

## DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION IN THE DEFENSE OF SUSTAINABLE CITIES<sup>1</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the management of a neighborhood Residents' Association located in a large municipality, located in the State of São Paulo. This study brings an important contribution to the debate on popular participation in city planning as a management strategy for achieving the UN's Sustainable Development Goal - SDG, number 11, which points out: "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". The methodology developed was bibliographic and field research with a qualitative approach, with the use of semi-structured interview techniques, and observation. The data collected in the interviews were analyzed from a theoretical-critical perspective that guarantees a reading of social reality and favors the understanding of social relations in their essence, that is, beyond what is presented in the appearance of the facts. The study brought indicators that although residents' associations are privileged spaces for popular participation, in the investigated institution there was no practice of protagonism of residents in social mobilization and participation in collective affairs. It is evident that the residents' association is unable to perform its political functions, nor to facilitate the approximation of the population with the municipal management, aiming at participation in the elaboration of public policies and sustainable local development.

**Keywords:** City Management. Participation. Neighborhood Residents' Association. Sustainable Cities.

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## INTRODUCTION

This article proposes to study the management of a neighborhood Residents' Association located in a large municipality located in the State of São Paulo, aiming to know the management strategies adopted by the residents' institution and the possibilities of ensuring popular participation as a management instrument in municipalities, envisioning the consolidation of a fairer society and sustainable cities. This study is justified by the interest in reflecting on popular participation in the elaboration of city planning as a management strategy for the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goal, number 11, which points out "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable".

For the development of the research, it was sought to identify the difficulties presented by the Residents' Association in their management and to analyze the level of participation of the residents of the neighborhood in the management process of the association, public policies and the socio-environmental issue. During the bibliographic research, the authors Demo (1993), Freire (1987), Oliveira (2022), Iamamoto (2015), Silva (2010) were studied, aiming to deepen the reflections on central theoretical categories necessary for understanding the reality of the object of study.

During the field investigation process, a Residents' Association of a neighborhood of the city, indicated for the study, was selected as the research sample. Considering the qualitative aspects present in the object of study, a qualitative research approach was chosen<sup>4</sup>. The data collection process was developed through interview and observation techniques. The interview was held at the headquarters of the Residents' Association and had the authorization and acceptance of the member of the board, the current president. The semi-structured interview addressed questions about the infrastructure of the neighborhood, the participation of residents in the association's projects and in the organization of the city, awareness of residents when disposing of solid waste and debris in the preservation area, and the work carried out by the association.

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<sup>4</sup> Qualitative research answers very particular questions. In the social sciences, it is concerned with a level of reality that cannot or should not be quantified. That is, it works with the universe of meanings, motives, aspirations, beliefs, values and attitudes. This set of human phenomena is understood here as part of social reality, as it distinguishes it not only by acting, but by thinking about what it does and by interpreting its actions within and from the reality lived and shared with its peers. The universe of human production, which can be summarized in the world of relations, representations and intentionality and is the object of qualitative research, can hardly be translated into numbers and quantitative indicators. (Minayo, 2007, p.21)

To record the information, a tape recorder was used, based on the participant's authorization. The observation was developed throughout the period of the investigation in the field, and all the information observed in the field diary was reported. Data analysis was carried out from a critical perspective.

The research was based on the assumption that the exercise of popular participation with the neighborhood residents' association can contribute to the process of democratization of municipal management. Popular participation in city planning has great potential for the creation of public policies capable of meeting the true socio-environmental demands that exist in urban territories. Residents' associations are instruments of participation, political organization and management, fundamental to ensure the movement and awareness of the population of the neighborhood, based on their needs.

