The participatory process in environmental sanitation issues: how does it reverberate in printed media?

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ABSTRACT

Participation in the field of environmental sanitation has low visibility and is little studied, especially in developing countries where democracy is a relatively recent reality. It is therefore pertinent to assess how social participation in sanitation occurs and how it is presented to society by the media.

In this study, the participatory processes in environmental sanitation were assessed using newspaper articles published in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. Different categories, such as discrete or continuous processes, passive or proactive populations, and top-down or bottom-up models of governance, were established. Although participation in and conflicts regarding environmental sanitation have been considered to be scarce, they were still observed in some instances, indicating that they occur in a covert or even invisible manner.

Key words | conflict, environmental justice, participation, pollution, sanitation, water

INTRODUCTION

The environmental sanitation sector, particularly in developing countries where democracy is relatively recent and is still being consolidated, has been characterised by a reduced level of institutionalised participation by civil society. The agents of the sector themselves have historically been apathetic to the creation of formal requests for participation and have resisted its institutionalisation. This resistance has been made clear by, for example, the clashes that occurred during discussion of the national law on basic sanitation in Brazil (Heller 2007), which was published in 2001 (Brasil 2007).

On the other hand, addressing the issue of social participation in the topic of environmental sanitation requires reflection on the imprecise and elastic meaning of the concept of participation and the flexibility of the concept of environment. Environment is a concept that is socially constructed and varies in meaning depending on social group.
In the process of economic development, social inequalities in the exposure to health and environmental risks are clear. The conservative branch of environmentalism, defined as ‘ecological modernisation’, tends to disregard the link between environmental degradation and social injustice. Social injustice can be defined as ‘a mechanism by which unequal societies, from an economic and social point of view, designate most of the environmental damages resulting from development to low income populations, racial groups that are discriminated against, traditional ethnic peoples, working-class neighbourhoods, marginalised and vulnerable populations’ (Acselrad 2004a, p. 14). This occurs with environmental sanitation in Brazil, which is characterised by a distribution of benefits that is asymmetrical to the population and perpetuates inequalities (Heller 2006).

Based on these factors, the present study attempts to explore the ways in which societal participation in topics related to environmental sanitation occurs. To this end, it uses a method that has already been employed in other investigations, such as a study on water conflicts in Mexico (Castro 2005) that used print media as the source of information. On the one hand, this strategy accounts for the contributions of societal movements, which are generally not very visible to academia. On the other hand, this strategy captures trends in the occurrence of these events. Even though this source has limitations in its representation of the spatial and temporal dimensions of participation events, given the logic that presides over the agenda of print media outlets, the research enables the formulation of hypotheses about the conditions under which events deserve to be disseminated.

Thus, the first objective of this study is to assess how civil society participates in the fight for environmental sanitation in the Rio das Velhas basin, an important water basin located in the central region of the state of Minas Gerais. It covers an area of 27,867 km², in which 51 municipalities, with a population of around 4.3 million inhabitants, are located. It includes the capital of the state, Belo Horizonte. It is the largest tributary of the São Francisco River Basin and has economic and social significance. Currently, Rio das Velhas is in an advanced stage of degradation as the result of various anthropogenic activities over the entire basin.

The second objective is to contribute to the discussion of the concept of participation in environmental sanitation issues.

To these ends, the contents of two of the most important daily newspapers distributed in the state, the Estado de Minas and Hoje em Dia, were analysed for 8 years (2000–2007).

PARTICIPATION AND ENVIRONMENTAL SANITATION

With the process of redemocratisation of several Latin American countries, the resurgence of social movements and the creation of new participatory approaches have been observed. If such practices were seen as threatening the stability of the regime during the process of redemocratisation in the previous period, they began to gain visibility and received the support of society. At the same time, because of environmental degradation and the global visibility it has received, environmental discussion and the associated environmentalist movement has also broadened. Several struggles, traditionally defined as social, have been incorporated into the environmental category, representing what is called the ‘environmentalisation of social conflicts’ (Lopes 2004). Consequently, beyond a technical or romantic analysis of nature, the groups involved in these processes built a counter-statement of hegemonic environmentalism that is defined as environmental justice and understood as a set of principles that ensure that no group of people endures a disproportionate share of the degradation of collective space (Acselrad 2004a).

