The Brazilian *Jeitinho* as a Structural Fix:  
*A ‘Snapshot’ from an Urban Sustainability Partnership Program*

Prepared by Fernanda Duarte, PhD  
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_Manda quem pode, obedece quem quer_  
(Those who can, give orders; those who want to, obey)  
(Old Brazilian adage)

This exploratory paper is intended as a contribution to the study of the complex relationship between organisations and culture – of how an essentially personalist society copes with the impersonality of its bureaucratic system. It examines the operation of a Brazilian social mechanism known as *jeitinho* (jaytcheenyoo) to circumvent structural constraints confronting an urban sustainability partnership project in a large urban centre in Brazil\(^1\). The *jeitinho* is a culturally specific concept, which has been roughly translated as ‘to pull a string’ or ‘to cut through the red tape’ (Barbosa 1995:36); a “knack” or a “fix” (Rosenn 1971), or a ‘clever dodge’ (DaMatta 1991:189). It is used in different contexts to deal with difficult or forbidding situations characteristic of the quotidian of Brazilian society. For example, one asks for a *jeitinho* when the queue in the supermarket is too long and one cannot wait for one’s turn; when one needs an extension of time to pay one’s telephone bill; when one is told that one’s car will not be fixed in time for the weekend, or that one’s social club membership card will not be ready in time for the *carnaval* ball. As Lourenço Rega puts it (2000:60), “there are no dimensions in Brazilian life that are not encompassed by the *jeito*”\(^2\).

\(^1\) For reasons of confidentiality, the name of this city has been omitted, and so have the bibliographic references alluding to it.

\(^2\) *Jeito* is another word used for the same phenomenon. *Jeitinho* is the diminutive form of *jeito*. 
This paper is particularly interested in the uses of jeitinho within organisational contexts as a strategy to deal with external constraints that are beyond the control of individuals. Inspired by Keith Rosenn’s (1971) analysis of the jeitinho brasileiro as an “institutional by-pass”, I conceptualise its operation within the sphere of a Brazilian public bureaucracy as a “structural fix”. That is, as a way of dealing with obstacles that emerge from the social structure of Brazilian society, such as funding rationalisations resulting from neo-liberal austerity measures, and excessive bureaucratic formalism, which delays decision making processes and creates more work and stress for people.

The paper draws on existing scholarly literature on the jeitinho and a “snapshot” of a pilot study of an urban sustainability partnership program in Brazil which, for the purpose of this paper, will be called POMAR. The data for this study is qualitative and was gathered during a three-week fieldwork in large Brazilian city, between November and December 2002, using techniques such as semi-structured, face-to-face interviews and participant observation. A total of fifteen people from the three partner groups (i.e., local government; environmental NGO, and local communities) were interviewed, recruited with the assistance of a key informant from the local council, who was contacted prior to fieldwork. It should be noted the jeitinho brasileiro was not the author’s original object of study, but emerged as a strong theme during the interviews.

For a better understanding of the jeitinho as an autochthonous practice of Brazilian society, a brief examination of its defining features and historical background is provided, followed by an analysis of its modus operandi within the context of the POMAR Program in a large Brazilian city.

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3 Due to the sensitive nature of the information gathered during fieldwork and the small size of the Program under investigation, its name and that of the NGO involved have been changed in order to protect the privacy of the people who so generously gave their time for the interviews. (The word "pomar" means orchard in Portuguese).

4 The original purpose of my research was to identify commonly encountered problems in tri-partite partnerships for sustainability, notably the difficulty in building and maintaining trust between the partners.
Conceptualising the jeitinho brasileiro

Whilst it is beyond the scope of this paper to engage in a deep analysis of what constitutes jeitinho, it is possible to extrapolate a set of defining features from existing scholarly works on the phenomenon (Campos 1966; Gomes 1971; Torres 1973; DaMatta 1984; Barbosa 1992; Rega 2000). These are: the jeitinho entails an extraordinary, unforeseen situation; it always involves a conscious act of breaking the rules; it is inherently personalistic; it requires a certain type of “technique” involving the conscious use of culturally valued personal attributes (e.g., a smile, a gentle, pleading tone of voice); it is normally a self-serving behaviour (but can be also altruistic); it seeks short-term benefits; it is explicitly acknowledged and described by Brazilians as part of their cultural identity, and it can be constructed positively or negatively. One typical example of the jeitinho goes like this:

