

# Empowerment through participation: assessing the voices of leaders from recycling cooperatives in São Paulo, Brazil

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**Abstract** This paper describes the findings of a project assessment on empowerment and leadership development of recyclers (*catadores*), recorded after the third year of the *Participatory Sustainable Waste Management* project (PSWM), a University Partnership initiative implemented in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, Brazil. In March 2008, video-taped, structured, open-ended interviews were conducted with leaders from recycling cooperatives and associations in the region, who had participated in the project's capacity-building activities, initiated in 2005. Throughout in-depth interviews, individuals were also asked to produce a timeline diagram highlighting the events that have contributed or hindered their personal development and empowerment within the context of inclusive waste management (*coleta seletiva solidária*). The interviews revealed the significance of: (i) the organization and mobilization of the recyclers movement (*Movimento dos Catadores de Materiais Recicláveis*), (ii) specific events that have empowered or disempowered the recyclers, and (iii) inclusive public policies in waste management as well as community outreach strategies to overcome stigma and marginalization. The personal histories focused on the successions of events and processes supported by the PSWM project until March 2008, which include the development of a collective commercialization network, a pilot experience with a micro-credit scheme for working capital of the coops, participation in meetings,

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seminars, and conferences, among others. The analysis contributes to the development of a greater understanding of capacity-building processes and helps identify 'target indicators' of personal empowerment, civic engagement, and citizenship building.

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## **Introduction: empowering citizenship through participation**

International development programs are slowly moving from centralized top-down forms of planning to bottom-up, participatory and community-based strategies (Salmon, 2007; Roche, 2008). It is assumed that through this shift local citizens are capable of collective action that can result in such significant development outcomes as improvements in quality of life, protection of resources, and the reduction in social exclusion and inequality (Gutberlet, 2009). Empowerment and social inclusion are closely linked dimensions of the process of social change. Although empowerment focuses on the individual level, social inclusion addresses the institutional or systems level. 'Social inclusion is the removal of institutional barriers and enhancement of incentives (through good policies) to increase the access of poor men and women and other excluded groups to assets and development opportunities' (Bennet, 2002, p. 23). Like the social mobilization aspect of empowerment, social inclusion seeks to provide agency to exclude individuals and to change the overall system within which the needs of the poor are to be satisfied. Empowerment has a contested and varied nature, translating into both power over others and power to do something individually or collectively for oneself or for others. In the context of community development, it can also encompass the power to exert pressure on external public and private sector institutions, for example, to improve the quality of life (Saegaert, 2006). Nevertheless, empowerment can reiterate the strengthening of these agendas in which the voices of the more powerful speak much louder than others.

Enabling poor people to remove the barriers that prevent them from accessing new livelihood opportunities is crucial for poverty reduction and a central motivation for empowerment strategies. Without empowered citizens who can speak out and influence the behavior of institutions that determine their access to services and livelihood resources, institutions will not be inclusive and accountable to the interests of all socioeconomic groups. Active participation is crucial, therefore, to achieve good governance and to ensure that there is accountability in the delivery of public services. Helping individuals gain access to information and develop an increased understanding of the societal issues that impact their lives are fundamental tools for community change (Foster-Fishman *et al.*, 2005).

Empowerment has been defined in various ways. The literature reiterates that it is essential for people to take control of the development process (Hjorth, 2003), meaning a tangible increase in social influence or political power (Corbett and Keller, 2004) through developing confidence in their own capacities (Wallerstein, 2006). The concept can be described as ‘an intentional ongoing process centered in the local community, involving mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation, through which people lacking an equal share of valued resources gain greater access to and control over those resources’ (Speer *et al.*, 2001, p. 716). It is the enhancement of assets and capabilities of individuals and groups to engage, influence, and hold accountable the institutions that affect them (Bennet, 2002). At the individual level, empowering processes are those that provide opportunities for people to work with others, learn decision-making skills, and manage resources (Schulz *et al.*, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000). Empowerment is often used to characterize approaches based on social mobilization. It is not a static, one time experience but rather a continuous process. Bennet (2002) describes this process as ‘mobilization empowerment’, which builds on the skills, information, and linkages needed for livelihood empowerment. ‘Mobilization empowerment can lead to new self-understanding, solidarity, and capacity for collective action’ (p. 23). A key element in most social mobilization approaches is helping poor and socially excluded individuals realize the power they gain from collective action.