## **POPULAR PARTICIPATION AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION**

Participation is the necessary fuel for the formation and strengthening of social movements, therefore, in neighborhood associations, as they represent the struggle for rights, improvements in the quality of life of all who live in a given territory. Popular participation, as a tool of democratic management, consists, as a starting point, in guaranteeing the political emancipation of individuals and making it possible to overcome the shackles of socially established thinking

Popular participation becomes fundamental for the creation of a critical human being with knowledge about their social reality and, from the development of social and political practices, the individual builds a praxis, which refers to the dialectical relationship between practice and theory, which is built from the experience of the act of participating. As Bordenave (1994) corroborates:

Widespread participation in associations and entities would balance the tendency towards rupture contained in participation if channeled exclusively through political parties. In addition, to the extent that it expresses real interests that are closer and more visible to each one, it would help to contain the innate tendency towards despotism supposedly contained in every democracy, since it subjugates minorities. (BORDENAVE, 1994, p. 14).

After all, its participation and encouragement is an important management instrument to guarantee a politically, culturally and socially emancipated society, managing to overcome social inequalities through processes of claims and participation in the decision-making acts of the various instances of State power. In this way, favoring the

construction of a new culture, in which the priority is based on the formation of sustainable cities free of any type of domination. It would also promote democracy, since the process of participation is an intrinsic act of social democracy. The author Demo (1988) contributes:

At the same time, such considerations lead us to affirm that it is not realistic to present the lack of space for participation as a problem in itself. In fact, it is only a starting point, because from this we start, that is: by historical tendency, we first find domination, and then, if conquered, participation. To say that we do not participate because we are prevented would not be the problem itself, but precisely the starting point. Otherwise, we would set up the welfare margin, according to which we only participate if we are granted the possibility. (DEMO, 1988, p. 19).

The ideal participation is the effective participation that is the one conquered, and not the one ceded by the State, after all, by this path of acceptance of the ceded participation, society will be doomed to the manipulations of the State, to its singular interests, which intrinsically favor the dominant class.

However, it is worth noting that participation is a necessary process for civil society to oppose the State, and ensure effective participation, through conquest. Promoting visibility, the realization of citizenship, the implementation of democratic rules of the game, the control of power, as well as control of bureaucracy in social policies and the corruption that is intrinsic to the formation of this sociability.

The importance of conquering participation is that through it civil society will be able to conquer, over the years, more effective social rights, as well as social policies that are less welfare and more focused on the understanding of totality, respectively, understanding with more quality the social structures intrinsic to the process of formation of the State, with the objective of breaking with multiple social inequalities, that permeate the social relations of this sociability.

## **EMANCIPATORY EDUCATION INTRINSIC TO THE LIBERATION PROCESS**

Education is a fundamental tool to contribute to the achievement of participation and respective social emancipation. From the essence of education as a practice of freedom, human beings will be formed as humans. Dialogic education and dialogue consists of an education based on dialogicity that seeks, through a horizontal pedagogical relationship, and trust, an interaction of the human with the world and the belief and trust in the capacity of the other " [...] It is education as a practice of freedom" (FREIRE, 2021, p.29). Dialogue must be present in all teaching-learning processes, through collective participation, in the

search and option for contents, methods, generating themes and their meanings, up to broader relations such as the participation of men in the world, "[...] a liberating education, and not a "banking", is that, in any case, men feel themselves to be subjects of their thinking, discussing their thinking, their own vision of the world" (FREIRE, 2021, p.166). In the educational process, the content cannot be treated as a set of reports or an imposition, as it happens in banking education. The role of the educator is fundamental in this dialogical relationship, "[...] the organized revolution, systematized, and added to the people, of those elements that they delivered to them in an unstructured way" (FREIRE, 1987, p.47). From a libertarian education, subjects go from spectators to active on the various decisions in society and contribute to its transformation.

## **THE SOCIAL ROLE OF THE RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION AND THE FORMATION OF SOCIAL MOVEMENTS**

Social organizations are institutions made up of people who aim to achieve specific goals. Its main characteristics are, having a goal to be achieved, the presence of social units that symbolizes a group of people who work in search of the same goal; It is the joining of individual efforts that generate collective action, after all there is a purpose to be fulfilled. Every organization has an important social function in society that makes it legitimate and institutionalized. Some examples of what these organizations are: neighborhood associations, unions, schools, among others.