Accordingly, social mobilisation, given the precarious nature of environmental sanitation service delivery, was a common method in countries that had already achieved universal services and thus fulfilled an important role in changing the attitudes of governments and leaders. The case of Barcelona in the twentieth century, recorded by Masjuan et al. (2008), is symbolic because it enabled a change in needs, perceptions and views that originated a ‘new water culture’ and a shift from supply-driven to demand-driven speeches by the leaders. Even in developing countries, water conflicts and public water supplies have had historical significance in shaping the direction of
public policies, such as in the case of the Metropolitan Area of Mexico (Castro 2004).

There is extensive literature on the topic of participation. Historically, it must be noted that the promotion of participation provided political advantages for leaders in the 1980s and 1990s through the attraction of investments, more effective projects and partnership possibilities with the private sector. This rationality was especially supported by multilateral development agencies, such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Even when social activists, who are advocates of participatory development, had broadened the concept of participation to avoid government manipulation and defined popular participation ‘as organised efforts to increase the control of resources and movement of those hitherto excluded from this control’ (Rahnema 2000, p. 196), there is no evidence that new rationalities had emerged, out of the hegemonic view of popular participation.

A first mode of participation is in the field of encouraged participation, which was even presented as a model of the conditions for the awarding of international funding. This model gained ground from the 1990s onwards, when the topic of participation in water or environmental sanitation policies was promoted under the designation of ‘water governance’ or ‘good water governance’, representing a deeply controversial split according to different theoretical perspectives.

In this mode, a relatively clear division can be identified between those formulations that value the participatory dimension as a control mechanism for the unrestrained predominance of the interests of the elites and of the strengthening of democracy, on the one hand, and the identification of governance with the state reforms, reinforcing private participation and weakening the role of the state on the other hand. Moreover, the arrangements for ‘governance beyond the state’ are associated with a ‘deep restructuring of political democracy parameters … leading to a substantial democratic deficit’ and resulting in an ambiguous model ‘particularly under conditions in which the democratic character of the political sphere is increasingly eroded by the burdens forced by market forces, which establish the rules of the game’ (Swyngedouw 2005).

A second mode of participation is that spontaneously undertaken by the population affected by public policy, or by its deficit or even absence, which is capable of also influencing the stance of governments and leaders. This model encompasses forms of participation that are not officially authorised and, beyond that, represents rights to participate that have been won and may then result in the legitimate strengthening and institutionalisation of social movements. In this respect, Simmons & Birchall (2005) have evaluated the reasons why public service users participated in the formulation of policies in Great Britain. They proposed a model in which participation results from several factors related to the positive perception of structure, size, status and success of the participating group. The factors that they considered included the motivation to participate; available individual resources (time, money, skill and confidence); mobilisation or other catalysts, including a negative relationship with authorities (‘the authorities are not listening to people like me’); the sense of relative exclusion (‘my community is more excluded than others like it’) and a desire for change; and, lastly, the more collective dynamics of participation.

A third mode of participation occurs when it is discouraged by the governing bodies, which is what clearly happens in authoritarian regimes and also when the head of state adopts this practice to neutralise resistance to an unpopular policy proposal. This reality in the field of water and sanitation was found in Great Britain, according to Bakker’s (2001) argument that participation was discouraged both by Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government, which was responsible for the privatisation of service provider companies – ‘justice as liberty’ – and in the ‘justice as virtue’ vision of the Labour Party. It would be fitting for the state of social welfare ‘to build citizens as client-consumers, discouraging their active participation in public life …[and] the distributive justice paradigm as an ideological reinforcement of depoliticisation’ (Young 1990, p. 66, cited in Bakker 2001).

