives is then a critical analysis of the media, as well as providing access to the tools and techniques for producing new representations.

Policy and practice implications

- International Seminar on Youth and Civic Participation, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, April 10th, 2007. The seminar, organised jointly with CIESPI, saw the presentation of results from the research alongside presentations from prominent researchers on youth from Brazil, Mexico and the U.S.A. The conference was well attended, with over 250 people from all over Brazil including students and professionals working in the area of social and community development. During the conference there was the launch of the publication ‘*Nós: A Revolução de Cada Dia*’, written by seven young people in collaboration with the NGPA project. This book unites seven stories from young people between 15 and 27 years old living in the city of Rio de Janeiro with different backgrounds and life trajectories but all with a history of being engaged in organisations and initiatives in the public sphere around the themes of citizenship and social justice. The Seminar was a great success, as was the launch of the publication written by young people themselves. Requests for the book, which is freely distributed by CIESPI, continue to arrive (more than three quarters of the initial sample of 1000 has been distributed) and the group of young people themselves have kept in touch and are involved in their own dissemination of this publication.

As for further impacts, publications from the project are now beginning to come out.

Key publications and outputs

Academic Publications

'Cultures of Participation: Young people's engagement in the public sphere.' Research summary article written with Practitioner Fellow Marcelo Princeswal submitted to *Children and Youth Environments*, online journal. A Portuguese version of the article was submitted to the Brazilian online Journal *Social em Debate* and another version is to be published as part of a CIESPI publication on Youth Participation in Brazil.

(forthcoming 2008) Butler, Udi Mandel 'Children's Participation in Brazil – a brief genealogy and recent developments'. Special Issue on Participation, *International Journal of Children's Rights*.

(forthcoming 2008) Irene Rizzini, Udi Mandel Butler and Nisha Thapliyal 'What Does Citizenship Mean for Children and Adolescents in Brazil?'. In *Children as Citizens?* Smith, Anne and Taylor, Nicki. (Eds.) University of Otago Press: Dunedin.

Rizzini, Irene. and Butler, Udi Mandel (2007) 'The Affective Citizen: childhood and belonging in the contemporary era' in *The Given Child*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

'Joined-up anthropology, the case for a dialogical approach'. Paper based on the research presented at 21st century Anthropology conference, Oxford University, June 2007, to be included as a chapter in a future publication of the conference.

Non-Academic Outputs

Butler, Udi *et al* (organisers) (2007) *Nós: A Revolução de Cada Dia*. CIESPI/PUC: Rio de Janeiro. Young Activists from Rio's own publication of their experiences of participation, published in Brazil March 2007 in Portuguese (and translated into English by me, available in pdf format and distributed through the Internet).

'Cultures of Participation: Young people and their perceptions and practices of citizenship.' Project report in English and Portuguese for scholars and practitioners available on the web.

Research material prepared for CIESPI's website (International Centre for Research and Policy on Childhood, Rio) (ongoing) www.ciespi.org.br.

For further information

(please fill in with project website and/or contact details)