Environmental and Democratic Participation: An Essay on Dam-Affected Communities in Southern Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the democratic participation of social movements in the Uruguay River Basin, with a specific focus on the Movement of Dam-Affected People (MAB). The research investigates the intersection of social movements, democratization, and water resource management, emphasizing the importance of citizen participation in decision-making processes and the defense of the rights of those affected by public policies. The objective is to analyze how the MAB promotes democracy and social justice by resisting the power dynamics of large projects and neoliberal policies in the Uruguay River Basin. This study employs a qualitative and interpretative methodology, based on an extensive literature and document review, supplemented by participant observation. Semi-structured interviews and document analysis are also utilized for data collection and thematic interpretation, aiming to understand distinct ideas, objects, and people within their specific contexts. The study concludes that democratic participation and the mobilization of social movements are fundamental to the effectiveness of public policies and the promotion of a more just and equitable society. MAB, in particular, exemplifies the struggle for rights and resistance against neoliberal policies, highlighting the importance of solidarity and collective action.

Keywords: Democratic Participation, Environment, Social Movements, Hydroelectric Dams, Southern Brazil

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the democratic participation of social movements in water resource management in the Uruguay River Basin, exploring how these movements, especially the MAB, challenge hegemonic power dynamics and fight for social and environmental justice. The general objective of this work is to analyze how the MAB promotes democracy and social justice by resisting the power dynamics of large projects and neoliberal policies in the Uruguay River Basin.

The first topic addresses the relationship between democratization, social movements, and social participation, highlighting how these elements are interconnected and fundamental to strengthening democracy and promoting social justice. The second topic examines social movements in Brazil, exploring their transformations over time, internal organization, action strategies, and challenges faced, such as criminalization and repression. The third topic discusses the struggle of the MAB, analyzing its claims, mobilization strategies, social and environmental impacts of dams, and resistance against neoliberal policies and the privatization of the electricity sector.

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretative approach, using qualitative data analysis to explore the

characteristics of ideas, objects, and people. The methodology is based on an extensive literature and document review, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews for data collection. The southern region of Brazil, consisting of the states of Paraná, Santa Catarina, and Rio Grande do Sul, is characterized by rich cultural and geographical diversity.

Santa Catarina, in particular, is notable for its mountainous landscapes, fertile valleys, and extensive hydrographic network. In the western part of the state, the Uruguay River Basin plays a central role, formed by important rivers such as the Chapecó River, the Peperiguaçu River, and the Uruguay River itself, one of the main watercourses in the region.

The colonization of the southern region was marked by a significant influx of European immigrants, mainly Italians, Germans, and Poles, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. These groups established an agrarian socio-economic base, with small family-owned properties cultivating fertile lands and developing a subsistence economy. This cultural and social heritage is still visible in the community organization and values of the local population.

In recent decades, the western region of Santa Catarina has undergone significant economic transformations, driven by the modernization of agriculture and the intensive implementation of infrastructure projects such as hydroelectric dams. The construction of dams has been a relevant public policy for Brazil's energy development, but it has also generated controversy due to its environmental and social impacts. The western part of Santa Catarina has become a focal point for these projects, resulting in the displacement of communities and modification of local ecosystems.

The installation of these hydroelectric plants brought a series of socio-economic challenges. The expropriation of land and the resettlement of affected families have generated conflicts, leading to the emergence of social movements such as the MAB. This movement plays a crucial role in articulating and defending the rights of affected populations, promoting social and environmental justice in the region.

The research and analysis of information is carried out in multiple phases, including a thematic content analysis proposed by Bardin (1977), Richardson (1999), Dalfovo, Lana, and Silveira (2008) and Mezzaroba and Monteiro (2009), Minayo (2014), Gil (2010).

Thus, this study aims to analyze the democratic participation of these social movements in the Uruguay River Basin. By exploring the historical, cultural, and socio-economic context of the region, the study seeks to understand how these groups resist hegemonic power dynamics and promote a more inclusive and sustainable development model.

DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL POLICIES

Brazil faces serious challenges related to poverty, land concentration, and ineffective public policies. Poverty in the country is exacerbated by income inequality and lack of access to basic services, such as education and health, which limit opportunities for social mobility. Land concentration, where large areas of land are in the hands of a few, perpetuates inequality and makes it difficult for small farmers to access the resources they need to support their families and communities.