Mário goes to the student services of his university to obtain a student card. He goes in the afternoon, as he knows that his classmate Geraldo works there in the afternoons. Mário is told by Geraldo that it takes five working days to obtain a student card. Mário is disappointed, but doesn’t give up. He smiles, tilts his head, and in a gentle, pleading tone of voice explains that he has a sociology assignment due in five days and that he needs the student card urgently in order to borrow books from the library. Geraldo once more stresses that it takes five days, and “rules are rules”. Very consciously maintaining the gentle, pleading tone of voice, Mário asks for a jeitinho. [Olha Geraldo, será que você não pode dar um jeitinho pra mim?…]. Geraldo smiles and tells Mário that he will talk to his supervisor, and disappears through a door marked “Student Services Manager”. Ten minutes later he comes back to tell Mário that the library card will be ready for collection the following day. Later on, recounting the story to his friends, Mário proudly boasts: “O jeitinho brasileiro é infalível!” [The Brazilian jeitinho is infallible!]. While some of Mário’s friends see
the jeitinho as a natural thing to do, others condemn it as the sort of disrespect for rules that “gives Brazil a bad reputation”.

But is the jeitinho a specifically Brazilian phenomenon? Similar social mechanisms surely exist in other cultures. Pedro Cavalcanti (1991:7) compares it, for example, to the trinkgeld in Germany, the bustarela in Italy, the speed money in India, the backsheesh in Egypt, the mordida in Mexico and the vizyatha in Russia. Bourdieu (1963, cited in Barbosa 1995:38) cites a practice chtara among the working class of Algeria, and I am told that there is something similar to the jeitinho in Cuba, known as guaperia. Whilst comparative research would be needed to ascertain the extent to which these practices resemble the jeitinho brasileiro, an informal investigation suggests that they might be more akin to bribery, which is not the most common manifestation of the jeitinho. Social capital, not monetary capital, fuels the jeitinho brasileiro.

So, why is this social mechanism seen as specifically Brazilian? The answer is that the jeitinho entails a “social choice” or a “social weight” attributed to it in Brazilian society (Barbosa 1992:15-16). Not only is jeitinho “universally” recognised by Brazilians (and by some non-Brazilians), but it is perceived also as something which is utilised by all in Brazilian society – from the poorest to the richest (Barbosa 1992:32). So deeply entrenched is this practice in Brazil, that it has become intertwined with constructions of Brazilianness (DaMatta 1984; Barbosa 1992;1995)\(^\text{5}\).

Building on the work of (1984), Barbosa (1992:129) explains the processes through which the jeitinho becomes enmeshed with cultural identity. She notes that when a certain type of action is qualified as jeitinho, the internal diversity of Brazilian society – class, ethnicity, gender, age, occupation, etc – disappears, and a “homogenising classification” emerges to define millions of people (1992:129). Indeed Amado and

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\(^\text{5}\) Anthropologist Roberto (1984:97-98) has pioneered this conceptualisation of jeitinho, linking it with a typically Brazilian personage known as the malandro [rogue]. The malandro refuses to engage in paid work and uses the jeitinho as a mechanism of survival.
Brasil (1991:38) see the jeitinho as a “hermeneutic key” to understand Brazilian culture, reflecting the personalist nature of Brazilian social practices. For Barbosa (1995:46), “the jeitinho brasileiro expresses the cordial, conciliatory, happy, warm, and human spirit of a country that is young, tropical, sensual, beautiful, and full of possibilities”. Whilst this is a somewhat idealised image of Brazilianness which echoes Buarque de Hollanda’s notion of homen cordial [the cordial man; cited in Leite 1978:317-324], it tends to prevail over more sinister conceptualisation of THE jeitinho brasileiro as bribery and corruption, epitomised, for example, in the work of Robert Levine (1998).

