

Aspects of the urban environment in Brazil

Introductory note

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- 1 Cities have always played a key role in the international debate concerning environmental issues. Since the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (also known as the 1992 Rio “Earth” Summit), environmental questions have become pivotal to urban sustainable planning and management worldwide (United Nations, 1992). For example, Agenda 21 establishes nations’ commitment to the development of urban projects and programs for the conservation and/or restoration of natural resources. The Rio principles including the implementation of Agenda 21 were strongly reaffirmed at the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD): held in Johannesburg (United Nations, 2002).
- 2 As cities become more complex, due to the development of socioeconomic activities, they tend to cause negative impacts on the environment. The historical growth of cities, with its demographic concentration, industrial production and built-up environments, has caused widespread pollution, natural resource depletion, and loss of biodiversity. International researches have agreed that the risk factors for socio-environmental vulnerability are directly related to environmental problems (e.g. floods, soil erosion, deforestation, water pollution, etc.). Although governments are expected to promote economic development and to protect environmental quality, economic development interests tend to have priority on the agenda of most developing countries. In Brazil, cities suffer from government’s difficulty in implementing sound policies on water and sanitation as well as in providing decent and affordable housing for low income groups, in order to prevent the growth of slums, and avoid environmental disasters and human fatalities in vulnerable areas. Overall, 81.25% of the nearly 170 million people in the country live in urban areas and 41% of the 5,560 municipalities have registered environmental problems and disasters, which substantially lowered citizens’ quality of life and even caused human fatalities (IBGE, 2005). Assessment of environmental issues is therefore central to Brazilian cities’ governance.

- 3 The authors who have contributed to this special topic issue focus on environmental, social and political aspects of urban development in Brazil. In their article, Rigitano and Barbassa show that citizen participation and consultation have become pivotal to the development of urban master plans. In their case study of social participation in the processes involved in master plan development in the City of Bauru, State of São Paulo, they give an account of the historical evolution of the legal framework guiding community participation in these processes. The authors argue that, in reality, even though social participation has increased, municipal authorities' attitude towards citizen involvement in decision-making processes is not very favourable. Costa et al. take an even greater environmental perspective on the restoration of urban rivers in the metropolitan periphery of Rio de Janeiro. The authors discuss the interrelations between environmental structure, urban occupation and social local interests. They explain in their case study of the Iguaçú Project located in the Baixada Fluminense region how environmental projects aimed at preventing risks (e.g. flooding events) offer opportunities to create new urban waterfronts, while considering rivers as valuable and meaningful features to restructure urban space. The authors examine the many ways in which community participation can be an effective strategy in the environmental restoration of riverside parks. Finally, Silva considers environmental justice in Rio de Janeiro by assessing social inequalities particularly located in spaces of exclusion within the Jacarepaguá Lowland Watershed. The paper concludes that public efforts to reduce environmental injustice are still very limited, whereas they are very effective in collaborating with private interests, especially in the real estate market.
- 4 Collectively, these articles argue that to address environmental issues in Brazilian cities, public authorities must express their true commitment in sharing power with a variety of stakeholders while trying to respond to the complexity of rapidly growing urban development.

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