

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCILS OF THE MÉDIO PIRACICABA REGION OF MINAS GERAIS STATE, BRAZIL¹

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Introduction

Public and private administrations, since the early 1970s, have been increasingly including environmental issues in their agenda. One of the key tenets of this process has been the decentralization and democratization of decision making, particularly in Brazil.

The 1980s in Brazil was marked by major advances in environmental legislation, which have contributed to a process of democratization and decentralization of environmental management. The Federal Law 6938/1981, which established the National Environmental Policy, included municipalities in the National Environmental Institutions System (known in the short form SISNAMA), giving them the responsibility to address the local environment. The autonomy of such responsibility was corroborated by the 1988 Federal Constitution, which considered municipalities a key part of Brazil's federal entities.

Among the most pressing challenges faced by local environmental administrations is to ensure community participation in the development and implementation of public policy. Several authors argue that the broad participation of communities in local environmental policies is fundamental to their legitimacy and effectiveness.

According to Milaré (2005, p. 181), “there is currently a consensus that you cannot do effective environmental management without the implementation of public policies and community participation”. Avritzer (2011) reinforces this argument by stating that the participation of civil society is a precondition to the success of deliberative processes. Philippi Jr. and Zulauf (1999) also note that the success of environmental management,

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especially at the municipal level, is directly linked to community participation in the debates and deliberations surrounding the environment.

Currently, there are several legal requirements in Brazil to public participation in the decision-making of environmental issues. At the local level, stands out Municipal Environmental Councils, insofar as they constitute a mandatory mechanism for community participation. Municipal Environmental Councils, also known in the short form CODEMA, are intended to assist the local executive power on environmental issues. Alcantara (2010) states that environmental councils “are forums for discussion, debates and conflict of interests” (p.1814).

While Gohn (2011) argues that councils enable the advice and participation of various social groups where important political decisions are made, he also questions the effectiveness of such participation. Leme (2010, p. 40) also warns that “The simple creation of councils is not a guarantee that their purpose will be fulfilled; also their composition does not represent real-life stakeholder fabric”. As it can be seen, many authors emphasize the importance of environmental councils within the public administration. However, many authors also question their effectiveness, particularly at the local level. Carvalho (2003) warns about:

[...] the risk of transforming [environmental] councils into bureaucratic structures that, instead of strengthening social movements and public will, end up becoming empty local government structures with no meaningful power (p.8).

In small and medium-sized Brazilian municipalities this risk is greater, given the existence of historical heritage of political clientelism and sharper dependence on specific industries. This is the case of the municipalities that make up the Médio Piracicaba region in Minas Gerais State, Brazil.

The objective of this study was to analyze the degree and the quality of public participation in the environmental councils of five municipalities that make up the Médio Piracicaba region: Barão de Cocais, Catas Altas, Itabira, Santa Bárbara and São Gonçalo do Rio Abaixo. Each of the five of municipalities, while having specific problems and dynamics, share the common challenge of being “mining communities”, as their economies are largely based on the mining activities that take place on their territories. Although mining activities have played a key role in promoting economic growth in these municipalities, they have also generated many environmental and social problems, such as increased real estate prices, traffic congestion, urban sprawling, and deficit in health, education and public safety services. Some of these problems are regularly addressed by local politicians.

All municipalities surveyed in this study have municipal environmental councils, which, in spite of their relevance to shaping decisions that can affect the cities' quality of life, are largely unknown by the general public. Even within the academic realm there is still a clear shortage of studies targeting the effectiveness of such councils, i.e. their capacity to drive environmental change.

This article is organized in five sections, including this introduction. Section two, below reviews the literature on public participation in environmental management and the role of municipal environmental councils. Section three presents the methodology. In the fourth section, the results of the research are discussed in light of the literature. The fifth section presents the conclusions and the main implications of the research.

