

BOOK REVIEW

Paths For Building Strong Participatory Institutions in Latin America**By Carla Almeida¹**<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5555-739X>¹Universidade Estadual de Maringá, Social Science Department, Maringá/PR, Brazil(MAYKA, Lindsay. *Building Participatory Institutions in Latin America*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019)

The Participatory Institutions (IPs) are expected to reduce the inequalities by including new players and demands from marginalized groups into the decision processes. Yet, what are the paths that lead the IPs to become strong enough to fulfill that role? That is the central question that Lindsay Mayka (2019) seeks to answer in her book based on a comparative study of the health and social assistance councils of Brazil and the planning and health councils of Colombia, which the Federal government also created and regulated and which the subnational spheres carried out. She concluded that the paths that the Brazilian councils followed bequeathed strong institutions, unlike the one that the Colombians followed. From that 'transnational and inter-sectorial' comparative analysis, she takes away the theoretical unfoldings that would explain to other contexts the determinant factors of the IP institutionalization processes. That is a unique contribution to such study agenda, which experiences the challenge to produce knowledge with greater generalization power.

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Correspondence: carlaalm@uol.com.br

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Her work is inserted in the debate on institutional strength, which represented an inflection in the institutionalist studies that, until then, focused on the institutional design as the determinant variable for political results. On the other hand, the idea of institutional strength provides importance to the broader conditions on which the effectiveness and the stability of the institutions themselves might be dependent (LEVITSKY and MURILLO, 2013, 2009). It is based on that benchmark that Mayka (2019) dialogues with the bibliography about IPs, thus providing a precious contribution to the Brazilian studies, mainly taking into consideration the current political changes that make the future of those institutions in Brazil uncertain. After three decades of expansion, what we ask today is to what extent they gathered strength to remain active in a new scenario in which those in power not only express clear preferences for centralized power arrangements, but they also systematically disqualify the democratic institutions as mediators between State and society. When it qualifies and conceptualize the different dimensions, the determinant factors and the possible results of the institutionalization processes of participation, Mayka's work (2019) provides important inputs for us to scrutinize the institutional strength of the Brazilian IPs based on that scenario.

Her analysis focuses on the dynamics involved in the long and difficult process of building institutions. It is based on that focus that she sets a critical dialogue with the studies that view the institutions as finished projects and that define institutional strength in a restricted manner as enforcement and durability, not observing the crucial role of social players in the institutionalization dynamics. According to Mayka's definition (2019), strong IPs are those with strong institutional design and high level of institutionalization. Taking up the institutional design as an important variable, she shows that the precise definition of formal prerogatives, authority level and action mechanisms of the IPs are important for their strength. The institutionalization level has to do with the extent to which social and state players value the institutions as 'locus' of representation of interests and with the extent to which they have formal coverage and uniformity. According to Mayka (2019), institutional strength, defined by those two dimensions, results from a process instead of being something enclosed in a creative act.

The Brazilian and the Colombian councils would be appropriate for a comparative study directed towards identifying the determinant factors of strong IPs because in both countries they would have 'common starting points', but they followed different paths. Mayka (2019) says that in both countries the political regimes faced legitimacy crises in the 1970's and 1980's resulting from the high levels of social and political exclusion. In Brazil, the military dictatorship faced a crisis that resulted from the exacerbation of the social inequalities, from the economic downturn and from the reaction to the State violence. Colombia underwent a restrictive democracy that did not stop the violence and the security crisis resulting from the increase in economic power of the drug cartels and from the strength of the guerilla movements. Even though the quality of their regimes was different from one another, according to Mayka (2019), in both countries the elites reached a consensus that the crisis that was taking place at that time should be faced with institutional reforms that included the adoption of IPs. Since the 1980's, both countries witnessed participation experiences as part of an effort to solve social and political exclusion problems. Such initiatives were crucial to consolidate the participative policies, which were consecrated in the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 and in the Colombian Constitution of 1991.

By analyzing the different paths that followed that 'shared origin', she reached those two independent variables that might have determined the success of the institutionalization of the Brazilian IPs as compared to the Colombian ones. The first one has to do with the scope proposed for the sectorial reforms. With a detailed analysis of the spaces, moments and players that marked the path of each council, she concluded that broader sectorial reforms determine the strengthening of the IPs. When the reform forecasts a change of paradigm in the coverage, funding modes and decision-taking, it shakes the dynamics of the sectorial policy. That generates instabilities and, thus, opportunities for key players, although unpredicted and unlikely, to start seeing the IPs as spaces to defend their interests. When she analyses the process of elaboration and implementation of SUS (Unified Social Assistance System) and SUAS (Single Welfare System), Mayka (2019) shows that the broad sectorial reforms implied in those regulations created incentives for the emergence of coalitions that favored the institutional strengthening of the councils. On the other hand,

the creation of the planning councils in Colombia aimed, in a more restricted manner, to democratize decision-taking. In that case, only the players committed to the participation could be mobilized to defend them.

The second independent variable has to do with the crucial role of the policy entrepreneurs to form the pro-IP coalitions. They convince the other players of their benefits, forging indispensable allies and solving the problems pertaining to the coordination of the collective action. While the broad sectorial reforms created the conditions to strengthen the health and welfare councils in Brazil, without the action of those agents to seize the opportunities, the result would not have been the same. They mobilize the necessary resources to strengthen the IPs, associating them to the general destination of the reforms and fostering the support network to defend them. The Colombian health councils, even though inserted within a proposal of broad sectorial reform, did not rely on the policy entrepreneurs to defend them. The team that implemented the reforms had a technocratic view of the changes and, therefore, it did not defend the councils as the decision-taking 'locus'.

