

## **“Participation”, “negotiated settlement” of conflicts and (neo) extractivism in Brazil: The Serra do Gandarela National Park (Minas Gerais, Brazil)**

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### **1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY**

Over the last 25 years, Latin America has seen the expansion and dissemination of technologies in the area of resolution of environmental conflicts, coming from core countries (Acselrad, H., Bezerra, G., 2010). In Brazil, this course takes place simultaneously with the country's democratization, which promotes the increasing participation of the civil society in the processes of discussion and decision-making. Although apparently abiding by the democratic and the emancipatory perspectives, these experiences of contemporary participation and management contribute to disguising litigation and the very loss of policies (Rancière, J., 2006). They "shift the focus of the actions from 'rights' to 'interests,' bending, therefore, constitutionally vested rights" (Zhourri, A., Valencio, N., 2014, 9) which start being granted out of generousness. Thus, we aim to study how a series of actions called "public participation" works in asymmetric contexts of power of social and business segments, that is, the disputes between the mining sector and environmental conservation.

Based on the struggles with Vale S.A. and the creation of the Serra do Gandarela National Park (PNSG), in the metropolitan area of Belo Horizonte, Minas Gerais (Brazil), this study aims to evaluate the limits of the mechanisms of participation and consensus paradigm in the perspective of (neo) extractivism in five different moments. Data were collected from two fieldworks focused on a better proximity to a study area; the establishment of contacts; and, conduction of 31 semi-structured interviews with local dwellings and technicians. We analyzed the reports of the Public Hearings and Public Consultations in which the use and occupation of an area were announced.

Official and public documents were also examined, such as: Public Hearing Minutes of the Apolo Mining Project; the proposal for the creation of the Gandarela Park submitted by ICMBio, in 2010 and 2013; the minutes of the meetings organized by ICMBio with local communities; Minutes and Documents Synthesis of the Work Group (GT1 and GT2) established by the State Department of Environment and Sustainable Development (SEMAD); the Books of Minutes of Meetings of the Rural

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Community Association of *André do Mato Grande (ACRAMDA)* and surrounding areas; the Books of Minutes of Meetings of the Rural Community Association of *Conceição do Rio Acima* and surrounding areas; and, the Proposal for the Creation of the *Alto Rio São João* Sustainable Development Reserve (RDS), submitted by ACRAMDA.

## 2. MAIN RESULTS

With the intention of resolving territorial conflicts in the region and the "harmonization" of interests, we mobilized several mechanisms of "participation" and techniques of negotiation and mediation (Barbanti, O., 2010). The purpose was to create consensus among the social segments involved and to "redistribute" power and control over territory and natural resources. The adoption of mechanisms and management techniques as well as resolution of conflicts - seeking "conciliation" between conflicting interests and proposals that center on the same area - based on the idea of Sustainable Development spread worldwide in the Report *Our Common Future* (1987). Such model of development, defined as sustainable, hosts a happy union between economy and ecology so as to reach a new age of economic growth. According to Freitas (2014), the ideology of Sustainable Development has become necessary to recover the degree of economic growth achieved in the last decades. The revival of the dominant ideology, that is, of the developmentalist ideology, gave rise to the incorporation of a new discourse "to pair with/embrace even stronger nature within the capitalist production" (Ibid., 2014, 245).

In this global context of redefinition and reconfiguration of the neoliberal project, "civil society" participation mechanisms are disseminated in the management of protected areas, which may affect different degrees of power over the decision-making process as suggested by Pimbert, M. & Pretty, J. (1995).

From the beginning of 2010 up until the end of 2012, several "participation" and "negotiation" opportunities were created, in local, state and national levels, in order to make the proposals feasible for the region and solve environmental conflicts. During these events, the "participation" of the "civil society" got several levels of power over the decision-making process: passive and consultative participation (e.g. in Hearings and Public Consultations) and functional and interactive participation (e.g. in Work Groups and direct Negotiations Round Tables). In the negotiations arenas, the "attitude and the cooperative spirits" between the parties, the "harmonization of interests" and the "consensual settings" became the watchwords to achieve the intended consensus concerning the future of the region.