Public participation in environmental policy and management

There are a many definitions of public participation in the literature. Valla (1998) states that “public participation encompasses multiple actions that different social actors exert to influence the development, execution, monitoring and assessment of public policies and/or basic social services” (p.9). Modesto (2002) rather argues that participation is “related to the assurance of individual perspectives within a legal, moral, impersonal and efficient public management” (p.2). The concept of citizen participation, according to Crevelim and Peduzzi (2005)

[...] is based on the universalization of social rights, the broadening of the concept of citizenship and the new understanding of the nature of the state, referring to the identification of priorities in public policies in public debates (p. 326).

With respect to typology, Gohn (2011) lists three types of political participation, as follows: 1) presential: the individual shows passive behavior; 2) active: the individual develops activities entrusted to him/her; 3) participation (real): the individual contributes to policy decisions. Arnstein (1969), in turn, typifies public participation in eight levels (manipulation, therapy, informing, consultation, placation, partnership, delegated power and citizen control), which she called the “ladder of citizen participation.” According to this author, the first two levels of the ladder (manipulation and therapy) represent “non-participation”, as in these levels people are not allowed to participate in the planning or implementation of programs. Informing and consultation represent the next steps, where citizens begin to hear and be heard about their rights and responsibilities. In the sixth level, placation, citizens begin to have a greater influence, however, still subtle, because it allows only counseling and the right to decide is still in the hands of the government (ARNSTEIN, 1969). At seventh level, partnership, citizens can negotiate and engage in decision-making. It is only the two higher levels, delegated power and citizen control, that allow citizens to make decisions, and therefore exercise a degree of power (or control) that ensures participation in programs and projects, being able to negotiate and change them. Arnstein (1969) also notes that often public participation is restricted to the early stages of the “ladder of citizen participation”, which creates a false impression that all interested parties were considered in the decisions, while, in reality, this situation only benefits those in power, thus maintaining the *status quo*.

The participation of communities in the development of environmental policies, especially in small municipalities, runs the risk of serving only to legitimize the interests

of productive sectors or ruling classes. Scardua and Bursztyn (2003) argue that, in many cases, local society is controlled by local oligarchies, which, in turn, find in the decentralization of environmental policy the opportunity to reinforce practices that attend their interests. In this context, Jacobi and Barbi (2007) argue that it is critical to promote

[...] changes in the prevailing paradigm to ensure effective citizenship, greater participation and progress in policies that promote and expand actions guided by the concept of sustainable development (p. 243).

One should note that the Federal Constitution of 1988 restored the Brazilian democratic regime, enabling a type of participatory democracy based on the principle of popular sovereignty and democratic state (OLIVEIRA, 2011). Machado (2010), in turn, argues that the Federal Constitution of 1988 introduced in the Brazilian legislation the principle of participation, which is reaffirmed by several infra-laws in various niches of knowledge. Gohn (2011) corroborates the importance of community participation in government by stating that

Participation is seen as the creation of a culture of sharing responsibilities in the collective construction of the community. The latter is seen as a partner, as a permanent co-responsible, not only as a supporting actor in sporadic programs (p. 22).

There are several tools of community participation envisaged by the Federal Constitution. Among the most notable are “public initiative bill”, referendum and plebiscite, as well as community councils and public hearings (JACOBI AND BARBI, 2007). At the municipal level, one of the main mechanisms of public participation in environmental policy and management is the municipal environmental council. Scholars have long been addressing the challenge of public participation in public policy-making. However, little is known about the institutional, political and normative aspects of municipal environmental councils (SOUZA AND NOVICKI 2011, p. 237).