There are different theories on participation. Weblor & Tuler (2000) tested a theory inspired by the Habermasian concepts of situations of ideal speech and communicative competence. The model is based on two basic pillars for the definition of an ideal participatory process: fairness, which refers to the opportunity for all interested and affected parties to assume a legitimate role in the decision-making process, and competence, related to the ability of
the process to reach the best possible decision. In their empirical study on the decision process in the forest conservation discussion in the northern states of the USA, stakeholders were interviewed, the authors showed potential for this theory to capture several aspects of the evaluated process. However, the case study also showed the need to connect the participatory process with the processes that preceded it.

In another study, Webler et al. (2001) propose five perspectives of what would be a ‘good participatory process’ in the environmental field: (i) a process that acquires and maintains popular legitimacy; (ii) a process that facilitates an ideological discussion; (iii) a process that promotes justice in the process; (iv) a participatory process containing a power struggle; and (v) the presence of leadership and commitment.

These are the theoretical elements, some with normative character, useful for the comprehension of the participatory process, which contributed to the analysis of participation in the field of environmental sanitation. Such analysis tends to involve a non-disciplinary view that seeks multiple perspectives and provides a systematic learning process. It is this ‘interactive’ participation model that eventually may be identified in newspaper articles.

PARTICIPATION IN SANITATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF PRINTED MEDIA

To assess social participation in the field of environmental sanitation in the Rio das Velhas basin, articles published in two daily newspapers, Estado de Minas and Hoje em Dia, from 2000 to 2007, were used. A search tool available on the websites of the newspapers was used to search the news archives using different sets of keywords, including the Portuguese equivalents of sanitation; environmental sanitation; wastewater treatment plant; pollution; river; environment; Pampulha (lake in Belo Horizonte); Arrudas (main stream in Belo Horizonte); Rio das Velhas and Rio São Francisco (main river, of which Rio das Velhas is tributary). After a first selection, each article was read, in order to decide whether it would be included in the sample. For the purpose of the search, the concept of environmental sanitation defined by Brazilian legislation was used, i.e., the following components were considered under the concept: water supply, sanitation, solid waste management and storm water management. The analysis was oriented in order to identify the following topics related to environmental sanitation: lack of basic necessities, organisational groups and community support networks, mobilising forces and environmental conflicts arising from social groups that have the continuity of their practices threatened by the impacts of the practices of other groups.

During the search for news stories, the categories that best fit the content of the analysis started to emerge in a constructivist methodology. The process led to the formulation of four analytical categories for participatory events, according to which 203 news stories were identified, distributed over 38 municipalities (out of 44 located in the Rio das Velhas basin), were classified.

As mentioned, this classification did not appear a priori; it appeared as part of the analysis, using a method that incorporated different perspectives from the authors, with different backgrounds, favouring a more complex construction. Instead of a process based on the suitability of categories and matching pre-defined concepts to reality, the methodology was drawn in light of the analysis of news stories, based on the interdisciplinary dialogue between the researchers, in a process that resulted in categories defined in the course of discussions. Due to the constructivist approach based on how the printed media express environmental perceptions of the interested population, the study attempts to identify the specific social concept of environment, as stated in the Introduction.

The newspapers that were analysed had some limitations that needed to be considered. There was a greater concentration of news stories in the Metropolitan Region of Belo Horizonte (created in 1973 and currently regulated by complementary laws of the state of Minas Gerais; it comprises 34 municipalities, 13 of which were not included in this study because they are not part of the Rio das Velhas Basin), with 141 out of the total 203 news stories, distributed as follows: 101 in Belo Horizonte (state capital, with a population of 2,375,444 inhabitants), 19 in Nova Lima (81,162 inhabitants), 3 in Jaboraticas (17,119 inhabitants), 1 in Caeté (40,786 inhabitants) and 1 in Ribeirão das Neves (296,376 inhabitants). This bias to the centre may be explained by the location of the headquarters of the two
news sources in Belo Horizonte. Figure 1 shows a cartographic representation of the situation.