After two years of exhaustive negotiations, the proposal for the creation of the Serra do Gandarela National Park was at last examined, both technically and legally, by the Ministry of the Environment (MMA) for about a year and was finally modified in order to meet the interests of the mining sector. VALE S.A., in particular, had demanded the exclusion of areas even larger than those recommended by the Work Groups (GT's). The fact is that, despite the fall in the prices of mineral commodities from 2014, the mining companies did not give up on their projects, nor their demands for expansions/increase. After these changes, the proposal was at last submitted by the Ministry of Environment to the President of the Republic, who is responsible for sanctioning the decree creating



federal conservation units (Brazil, 2000). The changes in the design of the park and the redefinition of its boundaries were published in the Official Gazette (DOU) on October 14th, 2014, a day after the creation of the Serra do Gandarela National Park was decreed. As stated in the decree, the park covered an area of 31.2840 hectares, which represents 7,000 hectares less than the original proposal, and still allowed mining activities in the region.

The result of the negotiations, therefore, brought about asymmetrical redistribution of power over territory and resources, exposing social hierarchies in producing and legitimizing relations and position of those involved. This condition demonstrate unequal power relations between the social actors involved, making it impossible to reach a solution for the environmental conflict in Serra do Gandarela. The final decision on which areas to preserve, the establishment of its boundaries and its category is interwoven with a dynamic that stretches far beyond the purely environmental issue, in which "politics, subjects, interests and representations acquire the condition of strategic variables in a set of distinct forces" (Mungai, M., 2008, 161). The idea of progress introduced by the mining industry can no longer be a categorical imperative which coaxes contentment with insignificant distribution of the exploration/exhaustion of both natural and human resources.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

Throughout the analyses of the projects under discussion for the Serra do Gandarela and the different ranges of "participation," management and negotiations utilized for the "resolution of conflicts," it became evident that there are inequalities - economical, symbolic and political - in the social sectors involved. As we have discussed, the "participation" of the "civil society" has reached different degrees of power over the decision-making process: passive and consultative participation (e.g., Public Hearings and Consultations), and functional and interactive (e.g., Work Groups and Direct Negotiation roundtables).

Despite the multiple mechanisms of participation and the different degrees of power in the decision-making they present, the "broad social participation" has proven to be merely bureaucratic, metaphorical and incapable of deterring or rendering unfeasible any economic project. The creation of Serra do Gandarela National Park, as well as other studies (*Rede Brasileira de Justiça Ambiental*, 2009; Mungai, M., 2008; Santos, A. et al., 2017) show that these participation mechanisms function rather more to legitimize matters socially and politically than to actually ensure effective participation of the affected groups. The studies reveal a distortion of the mechanisms of political participation consolidated in the post-dictatorial period, because, instead of endorsing the effective participation of the groups, they operate as "bureaucratic devices to neutralize conflicts" (Acselrad, H., 2017).

In addition, as we have shown, the negotiated settlement of environmental conflicts involved social subjects occupying distinct positions in the class structure and whose territorial and environmental demands are equally dissimilar. Thus, the territorial demands of the most "powerful" actors, from the economic and political point of view, were privileged to the detriment of the subjects classified as more "fragile," in this case, the local communities. The arrangements regarding the distribution



of power over the territory and natural resources clearly prioritized big businesses and economic growth at the expense of reproductions of livelihoods of the local communities and biodiversity. This unequal redistribution also contributes to increase social/political vulnerability of local families and enhances the historical process of concentration of land and income, of private ownership, which are issues held dear to the Brazilian large landholding structure.

The discussions herein clearly refer to a turnaround from the rights and concessions. They differentiate rights that have been historically and collectively conquered as concessions, as they are commonly individual, temporary and partial. Those who grant them, as enterprises, have the prerogative to withdraw whenever they deem it necessary. It appears that the understanding of rights as concessions derive from a history of submission and domination - when any initiative on the part of the dominants represents an extraordinary advance for those who would only have access to lesser crumbs. So, the inversion between rights and concessions rather slows down and block the emergence of a broader democratic society founded on the creation, recognition, guarantee and consolidation of rights (Chauí, M., 1994).

Finally, we note that the articulation of the terms participation, negotiated resolution of conflicts, (neo) extractivism and environmental protected areas requires a wider number of levels of analysis and study given its complexity and the existence of social interests/conflicts/visions of the world. Such articulation surely deserves a better apprehension and understanding, taking into consideration its contradictions and determinations in face of the pressures it involves.