The role of Municipal Environmental Councils

Growing public participation is a direct consequence of the creation of public spaces of debate and political articulation. Municipal councils are a key example of such spaces, as they ensure participatory processes in a transparent and pluralist environment (JACOBI and BARBI, 2007). The first Municipal Environmental Council of Brazil was created in the city of Cubatão (SP) in 1975 (SOUZA and NOVICKI, 2010). One could argue that this council was avant-garde for its time, since Brazil had not yet gone through a process of democratization; the spaces for public participation in politics were limited. But it was from the implementation of the National Environmental Policy Act on and especially after the CONAMA Resolution 237/97, which corroborated the authority of municipalities to conduct environmental impact assessment and licensing, that the quantity of such councils multiplied.

The Brazilian Survey of Basic Municipal Information - Munic (IBGE, 2009), points to a spike in the number of municipal environmental councils or CODEMAS in the last ten years. In 2009, there were active CODEMAS (i.e. councils with regular meetings and outcomes) in 39.9% of the Brazilian municipalities (IBGE, 2012). Despite this expansion, the numbers are still modest when compared to other municipal councils, such as the social assistance and health councils, which are present, respectively, in 99.3% and 97.3% of the municipalities. Leme (2010) points out that this situation is explained by the fact that the transfers of federal funding to municipalities are conditioned to the existence of social assistance and health councils.

Through the CONAMAS, municipalities create an integrated space of environmental management and democratic participation, and also ensure "(...) the continuity of environmental initiatives in a more transparent and coherent way" (PHILIPPI JR. et al, 2004). The diverse nature of such councils favors the clash of ideas and brings out different views demands related to the local environment. For Philippi Jr. et al. (1999)

Existing experiments [of local environmental councils] show that, despite all difficulties inherent to the subject, and despite the conflicts with powerful economic interests, the Councils have played a relevant and growing role in politics, bringing, in many cases, to the forefront of decision-making issues that were previously marginalized. (p. 130)

However, Souza and Novicki (2010) note that "the mere existence of CMA [alternative abbreviation of CODEMA] does not warrant the creation of democratic environmental policy and the consequent social and political participation within" (p. 53). The quantitative expansion of environmental councils and even its deliberative character does not necessarily show their success in tackling local environmental challenges. Some authors emphasize that many councils are marked by a lack of deliberative capacity, and that council members do not clearly represent society (Teixeira, 2000).

The parity of council members, while required by law, neither ensures the representativeness of the opinions and demands of the local population, nor ensures impartiality in decisions. According to Alcântara (2010), «environmental councils are often colonized by groups of the local elite that are more civically aware and prepared». The author further argues that often council members are mere repeaters of crystalized opinions, a fact that turns the CODEMAS debates into unproductive forums, as members come to the table with an already formed opinion (ALCÂNTARA, 2010).

Methodology

This research adopted a qualitative, multiple case studies approach to analyze public participation in the municipal environmental councils of five cities in the Médio Piracicaba (MG). The selection of the cities took into consideration two key criteria: all cities are inserted in a dynamic process related to mining projects; all cities have environmental councils that, despite their different sizes, experience common social and environmental problems, thereby facilitating their comparison.

As for the procedures of data collection, this study adopted literature reviews, documentation reviews, interviews (structured and semi-structured), as well as on-site participant observation. The literature review targeted books, journal publications, thesis and dissertations, as well as relevant environmental legislation. Information and statistics were also drawn from websites and publications of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics - IBGE, the Ministry of the Environment and João Pinheiro Foundation. In the second stage of the research, a documentation review was undertaken with the goal of understanding the operational aspects of the selected environmental councils. Copies of the municipal laws and regulations related to the creation of the councils were collected and analyzed. This study also reviewed the councils' meeting minutes generated between January 2011 and December 2012, as well as the presence lists indicating the council members' meeting attendance. Such documents were obtained in the Municipal Secretariats of Environment.

A field survey was also conducted in order to gather data about the structure and operation of the CODEMAS and the Municipal Secretariats of Environment. Data were obtained through structured interviews with the Municipal Secretaries of Environment as well as through on-site observations of the council meetings that took place between September and December 2012. Questionnaires were also applied to the council members of each environmental council, in order to identify their profile and their perception about the degree and the nature of public participation within their councils. Among the 61 councilors that make up all selected councils, 41 completed the questionnaire, a sample that represents 65% of the surveyed population, as can be seen in Table 1. This sample is not intended to have statistical/probabilistic representation, despite its apparent significance.

