I. ABSTRACT

Oded Grajew, Founder and General Coordinator of Rede Nossa São Paulo (or “Our Sao Paulo” Network) provided an overview of RNSP and briefly explained some initiatives undertaken recently. Vonda Brown, Senior Program Officer at Open Society Foundations praised the Network’s initiatives and highlighted the challenges for the future. Horacio Terraza, Emerging and Sustainable Cities Initiative Coordinator for Infrastructure and Environment at the Inter-American Development Bank shared his experience of working on a similar initiative and offered some insights on drivers of success. These comments were followed by a lively discussion.

II. OUR SAO PAULO NETWORK –OBJECTIVES AND CURRENT INITIATIVES

“We are trying to bring more power to the people because this is the way to a better country” (Oded Grajew). The Our Sao Paulo Network was launched in May 2007 to promote initiatives that can help build sustainable cities through citizen engagement and participatory democracy. The objective of the Network is to create tools that enable citizens to set an agenda and goals for successive governments and hold them accountable to these goals.

The Network currently comprises 700 organizations that span a wide spectrum of stakeholders including business, academia, civil society and citizen groups. The fact that so many organizations from all walks of political and social life are part of the network provides the Network with significant political power through connections with individuals in different fields. If it is hard to bring so many different actors to work for the common goal, it is also immensely beneficial.
The basic working unit of the Network is the Working Group; the Network is made of 13 thematic and interdisciplinary working groups. These groups are made up of representatives of various organizations and citizens. The groups are free to plan the actions from the perspective of each thematic area.

The Network’s activities include selecting key quality of life indicators for the region broken down up to the district level. These indicators are meant to provide benchmark to civil society, governments, businesses and various organizations to monitor progress over time. This information fills a huge gap not only for the citizens but also for the government officials who usually do not have this information readily available. This database is available on the Internet, where various indicators can be compared across districts and themes, and over time. These indicators were constructed after substantial public consultations in which almost 36000 individuals participated, and are constantly updated.

Most importantly, the Network conducts annual surveys of population’s perception of quality and access of different public services in all administrative regions of the city. In addition to the quantitative numbers, these perceptions provide a valuable resource for understanding the real situation of public service delivery. The Network has also created space for citizen participation and encourages the incorporation of new leaders, businesses and citizen organizations in the Network.

In addition to these activities, the Network has been able to achieve a number of significant successes. One of the most prominent ones is the Amendment to the Organic Law of the Municipality (Goals Plan Law). The Law suggested by RNSP and adopted by the municipality of Sao Paulo in 2008 aims to encourage the contestants of the mayoral race to present a detailed government program. The database of indicators developed by the Network is used to identify the goals and also to provide the baseline of these plans. Therefore, the Goals Plan Law helps integrate election campaign’s promises with government’s performances. Several cities in Brazil have already approved similar amendments.

Another successful initiative is the Sustainable Cities Program that Sao Paulo Network created along with two other organizations. The objective of this Program is to provide tools to various stakeholders to develop Brazilian cities in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner. The Program, in addition to providing a platform for stakeholders to discuss these issues, also maintains a database of indicators that span 12 themes including governance, equity, justice and education among others.

The Program also plays an important role in mobilizing relevant stakeholders. For example, it campaigns for the mayoral candidates to adopt the platform and assume the commitments of the Program. It also campaigns for the voters to value the candidates who are committed to the Sustainable Cities Program. If and when they are elected, the Mayors are encouraged to do a Goal’s Plan for an open process of accountability. More than 650 candidates have signed the program and more than eighty directories of political parties in the local, state and federal levels have also joined the Program. Currently, there are 242 cities that have signed the letter of commitment with the Platform.

The Program has also published a number of guides that help stakeholders – mayors as well as civil society groups – to develop, adopt and monitor a development plan that promotes economic, social and environmental sustainability. In addition, the Program also gives out annual awards to the mayors who fulfill their commitment to the program based on several criteria (such as transparency).
The Network has also played an active role in stimulating the creation and participation in municipal councils. Since the beginning of 2013, 3 new councils were created in the city by direct action of the Network. In addition Network members are actively involved in a number of other councils including the City Council of Sao Paulo and Municipal Council of Urban Policy.

