

Pedagogies of resistance: Community-based education for women's participation in watershed management in São Paulo, Brazil

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ABSTRACT: Informal and community-based education and organizing are fundamental to creating the conditions for equitable democratic participation by women and marginalized people. This paper overviews recent Brazilian initiatives which develop such "pedagogies of resistance," focusing on watershed decision-making.

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I. Introduction

The current international discourse emphasizing “democratization” and “public participation” in environmental and development policy has been thoroughly critiqued by activists and scholars who point out that it both hides and perpetuates deep socio-political inequities -- none more fundamental than gender-based injustices (Gujit and Shah, 1998; Naples, 1998; Lister, 1997; Cooke and Kothari, 2001; Fraser, 1993; Fung, 2004; Kapoor, 2005; Kapoor, 2008). These inequities are evidenced in the minimal participation by women, and by lower-class or otherwise marginalized people, in public processes which are ostensibly meant to represent everyone in making public decisions which affect everyone.

In Brazil, for example, the federal Water Law of 1997 requires participation by “civil society,” along with public officials, on watershed management committees at the local, state, and federal levels which decide water allocation and infrastructure questions and have the power to institute water charges to pay for water, sewer, flood control and irrigation infrastructure. However, women are gravely underrepresented on these committees, despite the fact that women in general, due to gendered poverty and work/caring roles in society, are seriously impacted by water issues and often have specialized knowledge which can be invaluable in water decision-making. Women made up 8 percent of representatives on state-level water councils, while two local-level watershed committees in São Paulo State for which data is available were about 14 percent female in 2005 (Moraes and Perkins, 2007). A deeper problem is that in the absence of watershed-based community organizations which make possible political communication with constituencies and representative politics, the meaning and value of “representation” by gender or even class is far from clear.

Addressing these gendered democratic deficits, as theorists from many different standpoints argue must be done, immediately encounters three challenges:

- governments are often reluctant to cede power and control by opening up policy decision processes for public examination and input (the “top-down” problem);
- due to cynicism and the erosion of civic priorities, it can be difficult to organize and elicit public participation (the “bottom-up” problem);
- women, in particular, are pulled in so many directions by their double and triple work-days that they simply do not have time for civic involvement (the “missing women” problem).

This paper discusses Brazilian initiatives and models for community-based environmental education, “pedagogies of resistance,” which are using the democratic opening provided

by watershed-based legal structures to overcome cynicism and demonstrate the value of grassroots participation in water decision-making. There is a burgeoning theoretical literature, including the work of Third World theorists, on the potential and value of such organized subaltern movements (Bhabha, 1999; Toro, 2004; Toro, 2005; Day, 2005). At both theoretical and practical levels, these examples from Brazil offer insights and hope about the potential of women's grassroots networks to help build woman-friendly democratic processes, in Brazil and globally.

II. Pedagogies of Resistance

Broadening public involvement in public decision processes – and watershed committees in particular -- requires a creative combination of grassroots environmental education and community organizing. Community-based environmental education initiatives which are relevant and interesting for local residents and increase their knowledge of watershed issues, understanding of basic political and ecological principles, and confidence to express their views, can serve as the basis of an intervention approach which is progressive, constructive and democratic. This, in turn, increases the resilience and sustainability of watershed decision-making processes. It also lays the groundwork for community organizing and extension of the environmental education activities to larger constituencies in local areas affected by watershed decisions.

The interrelationship between the process and democratic outcomes of such community-based educational initiatives is revealed by Brazilian ecofeminist Regina di Ciommo, who notes, “The participation of women in NGOs connected in networks gives them the experience (and the challenge) of working in a non-hierarchical way” (Di Ciommo, 2005:15).

Also undergirding the development of this participatory and education-based model of preparation for public roles is the concept of “feminist transformative leadership” as described by Brazilian ecofeminist leader and community organizer Moema Viezzer. “First of all, (this) means much more than putting women in positions of power, even if it is important to have women as promoters of change in power positions. It is transformative in the sense that it challenges the existing structures of power; it is inclusive, in the sense that it takes into account the needs, interests and points of view of the majority of the marginalized and poor in society; it is integral, in the sense that it attends to all forms of social injustice.... Feminist transformative leadership can be exercised, advanced or defended by women and men, young or old” (Viezzer, 2001:11).