Table 1 - Sample of Surveyed Municipal Environmental Council Members per Municipality.

Municipalities	Total council members	Interviewed council members	Sample representation
Barão de Cocais	10	6	60%
Catas Altas	11	5	45%
Itabira	20	12	60%
Santa Bárbara	12	12	100%
São Gonçalo do Rio Abaixo	10	6	60%
Total	63	41	65%

The third stage of the research was the analysis of the collected information in light of the literature. The analysis sought to understand the degree and the quality of the public participation in the CODEMAS meetings, and the extent to which it contributed to the development and implementation of environmental policies in the municipalities.

Results and discussions

To understand the degree of participation of local citizens in the municipal environmental councils it is important to assess the nature of the participation, its drivers and barriers, as well as the conflicts and articulations that might emerge during the meetings. According to Faria and Ribeiro (2011), the institutionalization the democratic potential of the councils can be measured through the councils' lifetime, the meetings' frequency, the composition of their councils' members, and the factors that affect decision-making. One of the key premises of a democratic municipal environmental council is that it must have parity of representation.

According to the information provided by the municipal secretaries of the environment, all municipalities surveyed in this study have parity-based councils. The parity requirement was also evident in the statutes of the five councils. Nonetheless, data collected through the interviews with the councils' members revealed that parity is not commonly observed in meetings. The review of the meetings' minutes also corroborated the lack of "factual" parity in the five councils.

This finding might mirror the fact that not all councilors were interviewed. However, it does indicate that, while a "theoretical" requirement, parity is not observed in practice, because particular groups of stakeholders are not actively engage in the meetings. One of the interviewed councilors corroborated this argument.

It is important to note that representation parity does not necessarily ensure power balance in the councils' deliberations. Differences in technical knowledge, political and economic power among councilors often leads to an unlevelled decision-making environment. "Therefore, under the democratic atmosphere of the councils, the will of the strongest are forged in society" (ALCÂNTARA, 2010, p. 1817).

According to IBGE (2009), "another way to qualify the councils, from a statistical point of view, is to assess how frequent are the councils' meetings" (p. 134). The reviewed statutes of all five councils set out particular periodicities for the meetings. However, data from the councils' meeting minutes and from the interviews show that, in the particular cases of Barão de Cocais and Catas Altas, the meetings' periodicity were not observed, as they were less frequent than expected. According to the head secretaries of the two councils, many meetings are canceled due to lack of quorum, which, in a certain way, demonstrates low commitment on the part of counselors.

One of the actions that can encourage the participation of the population and its collaboration in the municipal environmental politics is the publicity or press release of the meetings' schedule and of the work news of the municipal environmental councils. In order to understand the ways through which the work news of the councils were being publicized, the interviews included questions about the councils' call for participation. The internet was the medium of dissemination more frequently pointed out by the respondents. However, such disclosure on the internet refers only to sending email invites to councilors, which usually included the proposed agenda and past meeting's draft minutes, thus not reaching the whole community. Moreover, while all municipalities had official website of their secretaries of the environment, none of the websites included a specific page of the

environmental councils displaying information about their respective meetings and work news. The disclosure of the council activities made through official city announcements was cited by a third of the total respondents.