Most definitions are linked to the quality of one’s life and focus on related issues of gaining power and control over decisions and resources (Sidorenko, 2006). Some of the key elements of empowerment are inclusion and participation, accountability and local organizational capacity. Empowerment, participation, and leadership are closely interrelated (Laverack, 2001). Within the social policy context, these two notions are indivisible; empowering people means promoting opportunities for their participation, whereas participation requires empowering people to enable them to exercise this human right (Sidorenko, 2006). In Walton and Smulovitz’s (2003) *Evaluating Empowerment*, empowerment outcomes can influence either policy choices or the implementation of agreed activities, and a range of other factors ‘including economic, political, and institutional decision-making and on the extent to which poorer groups are empowered; and feedback loops, that may be positive, for example, when economic outcomes for the poor feeding back into their capacity to make choices and influence government and other actors, or negative, when changes lead to resistance from other groups or heightened conflict’ (p. 11).

Participatory approaches to development aim to produce empowering outcomes, including increased community capacities, broader stakeholder participation in decision-making (Lennie, 2005), and promoting social

justice (Gutberlet, 2008). There is substantial literature reinforcing theories of empowerment through participation, particularly as an approach to address inequalities and exclusion (Itzhaky and York, 2000; Sreberny, 2006). These approaches provide a platform to reduce and circumvent power relations typical of development research, and provide a voice for marginalized populations by facilitating their involvement in programs. Through this process of power redistribution, opportunities emerge to build participants' capacity to transform their lives and thus provide a means to facilitate empowerment.

#### *Empowerment as a dynamic process*

There are various components and elements in the process of empowerment. Malhotra *et al.* (2002) highlight the unique definitional elements of the concept of empowerment as both a process from one state to another, and agency – in which participants must be significant actors in the process of change that is being described or measured. From this perspective, empowerment can be described as an intervening process where the individuals involved are the agents of change, rather than merely the recipients. Empowerment is not an 'end state' that can be achieved in a systematic way. Essentially, it is about challenging the existing power structures and enabling new political and economic relations to emerge. The literature often points to the positive outcomes of the empowerment processes, but rarely does it critically reflect on the problems associated with generating empowerment. Conflict, for example, as discussed further in the project findings, can sometimes be a needed step in the empowerment process. It is therefore necessary to critically engage in the understanding that the process of empowerment is political and by nature non-linear, often controversial, and subjective. Empowerment can be 'generated' inasmuch as it can be potentially reversible, it is an unstable and unpredictable process that makes it problematic both practically and theoretically.

Despite the increasing use of empowerment in monitoring and evaluation, this can be a controversial approach. Malhotra *et al.* (2002) identify a lack of consistent and adequate data on measurements of empowerment for most countries. In Miller and Campbell's (2006) review on empirical evaluation, they highlight concerns about empowerment evaluation including conceptual ambiguity, a lack of unanimity in practice, and limited documented evidence of success. They point to concerns in its 'theoretical underdevelopment' and that 'empowerment evaluation shares enough in common with other approaches to blur its conceptually unique stance on evaluation' (p. 298). A major difficulty in measuring empowerment is that the attributes that signify empowerment in one context often have different meanings elsewhere. The variation in the importance of

empowerment across contexts poses a challenge in terms of both consistency and comparability in measurement schemes (Narayan, 2005).

### **Case study: empowerment and leadership among recyclers in São Paulo, Brazil**

In April 2008, research was conducted to study empowerment and capacity building supported by the *Participatory Sustainable Waste Management* (PSWM) project, a 6-year *University Partnership in Collaboration and Development* endeavor, initiated in 2005 and funded by the *Canadian International Development Agency*. In this project, capacity building happens through praxis rather than classroom experience. The recyclers, leaders from the cooperatives, and members of the PSWM project participate in regular project management council meetings, where knowledge is generated and circulated, conflicts are discussed and tackled, and project activities are defined, planned, and deliberated. The nature of the capacity building applied here is hands-on, experiential, and based on Paulo Freires' popular education principles and methodology (Freire 1970).

The PSWM project began in 2005 as a collaboration between the University of Victoria in Canada and the university *Fundação Santo André* (FSA), in Brazil, and expanded in 2008, to include a new partnership with the University of São Paulo. The scope of the project is expanding and currently involves 30 recycling groups in six different municipalities within the metropolitan region of São Paulo. In general, recycling associations or cooperatives have little agency and often continue to be marginalized. The long-term objectives of the PSWM are: (i) to improve the social and economic conditions for the informal organized recyclers, (ii) to contribute to environmental sustainability, (iii) to build the capacity among the participants in the PSWM project to implement participative management towards the creation of more sustainable and equitable public policies on solid waste management, and (iv) to stimulate knowledge mobilization and exchange on technical aspects of the collection of recyclables, organization of recycling cooperatives and associations, collective commercialization, participative resource management, and overall research activities related to waste management. These objectives were developed collectively with the recyclers, therefore reducing the potential for the emergence of conflicting agendas among the project participants. The project approach is participatory and transparent, and decisions are made through the deliberative Management Council, in which the recyclers partake together with members from the government and the university.