**Jeitinho in the past and present**

Consideration of the historical roots of the jeitinho is essential to understand its operation in contemporary Brazilian society. Albeit written in the 1970s, Keith Rosenn’s (1971) historical account of the emergence of the jeitinho remains relevant in the 2000s, and it is particularly useful to understand its operation in the context of the POMAR Program. In his seminal text, “The jeito: Brazil’s institutional by-pass of the formal legal system and its development implications” (1971), Rosenn makes two points that are particularly relevant to this analysis. The first one is the connection of the jeitinho with the high valuation of personal relationships characteristic of Brazilian society, and the second one is his view that the jeitinho emerged as a response to the excessive legalism and formalism of Brazilian society, inherited from its Portuguese colonisers.

Rosenn (1971:517) traces the roots of jeitinho back to colonial times when Brazil was under the rule of the Portuguese Empire, emphasising that this Portuguese past “still conditions Brazilian attitudes towards governmental functioning”. Portuguese colonial rule was an absolute monarchy, with the King as the supreme power, “the

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6 Referring to the systemic corruption of the Brazilian political system, Levine labels Brazilians “the Kings of the jeitinho”
representative of God on earth, supreme dispenser of all favors, and rightful regulator of all activities…” (1971:517). This system created an authoritarian, paternalistic, particularistic and *ad hoc* regime (Rosenn 1971: 517-18), which in turn generated an unnecessarily complex, confused, rigid and contradictory legal system. This system was transported by the ruling elites to colonial Brazil, with little consideration to its suitability to the conditions of Brazilian society. As a result, Brazilian culture has become highly legalistic, with laws applying to all facets of social relations (Rosenn 1971:528; 531; Gomes 1971 :46).

Excessive legalism led to formalism, which Rosenn defines as “the exaggerated concern with legal formalities” (1971:529). He notes that in Brazil, formalism is reflected in an “obsessive and oppressive” preoccupation with authenticity and verification, which is a core characteristic of Brazilian bureaucracies. Time-consuming and frustrating bureaucratic constraints persist in 21st Century Brazil, where poorly funded government departments are only open for a few hours a day, copious amounts of documentation are required for claims or requests for resources, and special stamps, only found in designated places, are often required to authenticate documents. Thus, the hectic quotidian of Brazilian society demands that people run from place to place, queue up for long periods of time at different institutions, and sometimes wait for months for a certain outcome. As one of my respondents put it, “*Uma vida de sufocar*” [A life of suffocation]. In view of this, the *jeitinho* has become deeply-entrenched in the fibre of Brazilian society as a strategy to deal with bureaucratic complexities – to “get things done”. Brazilians often act according to the old Brazilian adage: *Manda quem pode, obedece quem quer* [Those who can, give orders; those who want to, obey].

In an analysis of the *jeitinho* as a structural fix, it is also important to take into account the social and institutional impacts of market based reforms and austerity.

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7 For example, cashing travellers cheque at a government bank requires presentation of passport, supplying local address and phone number and signing multiple copies of a form.
measures that have characterised Brazil for the last few years under Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s two terms of neoliberal regime\(^8\). A domestic debt of R$ 305 billion in 1998, an external debt increasingly difficult to finance, a significant devaluation of Brazilian currency (the real) and a threat of deep recession, led to a severe financial crisis which Cardoso tried to counteract with a fiscal package of austerity measures [Programa de Estabilidade Fiscal]. A principal aim of such program was to slice R$ 8.7 billion from the following year’s budget (Flynn 1999), which had a serious impact on Brazilian society, notably on disadvantaged communities. As noted by Peter Flynn (1999:29), “Money ruthlessly drained from Brazil cannot be available for social programmes, for agrarian reform, for health and education, or for tackling poverty in all its forms, not even by the most committed government”. Linking this point to the present analysis of the jeitinho as a means of circumventing structural obstacles, Cardoso’s austerity measures led to severe cuts in public budgets for social programs such as the POMAR. As will be seen later, at the root of the partners’ problems was insufficient funding, a problem which was exacerbated by the inflexibility of Brazilian bureaucracies.