As an example of how this can work in practice, I would like to outline the process and results of the Sister Watersheds project, with which I have been involved over the past five years (see www.baciasirmas.org.br and www.yorku.ca/siswater). The Sister Watersheds project linked universities and NGOs in Canada and Brazil in developing strategies and materials for increasing the knowledge, interest and engagement of local residents on water-related issues, focusing on low-income neighbourhoods in São Paulo and Toronto and, in particular on low-income women. Funded by the Canadian International Development Agency through the Association for Universities and Colleges

of Canada, this \$1.3 million project combined student exchanges, research, community engagement, and capacity-building. Its novel conceptualization and design were developed by progressive Brazilian environmental educators Dr. Marcos Sorrentino (a professor at the University of São Paulo who was subsequently appointed director of environmental education in the Brazilian federal Ministry of the Environment) and Larissa da Costa of the Ecoar Institute for Citizenship, who subsequently became environmental education director at the World Wildlife Fund in Brasilia. The project's design evolved throughout its implementation by organizers at the Ecoar Institute, including Débora Teixeira, Mariana Ferraz Duarte, and Miriam Duailibi, Ecoar's director.

The Sister Watersheds project developed and tested training programs by conducting workshops led by its local NGO partners with more than 1450 participants (roughly two-thirds of them women), partnering with other community organizations to present content on topics related to environmental education and watershed management. For example, staff from the Ecoar Institute for Citizenship, an environmental education NGO based in São Paulo, contacted groups of elementary teachers, public health extension agents, and other community-based workers and provided in-service training for them about water and health, basic ecology, and public policy questions related to water in their local communities. The various training programs were shaped and modified to be specifically appropriate for groups of children, youth, health agents, school groups, teachers, film/culture/music/arts organizations, and Agenda 21/environmental education groups. The workshops focused on water management, environmental education, community development, and democratic participation, with emphasis on gender and socio-economic equity. The methodologies, techniques, and materials developed for these workshops and training programs were made freely available to other organizations through publications and websites, as well as contributing to the capacity of project partner organizations and individual staff members and students to continue related work on watershed policy issues into the future.

The curriculum materials and techniques developed by the project were fine-tuned in more than 220 workshops designed and led by project staff and exchange students in the three watersheds. All of the workshop participants were potential participants in Brazil's watershed committees, as civil society representatives/organizers. The curriculum materials developed by the project include a 110-page illustrated Manual on Participatory Methodologies for Community Development containing a set of workshop activities and background materials for participatory community environmental education programs and training sessions focusing on water issues; a 47-page illustrated guide with practical exercises focusing on urban agroecology; a full-colour socio-environmental atlas which brings together ecological, hydrological and social information about one local watershed in a series of interactive maps; a video about the history and environment of this watershed; a publication outlining Agenda 21 activities in schools; and several blogs and websites with materials and discussion-starters on watershed topics, as well as a book and many journal articles, masters' papers, and other academic publications contributing to the literature on participatory watershed education in Brazil.

Project participants from the University of São Paulo, York University in Toronto, and the Ecoar Institute for Sustainability – both continuing staff members and students, and those who have moved on after working on the project – benefitted from the opportunity to develop skills related to project proposal development, project implementation, financial management, environmental education and training, community development, communications, website development, mapping, video-making, public engagement and liaison with government officials, along with many other project-related skills. The project partners continue to make use of these experiences in their ongoing development of new projects, as well as their assistance to other organizations which, through the Sister Watersheds project, have come to see them as experts and leaders on watershed management issues.