The project evolved from long-term, trustful research collaborations among the principal investigators, who had previously worked in environmental

awareness or research on livelihoods issues with recycling groups in the region. Therefore, all project members were familiar with social, political, cultural, and economic prevailing conditions of informal and organized recyclers.

The current research was conducted with project participants who are leaders in recycling cooperatives in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, Brazil.<sup>1</sup> Our objective was to document experiences and perspectives of the recyclers to understand and evaluate their perception of empowerment and the role capacity-building initiatives can play in enhancing empowerment.

### *Methodological approach*

The methodology for this research is drawn from a *humanistic* 'action-oriented' (Krumer-Nevo 2009) perspective where the reflection and action spiral leads to knowledge generation and social change. We employ *qualitative* methods for data collection (McKendrick, 1999) and are grounded in *feminist* theories (Cope, 2002; Kindon, 2003; Ackerly *et al.*, 2006). A feminist stance in geography emancipates and empowers the marginalized by challenging what is considered valid knowledge and who is considered the knower (Sprague, 2005; Moss, 2006). Qualitative methods are employed to interpret the findings as context-bound and partial, rather than detached and universal (Bryman *et al.*, 2009). With the goal of bringing about change, feminist scholarship has explored and sought to understand the unequal gender hierarchies, as well as other hierarchies of power, and their effects on the subordination of women and other disempowered people through reflexive knowledge building.

This research addresses methodological issues of participation as the potential to be transformative within the concept of citizenship, empowerment, and collective action. Cook and Fonow (1990) highlight using participatory research strategies that emphasize a dialectic between the researcher and researched throughout the project; rather than the conventional assumption that maintaining a gap produces more valid knowledge. Gutberlet (2008) acknowledges Participatory Research (PR) as recognizing the knowledge and experience of local communities, and in revealing community assets and hindrances. Furthermore, she argues that participants 'can be empowered by the ability of voicing concerns and actively contributing to the generation of new knowledge' (p. 660) ... as well as 'recognizing their political power as agent of transformation of unjust social and economic relations' (p. 661).

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<sup>1</sup> This research was accepted for human participant research under the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (reference # 06-05-129b).

*Participants and site description*

The research sample consisted of seven leaders from different recycling cooperatives in the metropolitan region of São Paulo, Brazil. The participants for the in-depth interviews were mostly women, reflective of the larger number of women working in organized waste management initiatives in Brazil, and who often are in leadership roles. All the participants actively took part in the PSWM project and are also members of the *National Recyclers Movement* (MNCR). We are aware that, over the course of the project, close relationships between project participants have been built, which may affect the light shed on the project's activities. Participants were recruited for this study at a PSWM working management committee meeting, where a discussion was held on the methods and purpose of this study. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary, and the participants were able to withdraw at any time. The sample size represented the existing variety in terms of organization, infrastructure, group size, and geographic location.

Seven semi-structured, video-taped interviews were conducted in April 2008, over a 1-week period, at the following recycling cooperatives: *Cooperpires*, *Coopercose*, *Refazendo*, *CRUFFI*, *Vida Limpa*, and *FENIX*. The interviews lasted between 30 and 90 min. To overcome a language barrier, the researcher was accompanied by one PSWM member during the video interviews. The interview questions were discussed with the participants prior to video recording to clarify any questions and to ensure they were comfortable with the content.

Semi-structured, open-ended questions inquired into:

- their role and participation in the project;
- their impact on local policy and decision-making;
- their empowerment through project activities and key moments they felt empowered/disempowered;
- their barriers to empowerment;
- how project activities have affected networking among the recyclers (e.g. in their groups, with the MNCR or collective commercialization initiative) and the relationship with the general public.

All participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to give their insights about the project experience. The use of video taping proved to be a powerful and practical medium for capturing their responses but also as a tool to: (i) empower the speaker by providing a space to capture their experience, with their own words and valuing their knowledge and (ii) integrate part of the oral histories in a later video production on inclusive waste management. Program evaluation is a form of applied research. Its main purpose is to observe, capture, analyze, and feed back into a

program. Video interviews allow for detailed content and discourse analysis that can contribute to knowledge generation and verification of theoretical propositions.

The in-depth interviews were translated from Portuguese to English, transcribed and theme coded to highlight extremes and commonalities within the data, and to illustrate diversity among the individual experiences of the participants. The relation between variables and patterns in the data were constructed through content analysis. Using a coding frame, a series of patterns were identified, and the data were re-analyzed until all the themes were exhausted.