The mass media, which has the potential to reach a greater number of people, through newspapers, radio / TV spot and posters, were cited by only 12% of respondents. The disclosure of information, called by Philippi Jr. and Zulauf (1999) social communication

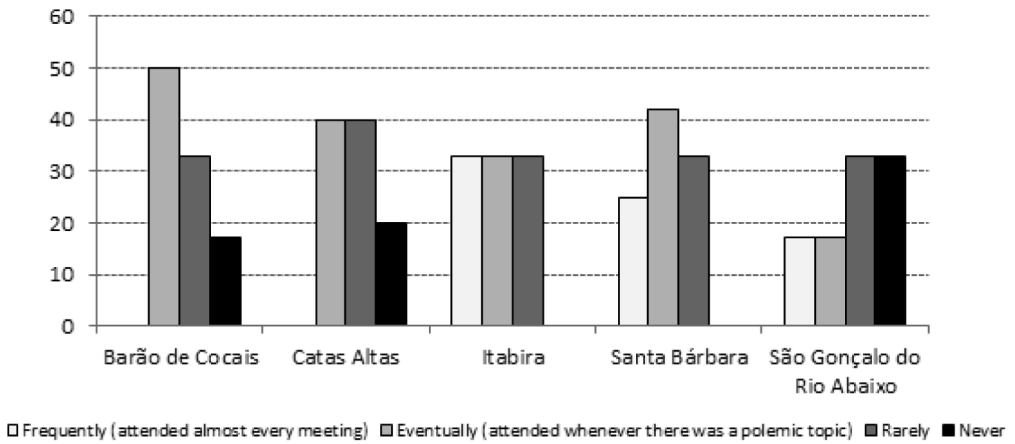
(...) is one of the most valuable tools for obtaining institutional, social, political and financial support to projects of the environmental agency, [...] creates a climate conducive to the importance of actions taken, and often has its benefits reverted to the progress of plans, programs and projects of the environmental management system. (PHILIPPI JR., And Zulauf, 1999, p. 53)

The councilors were also questioned about how frequently the people from the local community approached them to discuss the city's environmental issues, or to comment and make suggestions on specific topics. Across the whole sample, 11% of respondents answered that such a demand occurs frequently. For 39% of the councilors, such a demand occurs eventually, and only when the subject matter is of interest to the person. This indicates the individualistic nature of community participation in environmental councils, which contradicts the article 225 of the Federal Constitution that prescribes not only the right of all Brazilian people to a balanced environment, but also the duty of the government and of the community to defend it (BRAZIL, 1988). Also according to 31% of respondents, this demand from people in the community to discuss environmental issues rarely occurs and, according to 19% of the councilors who responded to the questionnaire, it never occurs.

By analyzing community participation, as perceived by CODEMA councilors, one can note that the overall participation is weak, and that, when it occurs, it is guided by individual interests. Souza and Novicki (2010) highlighted the fact that many municipal environmental councils focus on specific, pressing issues, usually related to specific stakeholders, at the expense of a larger debate about public environmental policy. This perception is shared by a member of the Catas Altas council, who stated that: "The council's work is more focused on the deliberation of urgent services."

Out of the total sample of respondents, 20% said that the participation of community members who are not councilors were frequent in the meetings. For 37% of the respondents, community participation occurs on an eventual basis, whenever there is a controversial topic in the agenda. For 34%, it is rare for the community to participate in the council meetings, and the remaining 10% of respondents stated that community participation never occurs (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Participation frequency from community members at the municipal environmental council meetings



Source: Based on the structured interviews with the councilors between November and December 2012.

Alcantara (2010) points out that one of the municipal environmental council's main weaknesses is the lack of participatory culture. The author further states that

In Brazil, there is neither an effective tradition of participatory management in public affairs, nor incentives to stimulate and educate this culture. The exercise of citizenship is conceived and stimulated through the voting system (almost exclusively in the selection of representatives during the elections) rather than through a more direct political action. (p. 1816)

This study also evaluated the way through which community participates in council meetings. Of those interviewed, 26% stated that participation occurs as protests, 39%, as verbal expression, 3%, as filing of public petitions, 12%, as submissions documents, 2%, through the work of the media, and, finally, 39% stated that community attends the meetings only as a passive listener.