Furthermore, ineffective public policies often fail to address these issues effectively, and are often poorly implemented or discontinued due to political instability and the government's lack of commitment to promoting inclusive structural reforms. These conditions combine to create a vicious cycle of poverty and social exclusion that is difficult to break without significant changes in government and social approaches.

The relationship between democratization, social movements, and social participation is interlinked and

crucial for strengthening democracy. Democratization is the process by which political and social structures become more inclusive and representative, promoting rights and freedoms for all citizens and expanding social participation (Santos, 2006; Avritzer, 2017).

Social participation is integral to the concept of democratization, involving the active inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes and political, social, and cultural activities. It is fundamental for the effectiveness of democratic processes, ensuring that political decisions reflect popular interests and needs (Santos, 2006; Avritzer, 2017).

Social movements, organized groups within society, are also part of this democratization process and aim to expand social participation. They work for social, political, and economic changes, defending specific rights or collective causes and play a vital role in advocating for reforms and promoting social justice (Santos, 2006; Avritzer, 2017). Social movements are one of the main mechanisms through which social participation manifests, driving democratization by demanding greater equity, justice, and representativeness in political and social institutions (Bidé, 2015).

Thus, democracy goes beyond elections and institutions, requiring active and inclusive citizen participation. It should reflect a diversity of interests and values, promoting social justice and equality. It is essential to recognize individuals and groups as autonomous subjects, as they are fundamental to building a truly democratic and just society (Touraine, 1996).

In the debate about the organization and functioning of democracy, it is important to revisit three major perspectives of political theories: Classical Elitist Theory, Participatory Democracy, and Deliberative Democracy, each offering a unique perspective on the nature of citizen participation, the role of institutions, and the legitimacy of democratic power.

The Classical Elitist Theory emphasizes the inevitability of elite influence in the political and administrative process. Its main thinkers, Max Weber and Robert Michels, argue that the complexity of modern societies leads to increased bureaucratization and technical specialization, resulting in the centralization of power in a small elite (Hass, 2006).

In democracy, the formation of parties transforms direct democracy processes into a hierarchical system. Large social formations move away from direct democracy due to task complexity and the need for continuity, with small dominant groups having advantages in communication and quick action, sharing power. Bureaucratization can conflict with the principles of democracy, which aim to reduce bureaucratic power in favor of public opinion and elected representatives (Weber, 1999).

Social control is an important aspect of social functioning and governance, significantly affecting social and economic structures. Democratic governance faces sustainability challenges, partly due to economic inequality and demands on time and resources. Moreover, forms of domination evolve and intertwine with economic structures, reflecting changes in power dynamics and social control (Weber, 1999).

Participatory Democracy emphasizes direct citizen participation in political decision-making processes. This theory opposes the elitist model, arguing that active citizen participation is essential for true democracy. Participatory Democracy challenges Classical Elitist Theory by proposing that greater inclusion and direct participation can overcome power centralization in an elite (Hass, 2006).

Contemporary theory fails to reconsider the classic concept of democracy, neglecting the relevance of political socialization and the cultivation of a "democratic character." It argues that the theory does not investigate the connection between participation and political efficacy, suggesting that participation can strengthen democratic efficacy and stability. A viable modern democratic theory must integrate the idea of a

participatory society where individuals have genuine opportunities for engagement in various political spheres (Pateman, 1992).

Schumpeter introduces the concept of "creative destruction," where economic innovation destroys and creates new structures, renewing capitalism. He argues that capitalist success leads to complexity and bureaucracy, potentially undermining its efficiency and dynamism. Additionally, he highlights the relationship between democracy and leadership, suggesting that democratic efficiency often depends on charismatic leadership, and capitalism is resilient and adaptable (Schumpeter, 1961).

Marx and Engels criticized the false representations of men about themselves and reality, arguing that ideas and dogmas dominate society and oppress individuals. They mocked the new philosophy of the Young Hegelians, asserting that it perpetuates these illusions and reflects Germany's misery, comparing it to a struggle against non-existent things (Marx, 2007).

Marx and Engels criticized the notion of a "neutral" liberal state and a "free" market economy, asserting that in an industrial capitalist society, the state cannot be neutral nor the economy truly free. A liberal democratic state could not fulfill its promises of equal security and justice due to class society's realities (Held, 1987).