#### *Diagramming: empowerment timelines*

As an approach to evaluate changes in individual perceptions of empowerment over time, and particularly since the inception of the project, participants were asked to draw a timeline and record key moments or processes that sparked or diminished their empowerment. Information was recorded with four of the seven participants providing a temporal scale. Besides the individual empowerment experience, we also registered collective empowerment, through partaking in the regional and national recyclers' movement and in other organizations. Since the beginning of the PSWM project, the number of women in leadership roles has increased significantly; for example, until recently the national recyclers' movement was spearheaded mainly by men and only recently more women have taken up key roles within the movement.

According to [Schulz \*et al.\* \(1995\)](#) and [Zimmerman \(2000\)](#), once individuals are empowered and are aware and therefore able to analyze what must change, they possess a sense of control and feel capable of acting, and engage in participatory behaviors ([Malhotra \*et al.\*, 2002](#)). An empowered person perceives their personal agency and acts in ways that reflect this perception. [Malhotra \*et al.\* \(2002\)](#) recommend capturing a process by following it across at least two points in time. Depending on the dimension of empowerment, the context, and the type of social, economic, or policy catalyst, women may become empowered in some aspects of their lives in a relatively short period of time (e.g. in our case, an increased number of women in leadership positions at the coop level), whereas other changes may evolve over decades (e.g. changes pertaining to the household level; [Malhotra \*et al.\*, 2002](#)).

### **Project findings: empowerment and leadership through PR**

Participation in decision-making can improve one's life choices and assets and has been shown to have empowering individual and community



outcomes. When a marginalized group takes some form of social action to improve its power position, this can be thought of as a collective quality. This reinforces the importance of participation and collective identity for empowerment to flourish in a community. From the perspectives of the leaders that participated in this research, the most significant empowerment process that emerged from participating in the PSWM project was the strengthening of *leadership skills*, *collective autonomy*, and *organization* of the leaders and recycling groups, and *political participation* between the leaders of the cooperatives and local government. Barriers to empowerment are also discussed in the project findings.

#### *Strengthening leadership skills*

Goodman *et al.* (1998) point to the important role leaders play in the development of small groups and organizations which are part of the continuum of community empowerment. Laverack (2001) also stresses the importance of capacity training as an integral component for the success of good leadership, which in turn can influence empowerment. Narayan (2005) points to the transformational power of knowledge where 'with capacity-building, access to information, and increased accountability in both state and civil society institutions, both groups and individuals can become empowered' (p. 76). For many of the leaders, participating in the PSWM project activities and capacity development provided an important avenue to strengthening their leadership skills, knowledge, and confidence. Through the project... 'we have power to know our rights and we are learning. The project helps because we are fragile, and when we are in meetings we perceive that there are many other problems out there and not just our problems' (Francisca M. L. Araujo, *Refazendo, São Bernardo do Campo*). For Zilda, 'the project has made us more advised, it gives us hope, motivation, power and that's why we are always after capacity building. Because we are much more instructed and prepared to continue the struggle' (Zilda Felix, *CRUFFI, São Paulo*).

Luzia comments, 'I never studied to be a leader, but the situation here makes it necessary for me to be a leader. So, the project helps me understand that I am not the owner of the cooperative, that we are all doing it together. Because today I am the leader and I have the obligation to teach other people to be leaders. I have been leader for 4 years. There is no one particular moment that I became leader, it was a process' (Luzia Maria Honorato, *Coopercose, São Paulo*). For Luzia, participatory elements such as recognizing the collective ownership of the project and the cooperative that she leads has contributed to her capacities to teach others by sharing responsibility and knowledge. This has also given her a broader understanding of many of the possibilities of being a leader such as the inclusion of the community, both to participate in the selective waste collection program but also those