The form of community participation in the meetings of CODEMA varies greatly from one municipality to another, but it is surprising how inexpressive is the filing of petitions in the meetings. Only the counselors from Barão de Cocais pointed out this option as a means of public participation in the meetings. This fact, again, reinforces the hypothesis that, even when the participation of the community occurs, it does not aim at defending collective interests, but individual ones. This hypothesis was corroborated by one of the CODEMA members of Santa Barbara who declared: "I think the population's participation is subtle or null when it comes to environmental issues. The interests on the table are individual. The collective perspective is not considered."

The work of the local media in the CODEMA meetings was almost not mentioned by respondents. It is assumed that there is a lack of interest or lack of coordination of both parties, media and CODEMAS, in the publicity of the councils' activities.

The questionnaire also sought to understand the perceptions of council members around the significance of the many factors that can influence decisions. The responses are compiled in Table 2.

Table 2. Significance of the many factors that can affect the decisions at the municipal environmental councils at the Médio Piracicaba (MG) region

Factors	Not significant	Slightly significant	Significant	Very significant
Social movements	16%	26%	42%	16%
Local media interest	32%	52%	13%	3%
Interest from other municipal government bodies	29%	29%	34%	8%
Mayor's interest	32%	20%	34%	14%
Interest from the local legislative representatives	42%	21%	26%	11%
Political/partisan interests	58%	32%	5%	5%
Interests from trade associations	34%	37%	21%	8%
Business and industry concerns	14%	34%	36%	16%
NGO and civil society activities	32%	26%	26%	16%

Source: Based on the structured interviews with the councilors between November and December 2012.

Data in Table 2 show that, according to the interviewed councilors, overall, the listed factors have low significance in terms of influencing decisions, with the exception of social movements and business and industry concerns.

From the standpoint of autonomy and equality, the fact that most factors exert little influence on decisions of the council can be overall positive. However, such a situation raises the following question: Being the council a forum that represents various segments of society, would it not be moving away from the interests of its represented members?

Social movements was the most influential factor considered in the decisions of the councils; their influence was ranked by 42% of respondents as significant, and by 16% as very significant. Local media, in turn, was considered not significant (32%) or slightly significant (52%) by most councilors. Such data mirror the little articulation between the media and the council.

While not a consensus of the majority, almost half of the respondents considered the influence of the interests of the mayor as significant (34%) or very significant (14%). In general, the influence of the head of the executive power in the councils of the municipalities surveyed in this study was a surprising finding, especially when one takes into consideration the fact that all the councils' head, addressed in this research, are municipal secretaries of environment who are indicated by the mayor. Moreover most councilor members (56%) declared that they participate in the council by invitation of the city hall and/or its municipal secretariat of the environment.

When it comes to the influence of the interests of companies / industries in the deliberations of the council, it is observed that the force exerted by this sector is much more expressive. Of the total respondents, more than half considered the influence of companies / industries significant (37%) or very significant (16%). It is important to note that the municipalities surveyed in this study are economically dependent on a few companies, if not a single company, and that most of the environmental impacts in the region are related to the activities from these companies, directly or indirectly.

Political/partisan interests, media, trade associations and the municipal legislature were considered the least influential factors in the decisions of the environmental councils. More than 60% of respondents considered the influence of these factors not significant or slightly significant.

Table 2 also shows that the degree of influence of NGOs and civil society in the decisions of the council was considered by more than half of respondents as not significant (32%) or slightly significant (26%). Overall, the low influence of civil society in the deliberations of the council is a result of misinformation, lack of education of the population for the exercise of their citizens' right, and even of individualism that prevents that society to organized around collective causes, such as protecting the environment.