Both authors emphasized the importance of deconstructing idealistic notions in favor of socio-historical pragmatism. They did not dismiss the possibility of change but stressed that such transformations must be grounded in the concrete reality of society. This perspective is evident as we still attempt to understand democracy through abstract models rather than basing our understanding on the concrete and real conditions of the "lifeworld" (Lebenswelt).

Deliberative Democracy focuses on public deliberation as a means to achieve legitimate democratic decisions. This model emphasizes dialogue and consensus achieved through rational argument exchange. It opposes elitist theory by arguing that deliberation provides a legitimate basis for democracy and, in a way, complements the participatory perspective by reinforcing the importance of the quality and nature of the participatory process (Hass, 2006).

When combined, these theories offer a broader view of the diverse ways to understand and improve democracy, allowing for a critical analysis of power dynamics, social participation, and the recognition of each approach's limitations and potential. The relative success in implementing democratic mechanisms in councils relates to the need for prior decentralization actions, elimination of clientelist mechanisms (horizontal loyalty networks/spaces of representation), and articulation of decision-making centers. These factors help increase social capital and social control, basic elements for effective public policies (Boschi, 1999).

In addition to the challenges of participation and democratization, we face issues related to international institutions and nations seeking to expand their influence and impose their own sociopolitical projects globally. An example is the Washington Consensus in the 1990s, symbolizing the triumph of neoliberal capitalism. Currently, in a new context of intensifying conflicts between the West and the East, these dynamics continue to manifest.

Theologians like Gustavo Gutierrez and Leonardo Boff integrated the Christian faith with social actions in environments of poverty and oppression in Latin America[2]. Gutierrez combined theology and Marxist philosophy, while the Church in Brazil fought for land reform and rural rights. From the 1980s, part of the Church aligned with progressivism, seeking to promote social change despite resistance from conservative sectors and variations in the relationship with military regimes (Iokoi, 1990).

The Movement of Dam-Affected People, originating from peasant roots, also addresses the problem of

deterritorialization. In this context, they face capital in the struggle for territory control, seeking to maintain partial control that promotes solidarity and resistance, aiming to disrupt land concentration and the capitalist structure (Fabrini, 2011).

Rural social movements, such as the MST[3], have historically fought for better living and working conditions, often in conflict with government policies prioritizing agribusiness. The pressure from these movements forced the state to acknowledge their demands and develop specific public policies. The tensions resulted in significant advances in public policies (Santos, 2017).

Social movements in Brazil have a long history and trajectory. In 1975, Liberation Theology emerged, valuing popular religiosity and confronting reality with religious promises, diluting hierarchy, and proposing a new Catholic Church. Meanwhile, on the left, a movement of self-criticism sought to root revolutionary strategies in the masses. Social movements united middle and lower-class workers around a common democratic social project (Sader, 1988).

International development projects primarily aim to help poor rural populations adapt to changes rather than encouraging resistance, denoting peasant opposition to the advance of neoliberal capitalism threatening their livelihoods. Simultaneously, the capitalist development process in Latin America transforms agrarian societies into industrial systems, emphasizing the initial accumulation of capital and the conversion of peasants into proletarians (Veltmeyer, 2010).

After the 1990s reforms, the mediation of interests by the Brazilian government weakened, increasing civil society's participation in legislation. Traditional societal structures adapted by creating special negotiation and debate spaces. From 2003, a process observed in Brazil and throughout Latin America saw the strengthening of the state, government intervention, and social inclusion in public debates (Boschi & Gaitán, 2008; Boschi, 2016).

The emergence of counter-hegemonic movements reveals the quest for emancipation in Brazilian society, a growing awareness of inequalities, a certain level of democratic maturity, and changes in power dynamics. It also indicates the failure of traditional institutions to meet the population's demands and drives significant social transformations.

The discourse of social actors reveals subtle differences, with social movements perceiving conflict as a response to state inefficacy and economic interests. In contrast, the state and economic agents present themselves as defenders of transparency and neutrality, treating conflicts as externalities of the socioeconomic process, ignoring their structural causes.

Examining political participation in democratic Brazil reveals a significant increase in civil society's presence in public policies and the expansion of participatory institutions such as councils and participatory budgets. The analysis distinguishes the evolution of political representation, differentiating traditional parliamentary representation from the new representation of civil society, which advocates for the inclusion of social actors in public policy deliberations and should be privileged from a relational perspective (Avritzer, 2007; Avritzer, 2013).