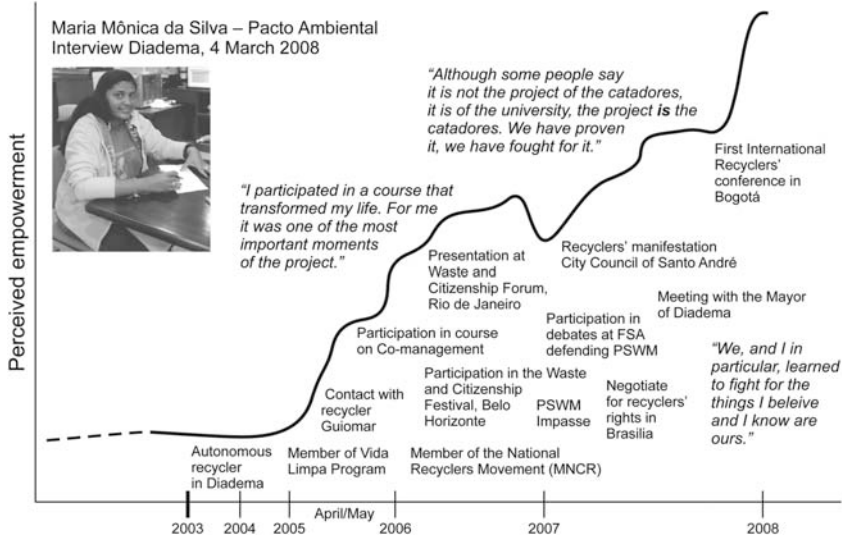


Figure 1 Perceived empowerment timeline, Monica, Vida Limpa

that can be included . . . 'How can we include all the catadores, the one with carts, the ones without carts and the ones not working? How can we involve the catadores who have problems with alcohol, drugs? How do we minimize the questions and improve the relationships? So, I think the project helps to stimulate these ideas. The problems aren't micro they are macro. The population doesn't know how to work with solid waste. It is difficult to collectively have consensus for growth. The project helps give us give direction for solutions' (Luzia, *Cooperco*). Through participation in project activities and knowledge building, Luzia, Zilda, and Francisca recognize their 'agency' as an evolving and strengthening component that can contribute to improve the situation of their cooperative and also the larger community.

For Monica, participating in a course on public policy and selective waste collection, where government leaders were invited to collaborate, was a key empowering moment. 'For me, it was the best thing that happened in the project. Because I changed a lot, I became a different person, totally! This was the key point in my leadership development. At this course, there were people from non-governmental organization's and government agencies; these were people I never thought I would be sitting beside. I participated in a course that transformed my life. For me, it was one of the most important moments of the project' (Maria Monica da Silva, *Vida Limpa, Diadema*). Figure 1 illustrates the key moments where Monica felt empowered since her participation in the PSWM project.

Between 2006 and 2007, she has experienced empowering outcomes from participating in the capacity-building activities including the 'Curso

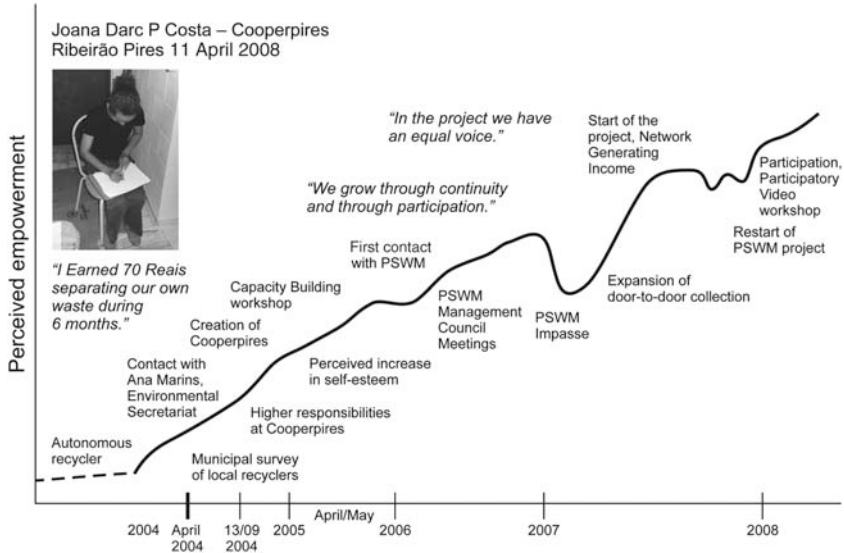


Figure 2 Perceived empowerment timeline, Joana, Cooperpires

participativo' (participatory course to which she refers to in the quote above), 'Forum Lixo e Cidadania' (Forum on Citizenship and Waste), and the 'MNC' (Municipal meeting). Similarly Joana, a leader from Cooperpires, has expressed similar empowering outcomes from participating in the capacity-building courses (Figure 2).

Since the inception of the project in 2005, Joana has experienced increased confidence and strengthening in her leadership skills. Her participation in the 'Rede Gerando Renda' initiative, where her cooperative networked in a collective commercialization scheme, was particularly empowering for expanding the resources and capacity of her group.

Capacity building and knowledge exchange can contribute significantly to motivating individuals to take action for the public good, an important element in psychological empowerment (Zimmerman and Rappaport, 1988). The leaders highlighted in this section all make reference to the empowering process of knowledge and capacity development through participating in project activities as 'we have power to know our rights' (Francisca, Refazendo), '...gives us hope, motivation, power' (Zilda, CRUFFI), and 'a course that transformed my life' (Monica, Vida Limpá).

