

PARTICIPATION AND POVERTY ALLEVIATION

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No one disagrees that democratic participation makes processes of social inclusion efficient. With participation, investment projects become less costly and more sustainable at the implementation stage and maintenance. Social engagement is also fundamental to control corruption and to ensure good governance and good partnerships.

Social participation humanizes processes, procedures, collectivities, and governments. The discourse of participation for poverty alleviation has become universal. International development agencies, NGOs, the academy, governments, Congressmen, are all for participation and cite several examples.

However, rhetoric is far from reality because urban poverty is growing, and we know many countries will not be able to meet the Millennium Development Goals accorded by 172 chiefs of state, as revealed in the UN Habitat document *The Challenge of Slums*, and the book *A home in the city* by SCLAR, E., RUBBO, A., GARAU.

The impoverishment of Latin American countries in the last twenty years is evidenced by an increase in the number of informal human settlements in Latin American cities. In the short period between 1990 and 2001 the number of informal settlements increased from 111 million to 127 million, a consequence of fast urbanization and low economic growth and low investment in public policies. ECLAC, 2004.

Brazilian economy grew by an amazing rate of 7 percent a year between the 1940s and the 1970s, and then it began to decline. The new international context and neoliberal policies were responsible for the absence of efficient social policies, and this took place in a deeply unequal social and historical setting (the universal rights of the Welfare State only applied to a small portion of society), which was marked by outdated political relationships (a tradition in authoritarianism, political clientelism, patrimonialism, limited rights and the privatization of the State).

In cities in countries like Brazil, deregulation and “commodityfication” of public services because of privatization, the tax war, the increasingly weaker social role of the State, and

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bad economic policies have had a dramatic impact on a territory which has always been partially unregulated due to the tradition of informality. It is a substantially segregated territory characterized by highly excluding and speculative land and real estate markets.

Poor economic growth in the course of the 1980s and 1990s worsened the typically urban problems and contributed to the emergence of new ones, particularly in big cities, such as unemployment and violence. Violence was a virtually unheard-of issue in Brazilian urban areas until the beginning of the 1970s.

Participation is therefore fundamental not only to discuss the neighborhood and the city, but also macroeconomic policies which are largely determined by global forces. It is there where we can find most urban problems. Decentralization, another highly important word in our days, is desirable because populations live in cities. But decentralization cannot be used to weaken nation-states while cities become more autonomous.