The construction of hydroelectric dams causes the flooding of large areas and the displacement of populations, leading to severe socio-environmental conflicts. These projects are part of public infrastructure policies reflecting complex and contradictory power correlations. The resettlement modalities include monetary compensation, credit letters, and resettlement. The main motivation for those affected in mobilizations is mutual solidarity among the affected communities (Pase et al., 2016).

Organizational structure plays an important role in local governance structures. Public policy

decentralization processes can reduce or exacerbate regional differences, depending on the power of local governance structures. Furthermore, the participation of diverse actors is important for policy effectiveness, although issues related to representation and equity may arise (Cortes, 2005).

The effectiveness of institutions significantly depends on the nature of elites and local history, and these factors are crucial for public policy effectiveness and economic development. A combination of institutional autonomy and inclusion is essential to maximize public action capacity and promote social development (Abu-El-Haj, 1999).

Neoliberalism imposes significant barriers to Brazil achieving an effectively egalitarian democracy, reducing democracy to suffrage. Under the unstable and limited neoliberal banner, democracy ends up depending on the policies of the current government, with increasingly recurrent and intense economic crises and rights reductions (Machado et al., 2024).

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN BRAZIL

The interpretation of social movements is affected by transformations in collective actions, analysis paradigms, and economic and political structures, leading to the emergence of new taxonomies lacking a solid theoretical basis. Social movement analysis can be conducted from both internal perspectives, such as discourse, composition, and articulations, and external perspectives, encompassing context, opponents, and allies (Gohn, 1997).

A group's political identity is influenced by the notion of ideology, along with concepts like social struggle and social force, forming a set of motivations. The organization of movements can vary between formal and informal, depending on the group's development stage and internal practices (Gohn, 1997). Equally relevant in the study and understanding of social movements is Game Theory.

Stolz (2023) proposes a general theory using "social games" to analyze social life, describing it as interactions between players and resources mediated by goals, rules, representations, objects, time, and space. Despite criticisms about the complexity of social rules, the theory argues that many games are also complex and ambiguous. The theory allows for the reconstruction of social game models through descriptive-interpretive heuristics, testing mechanisms with explanatory heuristics, and using formal and agent-based modeling (Stolz, 2003).

Social movements emerge as manifestations of collective actions, originating from various struggles and multiple causes. Their central elements include identity, adversaries, allies, bases, leadership, and advisories.

These components are structured around the mobilization process and are supported by a particular worldview. Over the past twenty years, social movements have undergone significant transformations in response to the new global economic situation. They began adapting to this dynamic scenario, organizing negotiations and cooperation based on direct action and constructive debate. These movements have become increasingly formalized, partnering with third-sector organizations and governments (Ferraz, 2019).

In the 1980s and 1990s, social movements worked alongside the Workers' Party, creating clear agendas, leadership, and hierarchies. Linked to the party as an educator and involved in national decisions, movement leaders were placed in trust positions and public participation, occupying councils and administrative government positions (Ferraz, 2019).

A social movement can be defined as a conflictual coalition against an organized social adversary, based on a "cultural mechanism" that guides the struggle between the parties. Its concept of historical subject highlights the social movement as a collective subject in history, intrinsically related to a conception that

may be historical, philosophical, or of other natures (Touraine, 2003).

The movement exists in opposition to these adversaries and their practices (Gohn, 2008), transcending superficial issues such as compensation. The counter-hegemonic debate promoted by the social movement goes much further; at stake is the construction of a more democratic, popular, and socially just national project.

Third-sector organizations and social movements seek to offer civic alternatives, promoting social justice and environmental balance in opposition to the prevailing socio-economic model marked by inequalities and environmental degradation. These movements strive to expand citizenship and value the human aspect, in contrast to sectors that use capital as a tool of domination and control (Herculano, 2000).

Gramsci advocates for a progressive revolutionary approach known as the "war of positions," focusing on building a new hegemony. This strategy differs from the "war of movement" proposed by Marx and Engels, which was more suited to distinct historical contexts (Freitas & Freitas, 2016).

New forms of rural organization value grassroots participation and direct democracy, contrary to authoritarianism and power centralization. These social movements oppose the elitist discourse of progress for progress and construction companies that hide environmental and social costs. These movements strengthen their identity by combating the injustices suffered by populations displaced by large hydroelectric projects (Scherer-Warren, 1993).