Furthermore, it was observed that both newspapers tended to present the news stories in a discrete fashion, some as brief notes distributed over several pages with little reference to the history of the cases. Only during the analysis, when developments in the cases were considered in subsequent issues of the newspaper, was it possible to define the complexity of the processes involving the affected or benefiting community.

In relation to the concept adopted, newspaper reports seem to emphasise cases of pollutant loads and the omission of public power more than actually developing the discussion about principles that should guide basic sanitation services. An example of these guiding principles is the lack of universal services, which should be available as a right, inherent to citizenship or equity, such that this right is independent of social class or of social differences of any nature.

For this field of environmental sanitation, it is assumed that the participation of society can come to define principles and guidelines for public policy in the planning of actions, monitoring of their execution and the assessment of the results; this role would indicate the fundamental democratisation of the decision-making process and implementation of actions. It is exactly this participatory process that was used to identify news stories involving the municipalities of the Rio das Velhas basin.

**THE NEWSPAPER ARTICLES**

**First category: discrete actions**

This category consists of 66 articles and involves the omission or action of the government, events and campaigns, educational and awareness activities and environmental recovery actions. The articles have a transient purpose that is decontextualised from a continuous process involving their social agents. However, they still fulfil the purpose of bringing people closer to the debate on environmental
issues. They may also occur in a phase of the longer-lasting process of social mobilisation if the people involved are continuously dedicated to the cause and seek collective results. Obviously, these articles generally do not combine the perspectives of a ‘good participatory process’ identified by Weber et al. (2001). Most often, these are processes in which participation is passive and independent of the initiative of the social agents affected by the environmental sanitation problem and classified in the category in which participation is encouraged.

The government’s actions in implementing environmental sanitation initiatives were the subject of 31 reports. The initiatives refer mainly to sewage treatment works: ‘the work in the Sewage Treatment Station of the Ribeirão do Onça basin … marks another stage of the project of environmental sanitation of Belo Horizonte’ (Hoje em Dia, 05/04/2002).

Another type of highly recurrent action refers to events in which people meet on a specific day to discuss improvements in environmental sanitation policies, protest or bring information to the people. An example is: ‘In the celebration of the World Water Day, in the 1st Water Forum for the Development of Minas Gerais … the need to strengthen the policies related to the management of water resources was discussed’ (Hoje em Dia, 22/03/2002).

Reports on educational and awareness activities were identified. In a public school, students ‘discover’ the importance of preserving rivers: ‘We cannot throw trash in the water because they are polluted. In the Río das Velhas, half are clean and half are dirty. If a river becomes polluted, the fish die and we cannot swim,’ explains 5-year-old Clara (Estado de Minas, 13/06/2002).

Second category: allegations

The second category identified through the analyses contains 48 examples. The reports aim to inform the public about discussions on the environment that can inspire different social agents including environmentalist movements, decision makers, politicians, researchers and citizens. They may have a restrictive character, may not trigger the collective process and may depend on the person who made the allegation. In general, they are triggered by a combination of factors proposed by Simmons & Birchall (2005). However, when the collective factor, i.e., dynamics of participation, is incipient, participation typically does not continue.

The allegation of the extermination of fish in Vila São Joaquim, in the central region of the state of Minas Gerais, on the banks of Río das Velhas, exemplifies this issue (‘Extermination of fish in Río das Velhas’ – ‘Mortandade de peixes no Río das Velhas’, Estado de Minas, 12/05/2003). The residents of this area fundamentally depend on fishing for survival, via either consumption or commercialisation. However, external forces caused a decrease in the level of dissolved oxygen in the river and the fish were consequently exterminated, thus profoundly affecting the means of the people for social and economic growth. However, despite the serious nature of the situation, there were no ramifications from the case, and there was a lack of broader involvement of the collective group in an attempt to reverse the situation and avoid similar occurrences in the future, at least based on the records of the media.