#### Collective identity and organization

Organizational structures are crucial for the way in which people come together and socialize to address common concerns and problems. The organization and mobilization of a community also depend on the sense

of cohesion among its members and a concern for community issues. Laverack (2001) distinguishes two dimensions of community empowerment: the organizational dimension of community groups; and the social dimension of a sense of belonging, and connectedness. Research analyzing collective action often focuses on the nature of social relationships and how those relationships affect development outcomes, also referred to as *social capital*. Putnam (1993) sees social capital as 'features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated action' (p. 167). Francisca describes the importance of collective organization as 'for me, it is fundamental the organization of the recyclers, because there are many catadores, they sell their material at lunch to be able to eat for dinner . . . so in those meetings learning about the reality of other companions that contributed to strengthen ourselves because we learned we are not alone' (Francisca Cosma Rabelo, FENIX, São Paulo).

Laverack (2001) claims that it is most empowering when the community carries out the identification of problems, solutions, and actions to resolve the problems. He refers to this as *Problem Assessment*. Due to internal conflicting political interests, institutional barriers were put up by the university administration at Fundação Universitária Santo André (FSA), and the PSWM project was officially halted between 2007 and 2008. The top-down decisions made by the university administration generated sufficient momentum among project participants and particularly the recyclers to initiate a campaign uncovering the unfair treatment of the PSWM project at that university. Despite the impediment of using the approved funding during this time period, project activities continued due to the significant level of commitment of the project leaders and supporters involved in PSWM. Fortunately, PSWM received additional funding from other agencies, which was not channeled through FSA, and kept the project alive. For many of the project participants, particularly the management committee members, this was a very distressing period, marked by political contest, manifestations and a process of negotiation and building alliances. The then FSA president was opposed to the idea of empowering recyclers, of having them access the university ground in capacity-building activities and ultimately having them participate in regional waste management policy making (which is a highly political endeavor). At the end, faculty members and students at FSA and individual representatives from the local government in Santo Andre, as well as other grassroots leaders provided sufficient support to reverse the situation, provoking a significant change in the university administration. This unprecedented political struggle elicited positive empowering outcomes for the leading recyclers, such as strengthening their collective identity and the will to continue

with the project; besides uncovering a corruption scandal at FSA with the impeachment of the university president. Luzia highlights in her interview how the halting of the project activities sparked her leadership skills: 'one moment in particular is when we spoke to the President at the University when the project was being held. This moment reinforced my leadership because I saw that I was apart of a larger movement' (*Luzia, Cooper cose*). Similar for Monica, the process of this struggle reinforced the collective identity and strength of the project and movement. 'Although some people say it is not the project of the cataodres, it is of the University, the project is of the catadores. We have proven it, we fought for it! Although the university president thought he was the owner of the project and that he could do whatever he wanted, we proved that is not the case and that the catadores will fight for it. Then I think that was the moment of empowerment. Real empowerment. We hit the front of it and we fought for it. That was one of the strongest moments in the project for all of us catadores' (*Monica, Vida Limp a*). Linking groups and networks to form partnerships to address community problems can serve as catalysts for community empowerment in which community members can take action to affect political change (*Fawcett et al., 1995*). For Zilda, the collective struggle of the project being halted created strength among the groups: 'instead of taking away the engagement we became more engaged and we will go after our rights' (*Zilda, CRUFFI*). These institutional struggles, freezing project funding for almost 1 year, ignited a collective identity among the catadores groups.

The ability of community groups to mobilize or gain access to resources is an important factor towards empowerment. *Narayan (2005)* sees resources 'not as a feature of empowerment per se, but as enabling factors that can foster an empowerment process' (p. 72). Two significant collective resources were identified in PSWM project: the micro-credit fund and the collective commercialization scheme. Usually, informal and organized recyclers sell their collected material to middlemen, where they receive only a fraction of the value (*Gutberlet, 2008*). By selling materials collectively, in larger quantities, recycling groups are able to directly commercialize the products to the recycling industries, providing them with a higher income. 'Collective commercialization is a means of increasing the recyclers' earnings and empowering them through praxis' (*Gutberlet, 2009*, p. 738).

Francisca highlights the important collective identity facilitated through the collective commercialization program in the following statement. 'Lots of cooperatives don't survive 1 year because it is very difficult to gather so much material, to organize the collective commercialization, but our organization, which was supported by the project, which helped to learn about each other and the public policies, it made us perceive that