To a considerable extent, the jeitinho works in Brazilian society as a mechanism of social survival that enables a culture that values personal relations to sustain traditional patterns of behaviour emphasising warmth and cordiality. This is in spite of the unsurmountable structural constraints imposed by governments whose first priority is clearly not the people. So, the jeitinho allows personal relationships to prevail above and beyond impersonal abstract norms imposed from above. As noted by Rega (2000:54), “In the convoluted Brazilian day-to-day, the jeitinho becomes an imposition of the ‘I’ against impersonal norms that devalue individuality.”

\(^8\) Cardoso was elected for the first time in 1994, and re-elected in 1998. In December 2002 he was defeated by Luis Inacio Lula da Silva, from the PT (Workers’ Party).
Acquainted with the general characteristics, historical background and modus operandi of the jeitinho brasileiro, we are now prepared to analyse this social practice within a specific organisational context, namely, the POMAR Program.

**The jeitinho as a structural fix in the POMAR Program**

Incepted in 1995, the POMAR Program is a tripartite urban sustainability program, involving local government, an environmental NGO (which for the purpose of this paper will be called Verde⁹) and local communities. It is funded and administered by the municipal council (to be referred to as the Prefeitura), and has been designed to address socio-environmental problems affecting low socio-economic areas of this urban center.

The city in question has approximately four million inhabitants in a dense demographic configuration. Like many Brazilian metropolises, it a history of uncontrolled growth and severe infra-structural deficiencies resulting from successive migratory flows of people from rural areas in search of a “better life”¹⁰. Uncontrolled migration in turn has led to the emergence of low socio-economic demographic clusters living in precarious conditions at the margins of the city. These extremely disadvantaged populations are collectively known as ‘a periferia’ [the periphery], and encompass favelas (slums), illegal settlements and sub-standard public housing.

The periferia receives surplus demographic contingents from the central areas of the city, which creates considerable difficulties in the provision of services and required urban infrastructures. As a result, periferia dwellers are confronted with problems such as water, soil and air pollution; substandard sanitation and waste disposal

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⁹ “Verde” means green in Portuguese.
¹⁰ These populations have emigrated from rural areas mostly during the 1970s and 1980s, a period in which this city underwent considerable growth.
facilities; poor health; unemployment; lack of educational opportunities for young people, substance abuse, crime and violence. Many _periferia_ dwellings are located in areas of risk which, not infrequently, are ravaged during wet weather by massive landslides, taking lives and destroying livelihoods (POMAR Brochure; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2003). The POMAR Program was created to address these socio-environmental problems, equipping _periferia_ dwellers with the required skills to protect the environment and to become more self-sufficient. With decentralised governance, the POMAR operates through four branches, located at four points of the city’s _periferia_ (northeast, northwest, southeast and southwest).

As stated in its publicity brochure, the POMAR Program has noble objectives:

- To improve the quality of urban living through the improvement of the environment, involving community participation and socio-environmental, cultural and food development
- To promote environmental and sanitation education in local contexts, envisaging to develop environmental awareness and commitment among children, youth and adults to improve the environment
- To promote food education through the positive valuation of local knowledge, attempting to develop in the population awareness about the link between good food and health, and the importance of healthy food to improve the quality of life
- To provide support for projects encouraging the improvement of environmental and sanitation conditions among low-income populations in the areas encompassed by the Program.
- To strengthen formal and informal groups in the communities, envisaging increase the participation of the public in the management of public policies.

However, the fieldwork data reveals a marked discrepancy between what is said at a discursive level, and the reality of the Program. It was evident in the interviews that the POMAR has been only partially successful in meeting its original objectives. Whilst it did run a workshops and courses on environmental education and
agroecological techniques for the communities in its early years, the past five years have been characterised by a rather patchy program of activities and a constant struggle by the three partners to make ends meet. To a significant extent, it has been the consistent use of *jeitinho* by the people involved which has allowed the Program to function at a somewhat basic level. But before providing specific examples of the *jeitinho* in the POMAR Program, it is important to examine in more detail the structural constraints and challenges that threatened the Program’s long-term survival.