Other cases examined also reveal that despite the problematic nature of the degradation of the Arrudas basin, the tributary basin of Río das Velhas with the highest degree of urbanisation, the environmental problems are not used as a motivation for conflict. Conflicts would require more participation. This emphasises that complaints do not always give rise to the participatory process and that the appropriate stage for the development of the process may not yet have been reached.

Differing from the allegations associated with demands, another modality associated with information was noted. This modality consists of information that the press obtains from environmental and water management agencies or even non-governmental organisations. No less important than other types of allegations, these reports have the purpose of highlighting major problems that exist in the basin. For example, there was a case of petrol station leakage that contaminated groundwater at some locations in the city of Belo Horizonte, and the lack of mandatory environmental licensing could have increased the risk of contamination of drinking water wells. The municipal secretary of the environment declared: ‘our concern is not to allow for the springs to be contaminated’ in a 21/10/2002 report by Hoje em Dia. This type of approach, in general, gives voice to public authorities and offers little space to foster the mobilisation of social agents.
Third category: social mobilisation

In this category, the reports generally receive more attention in the newspaper and are usually complemented by photos. In 36 mobilisation actions, the reports revealed the existence of collective action in defence of water springs, streams, rivers and parks.

The main mobilising agent identified was the Manuelzão Project, which is a mixture of non-governmental organisation and an extension project from the Medical School of the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais and has an effective social communication sector. At least 18 reports dealt with activities directly developed by this project, and 9 of them mentioned social mobilisation actions in different municipalities of Minas Gerais. Other reports have also mentioned this project as an important partner in achieving the improvement of issues connected to health and the environment. The news story ‘Manuelzão in a state of grace’ states that the project ‘... was able to mobilise the 51 towns from Minas Gerais, through which the Rio das Velhas basin passes’. ‘According to their coordinator [...] the revitalisation of Rio das Velhas fits into a broader notion of public health, environmental health and of economic development with healthy lives’ (Estado de Minas, 21/03/2000).

Having a pre-defined goal, i.e., the ‘return of fish to the river’, this project develops its activities using various motivational methods that fulfil the function of involving people in the discussions, debates and sharing of information. Some reports illustrate the activities:

‘The Manuelzão Project intends to mobilise one hundred blocks, among the 17 thousand that exist in Belo Horizonte, until the end of this year, for selective door-to-door garbage collection…. our plan is to create the Commission of Street Blocks, with targets to be met for each house and each street, so that people will correctly dispose of waste…. It will be the largest social mobilisation system of Belo Horizonte, hopes Apolo Lisboa. (Hoje em Dia, 01/08/2004)’.

In this case, there is a type of ‘exogenous’ mobilisation that is characterised by the frequent presence of external agents, ‘calling on people to act in the pursuit of a common purpose, with one interpretation and a shared meaning’ (Toro & Werneck 1997). Thus, social mobilisation may be transformed into an interactive participatory proposal if people participate in joint analyses that result in plans of action, the formation of new local groups and the strengthening of groups already in existence. In this case, mediation is replaced by the self-management of social groups who decide the means by which they will achieve their goals.

Nevertheless, there is potential for active participation in places where the project was present. Leaders showed the desire to deliberate on issues that interested the community. For example, there is a report that refers to the implementation process for a state park and the action of the Manuelzão Project, which reinforced requests to the State Forestry Institute to expedite the process.