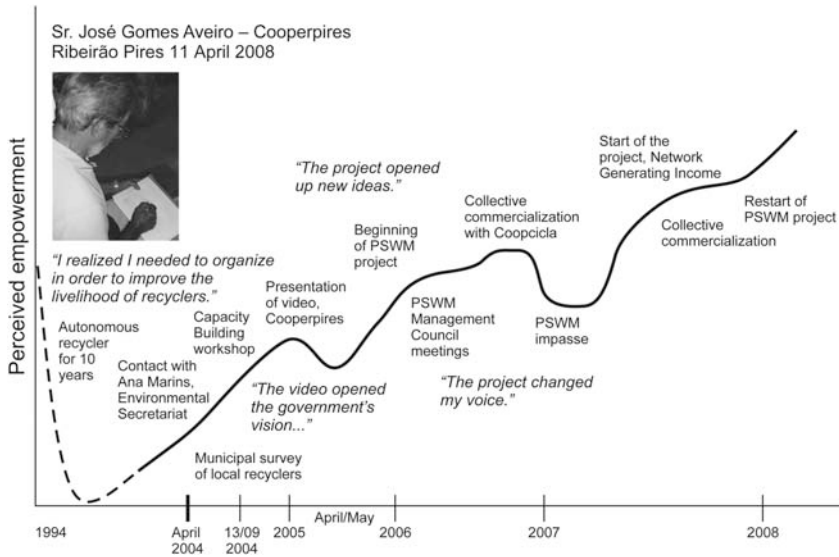


Figure 3 Perceived empowerment timeline, Sr. José, Cooperpires

we are not alone and together we are stronger to work as a network, in a group, and to learn about the reality of others was just so relevant' (*Francisca, FENIX*). For Monica, the project meetings 'identified the necessity to get together and create a network... We are now commercializing more material and we are more powerful to commercialize' (*Monica, Vida Limpa*). Sr. José, leader of the cooperative Cooperpires, highlighted the 'Projeta Rede Gerando Renda', the collective commercialization initiative, as a key empowering moment for him during the project (Figure 3). The collective commercialization program fosters psychological empowerment via a sense of greater autonomy as a result of the organization of the catadores and their capacity to receive increased wages. The experience also evidences how economic empowerment can also enable deeper power relations. Through collective commercialization, for example, the recyclers are able to sell some of their material directly to the industry and have hence eliminated dependency relations with some of the middlemen. Although our research was not aimed to register the shifts in power relations that might have happened also at the household level, some women commented that their individual empowerment has affected their homes as well. Capacity building and the collective activity at the coop have enabled some of the women to be more assertive and to disputing unjust relations at home.

Gutberlet (2009) discusses the fundamental networking abilities of cooperatives and associations in building solidarity and social capital.

Through organized programs, such as the micro-credit and collective commercialization, trust, reciprocity, and mutual interest become powerful agents of collective identity and can facilitate empowering outcomes for those involved.

### *Political participation*

At an organizational level, empowering processes are those in which responsibility and leadership are shared and opportunities to participate in decision-making are made available (Zimmerman, 2000). When individuals are given the space to capture aspects of agency, or to act on change, within political decision-making, empowerment can be a powerful outcome. Malhotra *et al.* (2002) point to measures such as decision-making, control, and choice as some of the most effective elements at capturing the process of empowerment since they are closest to measuring agency. Rozilda highlights the significance in her participation in the decision-making process: 'The fact that we had those project meetings where we discussed public policies we learned and gained more arguments so the project spoke about social inclusion, our rights and responsibilities, capacity-building, so all this, all that we have acquired through the project has helped us have a stronger voice, reaching the government and departments, but also the community' (Rozilda, FENIX, São Paulo). Through open and inclusive dialog with government, project participants exercise agency through dialog and by holding their government accountable for their interests.

Individuals and groups use assets and capabilities to empower themselves to be able to influence institutions and negotiate a better deal in terms of the flow of assets and opportunities dispensed by these institutions. 'The visit of the project leaders at the meeting with the mayors strengthened us together with the local government [during the FSA impasse]... out of that moment emerged these new policies, that moment was key for the local government to embrace our cause of recycling because before we did not have that support' (Francisca, FENIX). Participatory project management facilitates a space where government, and community interests can be exchanged in a collaborative and transparent way. Through these approaches, socio-economic and environmental struggles can be tackled through meaningful, inclusive, and sustainable policies while stimulating citizenship and democratic governance. Monica recognizes this space of exchange as a necessary partnership in deliberation 'I think the municipalities are nothing without the catadores and we are nothing without the government. The catadores need the municipality, and the Brazil-Canada project provides that opportunity for the two to



come together, to discuss their problems and find a solution' (*Monica, Vida Limpa*).

#### *Barriers to empowerment*

As much as it enabled empowering outcomes through collective struggles of project members, the halting of the project by the university administration demonstrated the lack of political will and persistent power relations maintaining the status quo of social inequality. Lack of participation and representation of less privileged and excluded social segments are some of the most visible barriers to empowerment. Zilda describes this moment as 'humiliating': 'I remember well the struggle for the Brazil-Canada [PSWM] project, the manifestations we made at the municipality in Santo Andre and in other places as well. We were very puzzled with the fact that the university president in SA did not accept our work. I don't know if nowadays he does, but he did not accept our work and we struggled for our right and we tried to reach him in his office, we were humiliated... and we were humiliated because we are catadores. There are many people from the project and they are very supportive but in other places we are humiliated. When we wanted to talk to the president they said that they did not know them and would not speak to them however they knew them very well' (*Zilda, CRUFFI*).