Despite the goodwill of its three partners, it was evident from the interviews that there were severe systemic constraints – notably economic, and institutional – preventing the effective operation of the Program. The main constraint was no doubt insufficient funding. As an interviewee put it, since 1999, the Program had been “ravaged by FHC’s public budget cuts”\(^\text{11}\). Claims of *falta de verba* [lack of funding] were a recurring theme in the interviews with representatives from the three partner groups, as reflected in the excerpts below:

> Over the last three years there have been severe cuts in the Prefeitura’s budget, which greatly affected the POMAR … In the past we used to have around R$400,000 per annum. In the last two years, I believe the Prefeitura didn’t spend more than R$ 50,000 on the Program … At the moment, resources for the project are only sufficient for maintenance – cleaning products; payment of security guards; telephone; gas, water and electricity. Sometimes there are delays in payment. For example, the kitchen [in the North West Branch] didn’t work for three months because there was no gas, due to lack of funds! (Francisco\(^\text{12}\), former Prefeitura project officer; founding member of the POMAR)

> We planned all these exciting agroecological projects just before the first meeting in June 2002, and submitted the proposal to the Prefeitura’s finance department. But then we got to know that it was impossible to develop activities in the POMARs to

\(^{11}\) “FHC” has become a common way of referring to Fernando Henrique Cardoso, with a slightly derogatory connotation.

\(^{12}\) Respondents’ names have been changed to ensure privacy.
address its core objectives because of lack of money to pay for labour, technicians and equipment. (Mauricio, Prefeitura project officer)

I love this Program, but if I take you to the POMAR, I confess that I’ll be a bit embarrassed. [giggle] Because it’s not the way I wanted it. I lost my technicians because of budget cuts by Prefeitura! … We used to have four technicians, and now we have only one! We used to have four vehicles that we used to visit POMAR’s vegetable gardens, but now we only have one left! (Helena, Prefeitura project officer)

We tried to set up a medicinal plant project to give [community members] the skills to generate income. But it was not possible because there was (sic) no funds for lunch, and people did not have an incentive to come (Afonso, community leader; South East POMAR).

Due to insufficient funding, POMAR activities were substantially curtailed, and in fact during 2001 no community projects were carried out. As noted by a Prefeitura project officer, the Branches often found themselves without basic items such as toilet paper and dishwashing detergent, because money would run out before the end of the month. Insufficient funding also resulted in a six-month delay in the payment of Verde technicians’ wages during 2001, an issue that generated tensions between Verde staff and Prefeitura officers. As one Verde informer put it, “How can we trust [the Prefeitura], if they don’t pay us?”

In addition to the anxieties produced by inadequate funding, the POMAR partners had to endure persistent constraints that arose from the excessive formalistic organisational culture of the Prefeitura. This was recognised by the partners themselves. For example, referring to the hierarchical rigidity, complexity, slowness and other idiosyncratic features of the Prefeitura, Mauricio dubbed it as “a maquina burocrática infernal” [infernal bureaucratic machine]. Respondents consistently expressed their frustrations with its excessively hierarchical and poorly integrated organisational structure, which created delays, obstructed decision-making processes,
and at times generated tensions among the partners. The following excerpts from the interviews, are illustrative of the partners’ perceptions of Prefeitura’s excessive formalism as another structural constraint to the POMAR Program:

In my opinion, the greatest problem in the POMAR Program has been the bureaucracy of Prefeitura. Because of this bureaucracy, resources are not made available when they’re needed … Sometimes they’re not released at all! The administrative machine of Prefeitura is very complex and slow. (Francisco, former Prefeitura project officer)

They say that this is a government by the people for the people, but when you try to put this into practice it doesn’t work. The difficult thing is that the public apparatus [aparelho publico] has norms and procedures that people don’t even know that exist! (Helena, Prefeitura project officer)

[POMAR’s] problems are, in their majority, related to the bureaucracy, and to the rigidity of the administrative machine, a common characteristic of the Brazilian public service. (Maria, senior Prefeitura administrative officer)