Other equally significant agents of social mobilisation, such as the Archdiocese of Belo Horizonte, public managers responsible for waters and green areas, and the State Front for Environmental Sanitation movement and association of municipalities were identified in the reports. Among these agents, the same concerns exist for poor management of water resources throughout the decades and the reflection of degradation in the lives of the communities that reside close to contaminated waterways and rivers. The strategies used included participation in public hearings, a symbolic embracing of relevant areas, hikes and the development of documents and manifestos, which can be observed in the following reports:

‘More than 300,000 people do not have access to sewerage in Belo Horizonte, which is a situation that exposes the residents to diseases that affected people in the last century … the movement of the group [Frente pelo Saneamento Ambiental] is being resumed for the state to implement a sanitation policy (Hoje em Dia, 14/04/2003)’.

Self-mobilisation approaches were not identified in news stories in the category of social mobilisation. Social mobilisation is a typology in which people participate by taking the initiative to change systems and processes independently of external institutions. Therefore, the mediation itself must be the object of analysis and discussion among
those involved in the environmental debate. This reveals that, by adopting the model of Simmons & Birchall (2005), the exogenous promoters have been capable of promoting individual resources, mobilisation and relative exclusion with a desire for change by the participants, which supports the motivating dynamics of the participatory process.

Fourth category: participation and environmental conflicts

Fifty-three news stories were identified in this category. This category is associated with the issues of social rights and unequal appropriation of the land and its resources. Therefore, the meaning of environmental conflict used in the scope of this study is consistent with that proposed by Acselrad (2004b, p. 26), who expressed it as ‘those involving social groups with different methods of appropriation, use and significance of territory, originating when at least one of the groups has the continuity of the social practices of the environment that they develop, threatened by undesirable impacts due to the practices of other groups’. This category is the one that comes closest to the discussion of spontaneous participation and self-mobilisation presented in this article.

For the definition of a case depicted in the reports, such as a case of environmental conflict, this study resorted to the delimitation of some relevant attributes. These conjectures certainly do not constitute a rigid framework for the classification of cases, but they provide a guiding script. Thus, the attributes analysed involve first the definition by one of the agents, such as an environmental matter, commonly encompassing themes such as an environmental problem, environmental impact and nature. Second, the situation should have a collective character expressed by one of the groups involved, even if only expressed by one individual, as long as the action is collectively legitimised. Third, the case should have a historical record and should not be limited to discrete phenomena that may not continue in to the future. This last characteristic was difficult to analyse because of the source of data used, i.e., newspapers, that tend to report current events and most often do not show the historical development of a topic. Methodologically, only when the group of reports was considered was it possible to determine whether the cases repeated themselves and to evaluate the frequency of the repetition. The fourth aspect was the construction of support networks within non-governmental organisations, associations, churches and schools that took steps as a collective group to contact governmental agencies such as the public prosecution service, public environmental agencies or the legislative power. Lastly, the cases should show different ways of approach to the environment, with the activation of different societal projects. This characteristic was not evident because it would require a more in-depth assessment in each of the cases. However, differentiations may begin from the speeches, talks and positions identified in the reports.

One of the most emblematic cases of conflict registered in the reports was that from Lagoa da Pampulha (Pampulha Lake), which is a symbolic and historical environmental locality of Belo Horizonte that was always the exemplar of scenic beauty and elegance in the city. However, the region lost much of its glamour due to pollution, such that it is one of the environmental policy issues of the greatest concern in city. Part of its surroundings is occupied by a high-income population, which gives it political capital and space in the media differentiated for participatory processes.

There were 18 reports about the region, all directly or indirectly related to the degraded state of the ecosystem. The case has lasted many years and there have been countless promises to improve the environment. This is expressed by the various reports, which present different government actions and various investments in the area, for cleaning and environmental recovery, but the environmental conditions are already challenging. Thus, many residents have shown a lack of hope in relation to programmes for and interventions on the lake: ‘We have still not seen an effective consequence that our hopeful eyes can actually see. There are always plans, but the pollution increases every day and the lake dies with every minute’ (Estado de Minas, ‘Reação para salvar a Pampulha’, 21/09/1999).