An organization can be differentiated into two forms: formal and informal organizations. Formal organizations are those that are documented, and are registered in a notary's office, it is therefore regulated, containing a CNPJ - National Registry of Legal Entities, a registration number and is ensured by law, an example is: political parties. Informal organizations, on the other hand, are those that are not registered and documented.

For an organization to exist, the participation of the collective is essential. As the author Maduro (1986) contributes:

Throughout the history of humanity, the search for individual rights and the consequent participation in society has been constant. In modern times this participation has been growing, and for this growth there are several reasons given; Among them we can mention the greater concentration of people in the cities, causing serious problems for the community; the improvement of communication techniques, the economic situation of a certain portion of the population, and also the Universal Declaration of Rights, which guarantees the same right of political

participation to all citizens. However, to achieve their goals, an organization is necessary, because as Dallari states,<sup>1</sup> "Every proposal for change in social life meets with resistance from established interests, from those who are accommodated or from those who are afraid of any transformation" (MADURO, 1986, p. 01).

Social movements refer to a social organization that mobilizes, through a collective action of a certain group of people, which aims to promote social changes based on political struggle and the use of participation as an intrinsic tool for social achievements. In Brazil, the 1960s was a period of great effervescence of the working class and the formation and constitution of social movements. According to Benevides et al. (2022):

In the early 1960s, precisely in the period between 1960 and 1964, a national-popular consciousness was built, through the political organization of social groups in the struggle for structural reforms, stimulated by the political-ideological opening of that time. Several social movements emerge and mobilize for grassroots, agrarian, urban, tax reforms, etc. These movements were gestated, organized and gained political strength in the face of the political, social, economic and cultural scenario of Brazilian society, being built by liberal professionals, intellectuals, students and workers in general. (BENEVIDES et al., 2022, p. 55).

Neighborhood associations are understood as a social movement, precisely because they claim quality of life and social rights "[...] because due to the rural exodus, the need to organize cities was a latent demand, which culminated in the creation of several social movements, including residents' associations" (BENEVIDES et al., 2022, p. 56) acting on the demands expressed by their respective neighborhoods.

This social movement must be characterized by popular participation as a fundamental axis of the political organization of residents, aiming to build democratic processes and demands. Education is the basis for the possibility of critical and organizational awareness of the population for the political engagement of the community, in the struggle to ensure the fulfillment of social demands. Although there are elements of this society that oppose the effectiveness of these organizations. The author Gohn, (2011), contributes that:

There are many challenges to be faced. As a general goal, it is necessary to change the political culture of our society (civil and political), still strongly marked by clientelism, physiologism and various forms of corruption; restructure the administrative culture of our public agencies, still structured on the pillars of bureaucracy and corporatism; to contribute to the strengthening of a citizen culture that respects the rights and duties of individuals and collectivities, since the predominant citizenship is restricted to voting and is still marked by colonial legacies of subservience and conformism. (GOHN, 2011, p. 356).



In other words, residents' associations can contribute directly to the transformation of various socio-cultural spaces from the perspective of seeking sustainable cities, after all, quality of life is achieved through the understanding of the balance between man and nature. Thus, the construction of sustainable cities depends on the type of management that is developed in communities and cities, since management guarantees the practice of ethical and sustainable intentionality, promoting social and environmental inclusion, and consequently, a more humane and free sociability.

However, due to the current economic system and through neoliberal ideologies, this reality becomes increasingly distant, where people are more involved with their rights. After all, workers are inserted in a logic of exploitation of their workforce, so the population does not have the time and incentive to participate. The authors Benevides et al, (2022) corroborate that:

However, currently, from the implementation of neoliberal public policies, what has happened is the partnership of these institutions with the State, in which there is the decentralization of public services, recently regulated by the Public Call Law. This new form of management of public services distorts the real function and objectives of the Residents' Associations, characterized by the provision of public services and not by the struggle for rights and popular participation. (BENEVIDES et al., 2022, p. 60).