The poder publico [public power] is the greatest obstacle [to the Program]. Unfortunately we depend on an administrative machine that I call “bunda de chumbo” [led ass]. The bureaucrats sit behind their desks, imagining the Project, but this is the most that they do. And when we need their support, they don’t come to the party. (Sergio, Community leader, Northwest POMAR Branch)

Another obstacle to the success of POMAR is “bureaucracy versus flexibility” – the rigid structure of the Prefeitura versus the flexibility of the NGOs and communities to respond to issues. Of course our own internal structure can create delays in decision making, as decisions pass through various officers, but our decision making process, by comparison, is much quicker than the Prefeitura’s. (Elizabete, staff from Verde)
In the face of these economic and institutional obstacles, POMAR’s partners often used the *jejinhos* as a structural fix, to counteract these unsurmountable obstacles. For example, Osvaldo, a Prefeitura staff who worked in one of the Branches reported that requests for petty cash to buy small items such as coffee, sugar, dishwashing detergent and toilet paper always took so long to be approved by senior staff, that he had to find a *jejinho* to ensure that they never ran out of supplies. Osvaldo managed to make an informal arrangement with an acquaintance who owned the local grocery shop, to allow Osvaldo (and other Prefeitura staff) to buy small items, as required and then pay him later, either from their own pockets (to be reimbursed later) or when the money came through from Prefeitura. In Osvaldo’s own words, “I asked Zé [the shop owner] to give a *jejinho* for me, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to have our regular cafézinhos [short coffees]”. Here, it is interesting to note that, through this *jejinho*, Osvaldo and his workmates were circumventing the convoluted, time-consuming, bureaucratic procedures required to set up a proper account with the shop. For them, sharing a “regular cafézinho” was more important than observing the rules. This example also illustrates the importance of personal relationships and social rituals in a personalist society such as Brazil.

A Prefeitura officer, who shall be called “Antonio”, recounted another instance of the *jejinho* used to deal with budgetary constraints. This particular example shows an altruistic dimension of the *jejinho*, in that it is used to help significant others. After receiving an official document outlining POMAR’s budget for 2001, Antonio realised that the available funds were not sufficient to run the proposed activities in all the four Branches. He drew the attention of his superiors to the issue, but was told that there had been severe cut-backs on POMAR funding, and there was nothing they could do. However, Antonio managed to fix the situation with a *jejinho brasileiro*. In his own words:

I couldn’t let [the communities] down! POMAR’s clients from the four Branches were looking forward to the horticultural projects we had promised them, and I didn’t
have the heart to disappoint them! So, I had to give a jeitinho in the situation. I knew the guy who managed the environmental NGO who would be providing the technical expertise for the planned projects; he was a childhood friend. I managed to convince him to reduce their fees in exchange for some free workshops on project management that I was prepared to give myself at their organisation. This was highly irregular and I never told Prefeitura about it. But everyone was happy in the end!

Antonio’s case is an instance of the jeitinho as a mechanism to circumvent structural constraints that echoes one of the five scenarios of the jeitinho as an “institutional bypass” postulated by Rosenn (1971:516). That is, here we have a situation in which a public servant deviates from his obligations because of his conviction that the formal norms are unrealistic, unjust or wasteful. Antonio by-passed the official rules, which he found unfair to the communities, and created his own informal alternative through a jeitinho. This case also illustrates what has been referred to as the “personalist” approach of the Latin American organisations, as opposed to the “functionalist”, or “pragmatic” approach that prevails, for example, in North America (Amado & Brasil 1991:45). Here the jeitinho is used as a means of avoiding conflict through the “art of compromise” (Rosenn 1971:525) so highly valued in the Brazilian culture (Gomes 1971:43-4). Hence, as surmised by Amado and Brasil (1991:57), “T]he jeitinho prevails and works as a conflict reducer … thus permitting a conviviality with the dysfunctions of work.”