The relevance of this case can also be highlighted by the many associations and various entities that influence the problem. The movement among agents who belong to a higher economic class dominates because they have a direct interest in this issue. In the debate, the groups with greater political and economic capital stand out; they pressure the authorities to achieve the objectives required for the recovery of the pond:
‘Tired of waiting for effective measures, the residents of the region are joining forces and programming a series of meetings and public acts to save the most beautiful postcard of the city (Estado de Minas, Reação para salvar a Pampulha, 21/09/1999)’.

Another case that is very symbolic of environmental conflict was that regarding a complaint about the bad smell coming from the Arrudas Wastewater Treatment Plant by residents of a neighbourhood in Belo Horizonte. The plant was inaugurated in 2001 by COPASA (Sanitation Company of Minas Gerais). In this case, the clash is evident: the Director of Metropolitan Operations from COPASA denied that the bad smell came from the plant and suggested that it came from the Arrudas stream itself, located close to the neighbourhood. However, a resident emphasises: ‘The Arrudas stream always smelled bad, but I think that after they built the wastewater treatment plant, it became much worse,’ (Hoje em Dia, ‘Calor piora mau cheiro da ETE’, 19/10/2002). The community had a series of demonstrations and contacted the public prosecution service to ask for the closure of the plant. The reports stated that the community was not against the venture and identified the benefits that it provided, but they accused COPASA of technical errors and exposing close to 100,000 people to this impact. The radical character of the demonstrations and the severity of the case show a population that is articulate and that uses various strategies in a situation of conflict. However, the case was suddenly no longer reported in newspapers, which prompts enquiries about the latest developments.

The cases of environmental conflict defined in the scope of this study show how the environmental issues and the problem of environmental sanitation are intrinsically conflicting and related to one another. Whereas some projects significantly change the sanitation and environmental conditions of portions of space, some social groups simultaneously redefine these changes, challenge them and recreate different projects for their territories. In accordance with Simmons & Birchall (2005), they are groups suffering from relative exclusion, which is an important factor for the initiation of the conflict situation. These are, in themselves, spontaneous and non-encouraged participatory movements, in contrast to the participation models advocated by the multilateral agencies in the 1990s, which frequently lacked legitimacy and representation and were asymmetrical, instrumental and depoliticised (Swyngedouw 2005; Castro 2007).

**FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The issues presented here on the topic of participation are intended to widen reflection on a concept that allows different interpretations, depending on the point of view. The concept requires a more informed discussion, so that it is not limited to a slogan or strategy to attract investments, political support and approval of programmes and projects.

It must also be considered that the temporary nature of participation needs to be better understood. The time that the project and programme planners have, for example, is not equivalent to the time that the community has to understand the proposals and suggest alternatives for change to adapt the proposals to their real needs. This lack of comprehension sets back the implementation of participation practices, given that participation demands time frames that often do not correspond to those available for the projects or programmes and that are guided by political, and often, electoral time periods.

In this study, a unique methodological strategy utilised print media to identify, map, interpret and categorise participation in environmental sanitation. Despite the obvious limitations of the source, the authors consider that printed media is a rich material to explore events and participatory processes that, after putting the goals of the printed media in perspective, reach sufficient visibility to attract the attention of the media. The media disseminates these events and processes that have the potential to attract the attention of the public that is not involved in the reported occurrences. In the field of environmental sanitation, the study reveals different categories for the participatory process: from discrete to continuous, from those in which the population is passive and receptive to those in which it assumes leadership and drives the process, from those that fit in the vertical models of externally imposed governance to those that conform to the bottom-up model. Although participation and conflict in the field of environmental sanitation have been considered scarce and incipient, given the
technical historical tradition of the sector, the study revealed that these factors are hidden and even invisible before being incipient. The investigation using print media enabled the unveiling of these important social processes.

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