In fact, there are several cultural, economic and political elements for the demobilization of neighborhood associations, including the lack of funds for the maintenance of these entities "[...] Often the entity is unable to provide a quality service to a significant number of the population due to its lack of resources" (BENEVIDES et al., 2022, p.61).

## **RESIDENTS' ASSOCIATION OF THE JARDIM PORTINARI NEIGHBORHOOD**

The Jardim Portinari neighborhood was created in 1982, in the north of the city of Franca/SP, next to the Vicente Leporace neighborhood. The Residents' Association of the Jardim Portinari neighborhood was established in 1989, " [...] This Association began in 1989, therefore, 7 years from the beginning of the construction of the neighborhood and for more than 30 years of existence until the present moment" (BENEVIDES et al., 2022, p.72). The Jardim Portinari neighborhood, since its implementation, has suffered from several infrastructure issues, as corroborated by the authors Benevides et al. (2022):

The construction of Jardim Portinari did not follow the same planning as Jardim Vicente Leporace and, since the beginning of its occupation by the residents, approximately 40 years ago, it has always been dependent on the Leporace neighborhood, with regard to issues of public facilities, that is, schools and daycare centers, Health Unit - UBS, services of the Social Assistance Reference Center - CRAS and others" (BENEVIDES et al., 2022, p. 63).

Other considerations about the Portinari neighborhood, is characterized by having two Permanent Preservation Areas - APP, due to two water springs. In addition, the neighborhood has basic sanitation, paved streets, organic waste collection three times a week along with the collection of recyclable waste that is carried out on Saturdays, as well as masonry houses.

The Portinari neighborhood residents' association is located in the central region, and develops interaction projects with residents in partnership with the Franca City Hall. They offer sports, recreational and festive activities such as ballet, zumba and judo for children. As well as, they promote community festive events such as the pig on the roller, Children's Day and Christmas party for residents, with the aim of promoting recreation and leisure for the local community, as well as raising funds for the maintenance of the Association, through hard work and struggle on the part of board members and residents. The Jardim Portinari Association has a trajectory of great effort and dedication on the part of residents, "[...] the history of struggles and achievements of the Association, through hard work with residents and public agencies of the city to ensure the maintenance of the local building and also in the offer of recreational and sports activities for the population of the neighborhood" (BENEVIDES et al., 2022, p.72). Since, the municipality is not responsible for the total expenses of the association, as previously socialized in the text.

In one of the questions asked to the president of the association, it was about what the Residents' Association develops in addition to sports activities, dance, ballet, zumba and parties, the interviewee (A) answers that:

So we develop, for example, if people are doing a campaign, then they need the salon. A bargain bazaar, a little something, we provide the salon without charging anything. A campaign is sometimes for illness, to take care of health, something that... to raise action. This has been very common in the post-pandemic scenario, many people are in need. (Interviewee A). <sup>5</sup>

Another question that becomes very important for the respective debate was about what would be the objective of the Neighborhood Association, in which interviewee B

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<sup>5</sup> The interview was conducted on 08/09/2022, with a resident representing the Jardim Portinari neighborhood.



<sup>6</sup>answers that: "It is to serve the community, to make the community feel good". Another question raised in the interview was about the participation of residents in the monthly meetings of the Association and it was said by interviewee (B) that; "The monthly meeting is open and takes place every first Monday of each month. Because it is open, the entire community is invited to participate. But it is difficult to participate much, one or two comes."

During the interview, the interviewees said about the lack of awareness of the population regarding the correct disposal of rubble, organic waste and recyclable materials. However, according to the authors Benevides et al (2022):

[...] This community institution does not carry out any environmental or socio-educational education activity aimed at a political orientation capable of contributing to the formation of a critical consciousness of the residents. In this sense, it was understood that the absence of this type of action can make it difficult for the Association to achieve its social function of mobilization and political organization of the population, aiming at the struggle for rights and quality of life. (BENEVIDES et al., 2022, p. 74).