The questionnaire also sought to ascertain the importance of the most important areas of actions and investments, according to the councilors' perception, needed to improve the council's work. The study listed eight items for which the councilors were to assign a degree of importance. The results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 - Councilors' perception about the required actions to enhance the municipal environmental councils' work

	Not important	Slightly important	Important	Very important
Enhance physical infrastructure	16%	22%	38%	24%
Hire/trains human resources	14%	5%	30%	51%
Improve the quality of the councilors' participation in meetings	11%	11%	35%	43%
Boost frequency of the participation of community members in meetings	8%	3%	43%	46%
Increase quality of the participation of community members in meetings	5%	14%	35%	46%
Follow-up on the council's deliberations	3%	6%	38%	54%
Increase the publicity of the meetings' schedule	3%	6%	54%	38%
Increase the publicity of the meeting minutes	6%	14%	49%	32%

Source: Based on the structured interviews with the councilors between November and December 2012.

A general analysis of the data presented in Table 6.3 suggests that all actions were considered important or very important. Actions qualified as very important were those related to community participation in the council meetings or the actions related to the councils' publicity and monitoring.

Among the listed actions, physical infrastructure was the one that received the lowest degree of importance. This result may be explained by the fact that, despite not having their own buildings, all councils have appropriate office spaces and equipment given by the municipal secretariats of the environment to hold their meetings. Human resources were mentioned by more than 80% of respondents as important or very important. According to Pereira, Mungai and Cross (2007) "financial, technical and administrative support to the operation of CODEMAS [sic] are in direct responsibilities of Municipalities" (p 17). However, many municipalities, especially small ones, do not have sufficient financial and human resources to meet the demands of the secretariats of the environment, as well as of the environmental councils.

The action "improve the quality of the councilors' participation" was also considered important (35%) or very important (43%) by most respondents. The plurality of composition in the council can facilitate the quality of participation of its members, insofar as it allows for different perspectives on the topics being discussed. But it must be carefully considered, so that the councilors do not have a very rigid opinion driven by individualistic perspectives.

"Boost the frequency of participation of communities in the councils" obtained a large degree of importance. Of the total respondents, 43% considered this action as important, and 46%, very important.

Follow-up on the councils' decisions was considered the most important action by the councilors. Over 90% of respondents evaluate this measure as important or very important. The importance of this action was corroborated by some councilors: "The CODEMA should more closely monitor compliance with its decisions" (Council member from Itabira). In another case: "We must enforce decisions taken, so people feel that the council is valuable to society" (Council member from Barão de Cocais).

The representatives of the municipal environmental councils realize the importance of increasing the publicity of the councils' work. Of the total respondents, 54% consider increasing the publicity of the councils' as important; and 38%, as very important. Increase the publicity of the councils' minutes was also considered an important or very important for more than 80% of respondents. This result shows that despite the low liaison between the council and the media, as previously discussed, the councilors agree that access to information, by population, is a key action needed to improve the council's work and foster the participation of society in the local environmental management.

Final remarks

The CODEMAS are, in theory, especial forums of democratic and participatory participation around environmental issues. In recent years, especially after the publication of CONAMA Resolution 237/1997, the number of environmental councils in Brazilian

municipalities has multiplied. However the creation of these councils does not always translate into effective societal representation and participation in decision-making.

This study showed that, like the rest of the country, the five municipalities addressed in this study are investing efforts to institutionalize the environmental area. Current institutions, however, tend to be precarious, especially in small cities.

As for the participation of the population in the CODEMAS, the analysis of documents and data obtained through interviews with council representatives, showed that participation is, in general, weak, and that, when it occurs, it tends to reflect individual interests, in contrast with the Article 225 of the Constitution of 1988 prescribes the collective duty to defend the environment.

Among the factors that appear to contribute to the weak participation of local communities in the councils, were identified:

Lack of knowledge about the roles and responsibilities of the local environmental council, a fact that is related to the low publicity of the councils' meetings and work news;

Challenge to monitor and follow up on the councils' deliberation, thus threatening the councils' credibility;

Lack of interest and commitment of some environmental councilors, who, in addition to not attending scheduled meetings, ultimately compromise the representation of the interests of the community;

Inequality of technical knowledge and political power among councilors, a fact that creates decision bias towards large companies and local elites, to the detriment of skill between the representatives of the local population and the environment; and

Local population's neglect of collective interests around environmental issues and sustainable development.