In Brazil, social movements often face strong repression, especially from the police, indicating their ability to confront privileged interests in the pursuit of a more just society. This process of criminalization, described as violent and illegal, usually comes from right-wing political groups, seeking to intimidate society and garner middle-class support for a failed political project (Sanson, 2008).

The criminalization process occurs through planning and can be derivative or targeted. Derivative criminalization occurs when pre-existing laws are violated, while targeted criminalization involves creating specific legislation against movements. Besides direct repression, there are also processes of delegitimizing the movement before public opinion (Viana, 2018).

After the 2000s, some sectors and individuals of social and union movements began to support governments, demobilizing in favor of government agendas, leading to a certain distancing from the democratic project. However, this experience led to disillusionment with traditional political structures and promoted learning for these groups (Ferraz, 2019).

Social movements have brought their struggles and debates to social media, especially through feminist collectives, significantly contributing to their members' civic education. Whether inside or outside the digital environment, these movements play a fundamental role in the democratization and social inclusion process in Brazil (Carrer & Giacomazzo, 2020).

Social movements, as collective actions challenging broad forms of social domination, should not be equated with crises or systemic transformations. Touraine emphasizes that these movements have a broader scope than merely protecting specific interests and, in current conditions, assume a more cultural or moral dimension than strictly social (Touraine, 2006).

Social movements in Brazil have been essential for social emancipation, promoting a new political culture based on democracy and collective participation. They decentralize power and avoid formal institutionalization, encouraging self-management and solidarity. This community organization is crucial for

creating new collective identities and building a more just and equal society (Lisboa, 1987).

Comprehensive theories connecting social movements to History or Society are being dismantled and reevaluated, being replaced by cultural and emotional approaches to action, empirically constructed from micro to macro. Recent critiques point to the need for more dynamic and relational models that consider cognitive and emotional mechanisms in collective action (Jasper, 2010).

Pragmatic (Cultural-Historical Activity Theory) and feminist approaches stand out in rethinking collective action through cultural and emotional perspectives. Recent studies emphasize the importance of meanings, intentions, and emotions in social movements, enriching the understanding of internal dynamics and promoting the transition to more modest and action-oriented theories (Jasper, 2010).

In modern capitalism, farmers continue to be small commodity producers, trying to resist neoliberal capitalism, which pressures agricultural products to become cheaper. This leads farmers to become small producers (the rich) or agricultural proletarians (the poorer), as part of the global economic system (Bernstein, 2001).

THE STRUGGLE OF THE MOVEMENT OF DAM-AFFECTED PEOPLE (MAB)

Social movements in the Uruguay River Basin are responses from traditional societies to the selective logic of capitalism, defending the value of family, land possession, and regional solidarity against capitalist impacts (Rocha, 2010).

The MAB[4] was strongly influenced by rural unions and progressive sectors of the Catholic Church (CPT), with these groups playing an important role in the movement's organization and action, expanding its claims and improving articulation with civil society (Correa, 2020).

Hence, the need to strengthen cooperation between the state and popular movements with extensive experience in expropriation and compensation processes. Joint participation and trust between social actors are essential for healthy democratic practices and avoiding repeated strategies that weaken the representation of those affected.

Social movements in this region stand out for a grassroots organization with horizontal practices, different from other regions. The affected are organized into community groups with local, state, and federal coordination, maintaining an organic and well-structured connection. This structure avoids bureaucratization and demobilization, possibly due to the high availability of social capital in the region.

Social movements have demonstrated an ability to adapt to social, political, and economic transformations, playing an essential role in defending the rights of small farmers. These movements not only resist public policies that may be harmful but also promote sustainable agricultural practices, ensuring that farmers actively participate in decisions affecting their lives through organization and mobilization (Mattos, 2019).

Social movements in western Santa Catarina have played a significant role in regional transformation since the 1970s. Influenced by various factors, including agricultural modernization and the church's actions, these movements have contributed to increasing peasant awareness and political identity. Currently, they face challenges such as criminalization, land demarcation issues, promoting healthy eating, and defending other social movements' agendas (Poli, Badalotti, & Gaspareto, 2017).