Altruistic jeitinho was also observed in the periferia, with people often going beyond their means to bridge the financial gaps the government could not fill in. For example, I was invited by Julia, a community leader to attend the graduation ceremony of a group of youth that had just finished a gardening course in one of the Branches. It was a hot day, and Julia was very apologetic that she could give me only a glass of water when I arrived there, and not a soft drink. She explained that, due to lack of funds, they could only afford to buy a few bottles of lemonade, and were saving them as a special treat for the graduands after the graduation ceremony. Expressing profound disappointment with the Prefeitura, Julia said:
Can you believe that they didn’t give any money at all for the graduation ceremony? Not even for some special treats for the poor kids who put so much effort into the [gardening] course! Jesus, they’re mean! Well, we had to give a jeitinho this morning and managed to raise a little bit of money in the community to buy five bottles of lemonade and a few bags of chips. It’s the least we can do for our kids.

Another instance of the jeitinho being used by members of periferia communities resembled the conceptualisation of jeitinho as an “empowerment resource” [recurso de poder] by Clovis de Abreu et al (1982; cited in Barbosa 1992:26-27), though they applied this model specifically to bureaucratic organisations. Within this tripartite sustainability Program, the jeitinho functions as a device to empower, not civil servants, but disadvantaged populations. A community leader from one of the POMAR branches (whom we shall call João) heard that a popular politician, known to be sympathetic to periferia communities, was planning to visit the bairro (suburb) adjacent to his own. João was disappointed that the politician’s visit would not include his own bairro, and contacted Mauricio at Prefeitura to ask him for a jeitinho to ensure that the politician would include João’s community in the visit. João was aware that Mauricio knew the politician in question, and suggested to entice him with a feijoada¹³ at the POMAR branch. In João’s own words:

The jeitinho was successful, and [the politician] did end up lunching with us. He was really nice, and listened to us. He promised to help us with funding for a backyard orchard project (which was beyond Prefeitura’s budget), and he came good: a few months later we got the money!

In the above example, disadvantaged communities capitalised on their personal relationships with Prefeitura staff, and asked for the jeitinho to empower themselves. I heard the same story from Mauricio later, and he explicitly acknowledged that the jeitinho worked. As he put it, with a big smile:

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¹³ Brazilian soup like dish with black beans and smoked pork.
Yes, that was true. I knew the politician and it wasn’t difficult to convince him to come: the man loves feijoada! But then I told João, I’ve given a jeitinho to bring [the politician] over, but now it’s up to you guys to ask him for the money. I’ve done my bit!

Mauricio explained that these jeitinhos to help the communities are not uncommon in the POMAR Program. Referring to himself and his fellow POMAR project officers at the Prefeitura he said: “We do these things whenever we can because we can’t count on ‘the system’ to do them. The elites have no ties at all with the people they’re supposed to represent.” Despite the severe economic and institutional confronting POMAR, it is clear that the Program would be worse off if it were not for the jeitinhos and goodwill of its very generous and committed staff.

**Conclusion**

This exploratory paper has drawn attention to the complex relationship between organisation and culture, through an examination of the dynamics of the jeitinho brasileiro in the context of an urban sustainability partnership project in Brazil. The jeitinho was presented as a “hermeneutic key” (Amado & Brasil 1991:38) to understand Brazilian culture, as it personalises a situation “ostensibly governed by impersonal rules” (Page: 1995:10).

Most importantly, as seen in the “snapshot” of the POMAR Program, this personalist approach of dealing with forbidding situations can be a valuable tool for empowerment, as it enables otherwise powerless individuals to manipulate situations to their own advantage, or to help significant others. Indeed, those who use the jeitinho in organisational contexts do not allow themselves to become passive victims of an impersonal and, at times, ruthless bureaucracy. The POMAR case is a clear
illustration of the *jeitinho* operating as a structural fix, enabling people to better cope with the severe structural constraints that characterise their day-to-day.

However, this is only a pilot study, based on a brief “snapshot” of a Brazilian partnership program. It would be desirable to conduct a more systematic study over a longer period of time with a greater number of respondents, in order to produce a more rigorous analysis of this fascinating social mechanism.
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