Another major barrier to empowerment identified in this research is the lack of community support and understanding of the collective recycling program. For Luzia 'it is important for me to participate but for others they don't understand because they don't have the information and they don't see what I see. So it is a problem because the community is not prepared for this larger process; the contribution to the environment and the generation of income' (*Luzia, Cooperco*). One of the objectives of the PSWM project is increasing public awareness about the benefits from inclusive waste management. The project also encourages responsible consumption and diminishing the generation of waste, towards *zero waste*. Without the support from the wider community, implementing local development strategies can be difficult, and ineffective.

Another barrier is the lack of government support highlighted by some of the leaders in their municipalities. 'We have no support from the district mayor. We make a very good work for our city for our people but we are not recognized. It is a hidden work and the authorities only come to see us when they need us in times of elections, nothing else' (*Zilda, CRUFFI*). Without appropriate support and recognition from government, cooperatives struggle with inadequate infrastructure, below standard working conditions, and lack of representation in public policies. In few municipalities, such as Diadema, the government supports the recycling cooperatives by



supplying infrastructure, transportation, and an honorable wage for their work. Despite the challenges that still exist, this partnership has been more successful in supporting selective waste collection, improving the working conditions and income generation of catadores, and dignifying their valuable contribution as a service to the community. It is clear, through feedback from the project participants, that government support is vital for locally owned, inclusive selective waste collection, and recycling schemes to become viable.

## Conclusions

The goal of the participatory approach is to ensure that project participants have an opportunity to not only express their views but also to be the catalyst for improving their quality of life. Described as ‘agency’ (Kabeer, 2001), this occurs when the participants are the significant actors in the process of change that is being measured. The experiences highlighted in this project demonstrate how agency, facilitated through participatory processes, is a core element of empowerment. A range of enabling factors, such as having safe spaces for deliberation, being able to access and process information and knowledge, or being recognized as knowledge generator help the individual realize their agency. Through participatory project management, individuals have the opportunity to expand their leadership skills, engage in collective organization and participate in transparent and democratic decision-making that holds accountable the institutions that affect their lives. These qualities are all components of the empowerment process.

The PSWM research and community outreach activities build on strong, collaborative partnerships among researchers, government agents, participants from non-governmental institutions, and in particular with leaders from the recycling cooperative movement. The experiences illustrated in this project demonstrate the powerful individual, community, and government benefits of participatory project management. In particular, these approaches encourage participation where in many traditional development scenarios this is lacking or non-existent. Participatory project management contributes to individual and community empowerment, generates safe spaces for collaborative and inclusive policy development, and stimulates citizenship building.

Some of the major findings from this research conclude:

- the organization of recyclers strengthens the notion of solidarity and collaboration among them, which fosters the autonomy of cooperatives;
- capacity building and leadership development enhances knowledge and skills to empower, which promotes change;

- network building with government is important to guarantee the participation in policy design and implementation and endorses deliberative democracy;
- awareness of the wider neighborhood is necessary to promote recycling initiatives and to improve working conditions, which reassures the recyclers of the important role they play in sustainable community building.

The paper demonstrates the close link between empowerment and participatory praxis. To advance democratic and deliberative processes, citizens need to be empowered and have access to spaces that are safe and from where they can be heard. Empowerment is an individually experienced process, stimulated through capacity development and the continuous participation in discussion and deliberative fora. It is not a static state, but rather a process that can develop into different directions. At times, for example, a person becomes less empowered, due to constricting personal circumstances that influence the state of empowerment, as could be highlighted by the empowerment timeline collected through in-depth interviews. Individuals have perceived growth as well as stagnation within this process.

The interviewees indicated several structural barriers affecting their empowerment, including access to education, information, and professional training allowing them to further develop their skills and income generation opportunities. For the recyclers, it was utmost important to have a regular meeting space where they felt confident to participate and voice their concerns, ideas, and suggestions. Specific capacity-building activities, like seminars, workshops, or field trips for the development of leadership skills, communication tools, management expertise, or more specific technical abilities were also considered fundamental to their personal growth. Although this research was not conducted to look at gender disparities, the researchers did notice that women, in particular, seemed to be most empowered from the capacity-building activities. Since this was not part of the empirical methodology, it is purely a qualitative observation and would require further investigation.

For community outreach projects, it is crucial to be able to evaluate the participants' impact in terms of empowerment. The methods we used to assess these impacts are qualitative by nature. They depend on self-evaluation and description of personal experiences, and they rely on the assessment of activities and outcomes, often on a medium to long term. Finally, empowerment timelines represent timely snapshots, from which we can learn about what makes people feel empowered.

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