While the Brazilian councils relied on both determinant factors, the Colombians relied on only one of them in each case. According to Mayka (2019), her work offers three contributions to the studies about IPs, to which I address some critical considerations. First of all, she argues that the cases studied would show that state capacity is not a variable that explains the strengthening of the IPs, emphasizing that both countries show similar performances in those kinds of indicators and that the successful councils in Brazil took place in areas of policies that are not bureaucratic efficiency concentrations. Even though it might matter to a certain extent, state capacity is supposedly not the determinant cause for the institutional strengthening. However, I think it is necessary to register the recurrent studies that certify to what extent the great inequalities of resources of the Brazilian municipalities, reflected in regional inequalities, offer barriers for the innovations in the public policies to reach reasonably uniform results throughout the country. Studies about the decentralization policies carried out in the country in the 1990's are exemplary in that direction, such as those by Arretche (1999) and Souza (2002).

That dimension does not stand out in Mayka's analysis (2019) because she focuses on processes, players and national institutions. However, in Brazil,

approximately 70% of the 5570 municipalities are small and it's in this set that difficulties related to the state capacities are intensified. According to several studies about IPs, including that of Silva (2018) and of Almeida, Carlos e Silva (2016), the variations both in the configuration and in the results of the participation are strongly related to the size of the municipality. Thus, because of their impacts and of the proportion they have in a country as big as Brazil, the inequalities in terms of state capacities deserve to stand out in proposals aiming to innovate and democratize the public policies, as well as in its evaluation.

According to Mayka (2019), a second contribution of her work was to show that the party strategies did not determine the divergent paths of the councils that were studied and, therefore, they are not, supposedly, variables that explain their institutional strength. She recalls that, in the 1990's, a period of expansions of the Brazilian councils, the governments that were in place in the country at the time did not support IPs. When the Workers' Party (PT), which admittedly supported the IPs, reached the presidency, they were already present in dozens of policies. In Colombia, the rulers provided negligible support to the councils, but the planning ones reached minimal levels of institutional strengthening, while those pertaining to health were a complete failure in this regard. Thus, even though literature emphasizes the role of 'political desire' to explain the results divergent from the participation, the cases studied eventually showed that such variable is not determinant.

As a third contribution, Mayka (2019) argues that the cases showed that a pre-existing civic engagement is not an explanatory variable for the strength of the IPs, as previous studies about the theme claim. According to her, even though her analysis reinforces the importance of the civil society in the creation of IPs as a crucial part of the players that make up the coalitions to defend them, the mere pre-existence of engaged social players did not establish the path followed by the studied councils.

It is necessary to make some considerations pertaining to those two last issues. Even though Mayka's analysis (2019) of the process of creation and implementation of the councils is detailed and has been built according to the dialogue with the reference Brazilian literature, it does not take into account some basic elements that provide specificity to the processes that took place in each

country. Thus, it equals the contexts of Brazil and Colombia in the 1980's regarding the origins of the IPs. Let's see.

For both, she emphasizes the importance of the emergence of new social players that go against the excluding regimes in place in the 1980. However, I believe that she does not acknowledge enough both the extent and the strength that characterized the Brazilian social movements of that time in its defense of the participation and of the party resources present in that context that helped connect sectorial reforms to a broader reform project for the democratization of the State and of the society. With unique characteristics in Latin America, Brazil witnessed the emergence of PT in 1980, a left wing party that channeled the energy of much of the popular movements and of the professionals and activists coming from the middle classes involved in the social struggles of that time. PT not only contributed to weave the political ties among those different players, but it also served as a channel of institutional expression organically tied to the struggles of that period. Therefore, the creation of PT strengthened in some parts of the Brazilian civil society the political bet in reformation projects directed towards the institutions in the 1980's and 1990's, in which both the participation and the broadening of the rights became crucial elements. In that process, the sectorial reforms themselves emerged as an integral part of a broader reforming utopia of democratization. Thus, even though it was not in the government in that period, the presence of PT and the relationship that it established with the new political voices that emerged, differentiated in a qualitative manner the democratization process that Brazil carried out at that time from the tensions that the Colombian restrictive democracy faced.

The social movements, as well as the professionals and bureaucrats involved with the elaboration of both SUS and SUAS, made up a broader political field, weaved in the pro-democracy struggles, which reflected the articulation capacity of the Brazilian progressive forces to put under dispute in the Constituent Assembly demands for the democratization of the relations between the society and the State and for the increase of rights. That's why, while the participation of the society in the public policies became a consensus in several countries in the 1990's, also as a result of the guidelines of the international bodies, in Brazil such demand was not totally captured by a technocratic reform. As Mayka (2019) herself emphasizes, the demands for 'participation' and 'political decentralization' could be

articulated in the reforms proposed by SUS and SUAS, which favored the increase of the coalition pro-IPs in Brazil. Unlike Colombia, ‘participation’ and ‘decentralization’ were separated and a technical decentralization project guided the project to reform health in the country, which restricted the power of the councils. However, Mayka (2019) does not acknowledge the importance, for that result variation, of the existence of a broader reform project directed towards the institutions in Brazil, which transcended the sectorial reforms, anchored by a left wing party created as a result of the new voices and players of the civil society that emerged in the 1980’s.

The consideration of the nature of the interactions established between social and political players, or between civil and political society, seems to me, thus, important to understand the path of the councils that Mayka (2019) studied and, therefore, the process of building strong IPs. Taking the Brazilian case as reference, the consideration and the qualification of those interactions helps understand the connections between both independent variables of the model that she proposes to explain how the IPs become institutionally strong: the kind of reform at stake and the presence and role of the policy entrepreneurs in building the coalitions.

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