The MAB adopts a social and nationalist vision, criticizing the neoliberal process of selling national assets and control by international capital. The confrontation is ideological, challenging standards and facing united opposition from a conservative political system that is not open to social demands—even with

progressive advances in the last twenty years.

The MAB has promoted the leadership of the affected, organized educational activities and debates, mitigated dam impacts, organized protests, and strengthened the political presence of affected communities (Araújo, 2006).

Social movements in Latin America compete for investments, knowledge, and culture, highlighting the absence of these movements. A humanistic neo-anarchism has emerged in power spaces. Liberation Theology significantly influenced, including the MAB's foundation, reflecting the quest for a more equitable society (Scherer-Warren, 1993).

The World Bank highlights the inadequacy of Brazilian laws in protecting populations displaced by dams. The laws favor concessionaires in expropriations, disregarding social and environmental impacts. This approach facilitates projects at the expense of affected communities' rights, perpetuating inadequate and insufficient compensatory practices to ensure appropriate outcomes for the displaced (Vainer, 2007).

Liberation Theology, influenced by the Second Vatican Council and the Medellín Conference, promotes an active church in addressing Latin America's challenges. It emphasizes utopia, history, and social reality, adopting a doctrine focused on social issues and social transformation (Scherer-Warren, 1993).

The church shifted from being an observer of poverty and social exclusion to an active role in the people's struggle for emancipation. The proliferation of base ecclesial communities, formed by small family groups studying the scriptures and reflecting on their social reality, was significant in poor and agrarian regions of the country. These new social movements stood out for their ideological and organizational pluralism, promoting democratic and tolerant practices in society (Scherer-Warren, 1993).

The MAB consists of peasants impacted by reservoirs of hydroelectric plants (UHEs). It emerged in the 1970s when the media announced the construction of 25 plants on the Uruguay River, affecting more than 40,000 families. Initially, the Pastoral Land Commission warned the population about the projects. In 1979, religious and union leaders created the Regional Commission of Dam-Affected People (CRAB) in Santa Catarina, the precursor of the MAB (Poli, 2008).

Despite the lack of initial support, the 1985 Romaria da Terra marked a turning point, consolidating local support. In 1998, the CRAB became the MAB in an assembly in Paraná. During the 1980s, the movement gained strength with the slogan "Land Yes, Dam No," resisting in various regions. Today, the MAB is an autonomous movement present in 14 Brazilian states, fighting for the rights of those affected (Poli, 2008).

The MAB acts as an information mediator, expanding understanding of hydroelectric issues and strengthening the fight for social rights. With the acquisition of technical skills and relevant knowledge, participation of the affected could be limited. The movement conducts educational activities, spreading knowledge, solidarity, and social cohesion to change social dynamics and promote communication between the community and the state (Neto & Jacobi, 2020).

It opposes dam construction due to its negative impacts and privatization of the electricity sector. The movement proposes a new energy model in Brazil, focusing on energy savings and alternative sources, based on the analyses of affected populations across the country (Strada, 2005).

The social movement opposes progress at any cost, defending the affected and national interests, positioning itself against the concession of hydroelectric plants. It fights against energy commodification, promoting environmental protection and affected people's rights. Hydroelectric plants attempt to establish themselves in the territory with local authorities' support, creating structures that minimize population resistance and

strengthen their presence.

The criminalization of the social movement, denounced by the MAB to the Special Secretariat for Human Rights, led to the formation of a Special Commission to monitor human rights violations in dam construction. The Foz do Chapecó Case Report details failures in environmental impact studies, social issues, police violence, and criminalization of the movement, involving public bodies such as IBAMA, companies (CEFC), judiciary, and military police from SC and RS (Brazil. Res. n. 26/2006).

The distinction between institutional and social justice reveals two dimensions of law: established norms and ethical ideals. The lack of clear compensation rules is a central challenge faced by the MAB, complicating the definition of criteria and requiring direct negotiations with companies. This context contributes to the weakening of the social movement.

The movement has sought dialogue with the federal government, resulting in some minor concrete advances. The MAB advocates for environmental protection, questions dam construction flaws and compensation processes, opposes hydroelectric plants' construction, defends affected people's interests, and criticizes high energy costs and submission to foreign interests.

The social movement aims to protect the peasant way of life, valuing human supremacy over the modern "individual" concept. For peasants, land and community are essential, and their loss implies the destruction of identities and relationships (Scherer-Warren, 1993; Rocha, 2010).