While the CODEMAS addressed in this study were found to have limited public participation around environmental issues, it is undeniable that these councils have a great potential to advance democratic participation. This research supports the need to implement strategies to strengthen the CODEMAS and their integration with local communities. These strategies should consider the inclusion of community capacity building, so that the public can participate in a more active manner, thus enhancing environmental policy-making.

The findings from this study, far from exhausting the subject, can contribute to a better understanding of the barriers and opportunities to the effective roles of municipal environmental councils. The findings can also underpin future studies about the means to strengthen public participation in the environmental debate. In advancing future studies, scholars should consider larger geographical areas.

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PUBLIC PARTICIPATION IN THE MUNICIPAL ENVIRONMENTAL COUNCILS OF THE MÉDIO PIRACICABA REGION OF MINAS GERAIS STATE, BRAZIL

Abstract: The process of decentralization and democratization of environmental management faces challenges such as ensuring people's participation in the conduct of public policy environment. One of the main local mechanisms of popular participation in the conduct of environmental issues is the Environmental City Council. Despite the recent quantitative growth of these councils in Brazil, many authors question whether this body ensures effective participation in society on local environmental policy. This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the effectiveness of municipal environmental councils to investigate the degree and quality of participation of the population in Environmental Councils five municipalities of the Middle Piracicaba / MG. This is a qualitative research using multiple case studies. The results show that it is still low degree of popular participation in the councils and, when that occurs, occurs mainly to meet individual interests.

Keywords: Environmental management municipal; Municipal Councils Environment; Environmental policy participation.

Resumo: O processo de descentralização e democratização da gestão e da política ambiental pública enfrenta o desafio de garantir a participação da população. Um dos mecanismos de participação popular na condução das questões ambientais é o Conselho Municipal de Meio Ambiente. Apesar do recente crescimento quantitativo desses conselhos no Brasil, muitos autores questionam se esse órgão garante a participação efetiva da sociedade na política ambiental local. Esse artigo busca contribuir para o melhor entendimento da efetividade dos conselhos municipais de meio ambiente ao investigar o grau e a qualidade da participação da população nos Conselhos de Meio Ambiente de cinco municípios da região do Médio Piracicaba/MG. Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa baseada em entrevistas estruturadas, revisões documentais, observações diretas e revisões da literatura. Os resultados, de maneira geral, indicam que ainda é baixo o grau de participação da população nos conselhos e que a participação ocorre principalmente para atender interesses individuais.

Palavras-chave: Gestão ambiental municipal; Conselhos Municipais de Meio Ambiente; Política ambiental; Participação popular.

Resumen: El proceso de descentralización y democratización de la gestión ambiental se enfrenta a desafíos tales como asegurar la participación de la población en la gestión del medio ambiente las políticas públicas. Uno de los mecanismos de participación popular en la gestión de los problemas ambientales es el Consejo Municipal del Medio Ambiente. A pesar del reciente crecimiento cuantitativo de estos consejos en Brasil, muchos autores se preguntan si este órgano asegura la participación efectiva de la sociedad, en la política ambiental local. Este artículo pretende contribuir a un mejor entendimiento de la efectividad de los consejos municipales del medio ambiente para investigar el grado y calidad de la participación de la población en los Consejos Ambientales del cinco municipios del Oriente Piracicaba / MG. Se trata de una investigación cualitativa mediante el estudio de casos múltiples. Los resultados muestran que es todavía escaso grado de participación popular en los consejos y, cuando eso ocurre, se produce principalmente para satisfacer intereses individuales.

Palabras clave: Gestión ambiental municipal. Consejos Municipales del Medio Ambiente; Política ambiental; Participación popular.