The first initiative described by Almudena took place in 3 municipalities and 5 communities in Yucatan. These communities decided to engage with the government through FISM. Communities were unaware of how much their municipalities were getting from the central government for social infrastructure funds. They did not know how the public officials prioritized various social infrastructure projects taking place in their communities. CCS’s campaign, also called ‘Caravan,’ focused on promoting technical capacity and political skills of the citizens, in partnership with grass root organizations. CCS argued that this campaign had a crucial role to play in the following developments. Public works proposed by communities in 4 out of 5 communities were authorized by the city council and 3 municipal commissaries requested intervention to promote participatory process in their communities. CCS argued that the campaign also had spillover effect as it inspired 2 community based groups to work on citizen control.

The second initiative took place in the northern part of Mexico in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua and is called Plan Estrategico de Juarez (PEJ). In this initiative, the community chose to scrutinize the municipal development plan and city council plans. The campaign focused on improving technical capacity of the citizen groups, and mobilization of different urban groups around a common interest. The organization carried out litigation, direct work with municipal officials and outreach including through media, social media and theater. According to CCS, the impacts of these activities have been widespread. It led to increased attendance of city council members. Federal court decided to allow PEJ President to attend city council sessions. In addition, class action suit to open city council sessions to citizens is currently in process. In general, CCS argues, this initiative increased citizens’ awareness about the workings of municipal government.

III. CHALLENGES AND MOVING FORWARD

During the discussion, a number of challenges were highlighted for the current and future work of the Network. Horacio Terraza – the discussant – based on his experience with Emerging and Sustainable Cities Initiative at Inter-American Development Bank raised the challenge of stimulating participation from civil society. He suggested that sometimes it is difficult to find civil society organizations or citizens’ groups who are able and willing to take a lead in these initiatives. In some cities, while such groups are prominent and can be easily identified, in other cities it is much more complicated. Oded Grajew agreed and presented a number of reasons why this could be so. Citizens are afraid to monitor the government as there is fear of reprisal from the government. Also, sometimes individuals or groups have their own specific interests that may be detrimental to the movement. Therefore, finding a credible partner to represent citizens remains a complicated task. However, it was noted that the presence of strong business association proved to be useful in finding such credible representation. In cities where there was a strong and well-meaning business association that is willing to spend money, the movement turned out to be much more successful than in cities where such associations were not present.
Another challenge in Network’s work is the need and difficulty of including public officials. While most of Network’s activities involve citizens, it is equally crucial to include public officials in the equation. Officials’ behavior is also complicated because of lines of internal accountabilities within the government departments that may, at times, be perverted. Nevertheless, the Network has successfully tried to involve government officials by having dialogues with them, for example, in the use of indicators and improving their capacities to deal with various issues of public service delivery.

In addition, the participants highlighted the difficulty of proving that the information provided through indicators and other databases created by the Network have actually resulted in the change of behavior. At the moment, anecdotal evidence strongly suggests that to be the case. For example, a lot more electoral candidates are willing and keen to base their election campaign on the data provided by the Network; they use this data to identify the problems and find solutions. The fact that citizens are responding to such campaigns positively also indicate the effectiveness of these initiatives.

A more general issue of relationship between participatory and representative democracy was also discussed. Some participants suggested that there seems to be a dilemma between participatory (or popular) democracy and representative democracy where one negates or substitute the other. Oded Grajew, however, suggested that representative democracy gives space to participatory democracy. Both complement each other; it is not one or the other.

Last but not the least, the issue of neutrality of participation was brought up – do all citizens get a chance to participate? Is the participation equal among various groups? Are interests of certain groups hijacked by others? While this remains a central problem in social accountability approach, the Network tries to ensure the equality of participation by disseminating information far and wide and by encouraging all groups to participate, and also by keeping a watch on the process.