The colonization of the Uruguay River Basin by Italians and Germans followed the "liberal colonization utopia," creating a society of small producers and a rural organization centered on the family. These communities, structured by mutual aid, form a solid social fabric (Scherer-Warren, 1993; Rocha, 2010).

This ideal, based on mutual exchange and aid, constitutes a solid social fabric. In southern Brazil, rural organization remains family-centered, with the state and colonizing companies promoting this structure by distributing land plots to families, following the same orientation as immigration processes.

Since the 1970s, the MAB has been committed to defending the rights of people affected by dams, achieving significant gains such as resettlements and better compensation. However, after the electricity sector's privatization in the 1990s, the rights violations of affected communities worsened. The lack of specific policies for protecting these people and the insufficiency of existing legislation have perpetuated the vulnerability of affected communities (MAB, 2013).

The MAB has strived not only for fair compensation for the affected but also for keeping communities united through collective rural resettlement, thus preventing the disintegration of these social groups and emphasizing the direct involvement of the affected in all phases of the negotiation process.

The MAB faces the challenge of balancing specific local struggles with broader strategic objectives. Immediate achievements, such as fair compensation and land access, are essential to meet urgent needs and maintain the base mobilized. However, tension arises when these local struggles are not connected to a broader vision of social transformation. Democratization and politicization within grassroots organizations are essential to avoid power concentration and promote an inclusive and participatory political culture (Moraes, 1996).

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The peasant culture in western Santa Catarina was marked by four main axes influenced by European

community traditions, which served as a basis for adapting descendants of Italian, German, and Polish immigrants from Rio Grande do Sul. This process resulted in land occupation and the formation of a community whose moral values, such as work, respect for property, and community life, were strongly shaped by religion (Poli, 2001).

The MAB faces the challenge of balancing local struggles, such as compensation and land access, with broader strategic objectives. Connecting these struggles to a vision of social transformation is important to avoid power concentration and promote an inclusive and participatory political culture within grassroots organizations (Moraes, 1996).

CONCLUSION

The democratic participation of social movements in the Uruguay River Basin, exemplified by the MAB, is essential for promoting social justice and defending human rights. Through collective mobilization and community organization, these movements challenge hegemonic power dynamics and fight for a development model that respects local populations' needs and the environment.

The MAB's analysis highlights the importance of active citizen participation in decision-making processes, especially in large infrastructure projects like dams. These projects often disregard social and environmental impacts, prioritizing economic interests over the rights of affected communities. The MAB, by organizing protests, promoting debates, and seeking fair negotiations, has positioned itself as a critical voice against the privatization of the electricity sector and the commodification of natural resources.

The research revealed the complexity of the relationships between social movements, the state, and the market, highlighting the inherent tensions and contradictions in Brazil's democratization process. The MAB's struggle also exposes the challenges of criminalizing social movements, which, despite repression, continue to play a crucial role in defending rights and seeking justice. The movements' resistance reflects the resilience of communities, which organize to preserve their cultural, social, and economic identity in the face of neoliberal capitalism pressures.

Finally, this study emphasizes the need to strengthen democratic practices and social participation as pillars for building a more equitable and sustainable society. Social movements, by promoting inclusion and justice, play an essential role in democratizing natural resource management and defending human rights. The MAB's experience in the Uruguay River Basin exemplifies the importance of solidarity and collective action in the fight for a fairer and more inclusive future.

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FOOTNOTES

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[2] Brazil is a country with a Catholic majority, followed by a smaller group of Protestants and other religions.

[3] The Landless Workers' Movement (MST) is one of the most important social movements in Brazil, founded in 1984. The MST fights for agrarian reform, seeking to redistribute unproductive land to landless rural workers, with the aim of promoting social justice and reducing land concentration in the country. The movement is also dedicated to promoting sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty, organizing land occupations and pressuring the government to implement public policies favorable to agrarian reform. In addition, the MST is known for its educational and political training activities, seeking to empower rural workers and strengthen the fight for their rights.

[4] The Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB) is a Brazilian social movement that defends the rights of communities affected by the construction of dams and other infrastructure projects, such as hydroelectric dams. Founded in the 1990s, MAB works on several fronts, including the fight for fair compensation, adequate resettlement, and the preservation of human and environmental rights.