Community environmental perception surveys conducted by the project in each of the Brazilian watersheds established a database of information on public priorities and views on watershed issues. The socio-environmental atlas gathered and made available in one place a wide range of information on ecological, hydrological, social and political circumstances in the watershed as a whole – information which proved very useful to public officials and watershed committee members in understanding the watershed as a whole. The nearly 1,500 participants in workshops conducted by the project gained familiarity and experience with water-related issues and their own ability to influence water management and policy through watershed committee structures, community organizing, community arts, and other means.

This project helped both its university and NGO participants to bridge the gap between academic and community-based methods of environmental education. Graduate exchange students studied and contributed to local training programs; faculty members wrote about the theoretical and practical benefits of public participation in watershed management; NGOs supervised students who received academic credit for their community-organizing work; professors led local watershed governance structures; innovative methods for environmental education were shared internationally; this collaboration allowed new perspectives on water management to evolve, with benefits for all participants' training/education programs. USP, York and Ecoar developed at least 38 new partnerships with other community organizations as a result of this project.

Students, both in Brazil and in Canada, played a crucial role in developing the linkages between academic institutions and community-based NGOs. Both locally and internationally, students sought out community organizations for their research and field experiences, and shared the results of their work with both academic and non-academic audiences. The student exchanges of this project thus fuelled its interdisciplinary and educational bridging contributions.

Besides the dozens of staff and students involved in the project directly through its partner organizations, the participants in workshops run by the project, and the audiences at the many public seminars organized by the project and the conferences where its results were presented, the project's outreach includes those using its websites (more than 10,000 hits were recorded on the baciasirmas.org.br website in one month in 2006) and

the curriculum materials and publications it has generated. These audiences include people from academia, government, NGOs, and local communities / civil society.

So there is potential for tremendous multiplier effects from such interventions designed to train community organizers on water issues and generate workshop materials and techniques for progressive community engagement, disseminating the results through both activist and academic channels.

III. Transnational Linkages

Another creative and inspirational model for transnational intervention to increase public involvement in watershed management is being developed by the Socio-Environmental Knowledge and Care Centre of the La Plata Basin (Centro de Saberes), an organization funded largely by a fraction of the hydroelectric power revenues generated by the huge Iguazu dam, located on the Paraná River where Brazil meets Paraguay and Argentina (centrodesaberes@pti.org.br ; <http://www.saberycuidar.org/home/>). The Paraná watershed, which drains much of central and eastern South America and reaches the Atlantic ocean via the La Plata River near Montevideo, also includes Bolivia and Uruguay, so the Centro de Saberes works in three languages -- Portuguese, Spanish and Guaraní, the official language of Paraguay. In an organizational model developed in part by Moema Viezzer, the Centro de Saberes convenes regular meetings of “permanent learning circles” attended by media, academic, activist and political representatives of each of the five countries in the watershed. Each year, like ripples, the “permanent learning circles” expand, as the participants from the year before invite additional representatives to attend in subsequent years. The circles have grown from 5 participants (one from each country) in 2006, the first year, to 35 the next year, to hundreds currently. More than half are women. The agenda and program of the meetings include social exchanges among participants, discussions of local priorities for environmental and political action, and brainstorming about how to accomplish the goals identified by each group.

The Centro de Saberes has five operating principles: water as the generator theme; the La Plata watershed as the operating territory; an ethic of protection of the diversity of life in the watershed and consideration of the different kinds of knowledge and protection available in the watershed; environmental education as an element capable of engaging society into action; and the collective construction of information, knowledge, and actions.

IV. Conclusion

Brazilian ecofeminist Ivone Gebara has written:

“In Latin America we want to be part of a national and international movement for the globalization of social justice ... A new national and international order is our goal. An ecofeminism as an echo of feminism takes this as its goal without forgetting the special commitment for all women, without forgetting the importance of local education for a

better world for everybody. It is the first time in our history that international civil society is uniting to form a new social and political order. It is the first time that together we are asking for a new qualitative daily life. In this perspective there is a new hope for all of us” (Gebara, 2003:97).

By linking community-based education with democratic organizing and leadership by women, Brazilian movements are addressing the challenge of how to make democratic participation possible within fundamentally inequitable societies, which of course is a challenge with parallels in every country including Canada.

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