Thus, it is understood that the Residents' Association should be more involved in seeking means, tools or partners for the development of socio-educational activities for the community of the Portinari neighborhood. At another point in the interview, the question of the participation of the residents was resumed, about what would be the opinion of the participants about the involvement of the population with the association, and according to interviewee A: "I think it is very little, when there is a passinho dance for example, it is an activity that does not pay anything, Then they come, but when it's about the association, they don't come to discuss." However, another question was asked about what are the methods that the Association uses to encourage the participation of the population in the institution and it was said by the interviewees that before the pandemic they used to post the days and times of the meeting, but that after the pandemic they no longer post because it is understood that the population already knows the fixed days of meetings of the Association. It was also addressed about the structural difficulties that the Association encounters to develop its activities with more quality and it was said by the interviewee (A) that:

The difficulty is that we run after the city hall and everything and we are not served. The mayor was here, ran his campaign here and promised some things here for us here in the neighborhood. Then we invited them to a meeting here in the neighborhood, it's been more than a month and they haven't come yet. That's our difficulty, you know? There are things to do in the neighborhood and we are not served. For example, the place where people are throwing garbage, the Mayor

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted on 08/09/2022 with a resident of the Jardim Portinari neighborhood.

promised a court, to prevent people from continuing to throw garbage there. It needs more lighting in the streets, on the soccer field. (Interviewee A).

Both interviewees showed concern about the lack of adequate lighting and emphasized the importance of this, in order to be able to serve a larger audience in the realization of sports activities and mentioned the possibility of having times available at night or in the early afternoon, around 6 pm. However, without adequate infrastructure it is not possible, critically reflecting that, due to this context, children are doomed to only go to school and then home without the possibility of performing a sport or even leisure. Since, the demands of the Portinari Neighborhood Residents' Association have not been met by the City Hall of Franca.

## **CONCLUSION**

The results analyzed about the study developed with the Jardim Portinari Neighborhood Residents' Association, it is evident that the institution's lack of understanding about the understanding of the social function of a residents' association, about its main objectives, which consists of promoting debate among residents in favor of the struggle for rights and decent living conditions for the residents of the neighborhood themselves.

The Residents' Association, although it has promoted leisure and entertainment activities for the population, in controversy has been mostly dedicated to the promotion of events, parties and recreational activities. As a result, they end up not promoting the intrinsic objectives and their social function, as well as there are no participatory practices of the board or even of residents, expressing conservative and alienating characteristics, in short, not being able to guarantee mobilization, organization and participation as strategies for promoting more sustainable cities.

It highlights the necessary contribution of universities through their work in research, training and university extension, aiming to practice actions and programs to encourage critical and political knowledge, through multiple knowledge workshops for members of Residents' Associations and for the population in general. With this, it would enable a broader understanding of topics such as the environmental issue, rights and duties, citizenship, the importance of the Association as an instrument of struggle and vindication of social rights. As well as, socio-educational workshops promoting the formation of critical

and political awareness about socio-environmental issues, which are directly linked to the development of a particular neighborhood, city, state and Union.

It is important to emphasize that the members of the association's board of directors are workers, people of sociability, who are inserted in this neoliberal, contradictory logic, promoted by the current economic system, capitalism. Thus, there is a need to deepen reflections on the intrinsic issues of this ideology. After all, there will be no incentive from the State to promote education and political training for these people, because education becomes a tool for social emancipation, in which the State has no interest in promoting.

This study justified its relevance in reflecting on the importance of popular participation in the elaboration of city planning as a management strategy for the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goal, number 11, which points out "Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable". However, it can be observed from the debates socialized in this text that these issues related to the promotion of popular participation and political organization of neighborhood residents have not been practiced in this association studied

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