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Brazilian citizens taking action against hunger and deprivation

1. GENERAL INFORMATION

1.1. Title of practice or experience

The “Hunger Campaign”: Brazilian citizens taking action against hunger and deprivation

1.2 Category of the practice/experience and brief description

Millions of Brazilian citizens design and carry out new and creative solidarity actions against extreme poverty and its roots, mobilizing an enormous amount of human and material resources against hunger on a scale that was previously **unknown**.

1.3 Name of person or institution responsible for the practice or experience

National Coordination of the Campaign against Hunger

1.4 Name and position of key or relevant persons or officials involved

Not available.

1.5 Details of institution

- (a) Address: IBASE, Rua Visconde de Ouro Preto 5/7, Brazil
- (b) Telephone: ++ (55) (21) 553 6097
- (c) Fax: ++ (55) (21) 551 3443
- (d) E-Mail: jcidadania@ibase.org.br

1.6 Name of person and/or institution conducting the research

Fernanda Lopes de Carvalho, researcher at the Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis (IBASE), advisor to the National Coordination of the Campaign against Hunger, and member of the Coordinating Committee of the Campaign for the State of Rio de Janeiro.

1.7 Details of research person/institution

As in 1.5 above.

2. THE PROBLEM OR SITUATION BEING ADDRESSED BY THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE

According to IPEA (a research office for the Ministry of Planning), there are about 32 million people living below the poverty line in Brazil, equally spread throughout urban and rural areas¹. The largest concentration of people living below the poverty line is found in the northeast region and in metropolitan areas. Sixty percent of the rural poor live in the northeast. Even though the consumption of food on average is 7.5% greater in rural compared to urban areas, given the importance of non-marketable subsistence production in the former, malnutrition indices are worse for the rural population because of the lack of sewage facilities and health care.

Hunger in Brazil cannot be explained as stemming from a deficient food supply. Grain production (rice, beans, corn, soybeans and wheat) in 1993 reached a record level of 70 million tons. If we accept the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) recommendation of a minimum daily diet of 2,242 calories and 53 g of protein, available supplies² of food are greater than required to cover the needs for calories and proteins of the population. The average grain production of the country for the last seven years (59 million tons) would still be able to supply **3,280** calories and 87 g of protein a day to every person.

Given its natural resources and its productive potential which is still largely unexplored, Brazil is actually able to produce food for internal consumption and still be left with a significant exportable surplus. Some estimates indicate that, even without technical innovations, it is possible to triple production. Deficient infrastructure in transportation, storage and handling causes losses estimated at 20% of output. If on the supply side, the problems seem solvable, it is the demand side that poses the toughest difficulty – lack of purchasing power affecting a large part of the population.

Unemployment is part of the problem, but disguised unemployment is much worse. Precarious and underpaid jobs do not allow a large number of people to rise above extreme poverty. Thus, even among those who have jobs, 19.7% earn less than the legal minimum wage (about US\$ 80 a month), a value that is considered insufficient to cover the minimum requirements of decent living. In rural areas, the situation is even worse, where up to 41% of workers receive less than the minimum wage (in the state of Ceara). Precarious employment is indicated by the fact that 34.7% of employees do not have any formal contract and that 14.2% of children between the ages of 10 and 13 have to work, even though Brazilian labor laws forbid hiring children under 14 years of age³.

There is a general consensus that extreme poverty in rural areas results mainly from the extremely concentrated structure of land ownership. About 1% of landowners hold 44% of the land, while 67% of owners own just 6%. Forty-four percent of the families living under the poverty line are found in rural areas, even though three-quarters of the total population live in urban areas. A similar picture is produced from the data on earnings. In Brazil, average monthly earnings reach 4.1 times the minimum wage but this average is 4.9 times in the southeast against only 2.1 times in the northeast. And important as it is, land concentration is only one of the factors explaining income concentration. Gender and race factors are also relevant: average monthly earnings for males are 4.9 times the minimum wage, but only 2.8 times for females: white males earn, on average, 6.3 times the minimum wage, while black women earn 1.7 times the minimum wage.

3. DESCRIPTION OF THE PRACTICE/INNOVATION EXPERIENCE AND ITS MAIN FEATURES

The sudden emergence of a mass movement demanding the removal from office of President Collor, against whom evidence of corruption was piling up, was a turning point for Brazilian society. The Citizens' Action (CA) was born from this movement. The image of apathy, insensitivity and powerlessness that Brazilians had of themselves was broken. It was the new-found community spirit that allowed the Campaign against Hunger to thrive.

The Campaign has received broad coverage in the media since it was launched, which is essential for its success. Its organizers actively sought the collaboration of professionals in the field, in a very fruitful partnership. It provided the only means of widely disseminating the Campaign's message to a country with continental dimensions. TV networks broadcast publicity messages about the living conditions of the extremely poor, unemployment, hun-

ger, as well as the meaning of solidarity and the need for concrete action to overcome these problems. TV shows and soap operas, which are very popular in Brazil, with the largest audiences among all shows, all mention the Campaign, eventually making it part of their plots. Radio stations also broadcast news about the Campaign and its results. Finally, the press coverage is also very large and useful.

The Campaign has an explicit strategy with respect to the media, to keep it permanently in the spotlight. A news service feeds the main papers, and TV and radio stations daily, with information sent through faxes. In addition, the animation group of IBASE (Brazilian Institute of Social and Economic Analysis) produces three-minute-long videos that are shown once every week on TV, showing local experiences of combating hunger and unemployment. The Campaign also had a weekly 30-minute show on public TV in Rio de Janeiro, hosted by Mr. Herbert de Souza and produced by IBASE. The Campaign has been able to count on the voluntary work of some of the best publicity writers and producers of the country, who organized themselves into a committee, very appropriately called the Ideas Committee. The Campaign also produces a bi-weekly newspaper, the *Citizenship Paper*; produced by IBASE and distributed all over the country to facilitate the spread of ideas, experiences and suggestions.

The Campaign is particularly effective with the public because of the active participation of showbusiness artists in most of its initiatives. Concerts, art exhibits and even auctions of paintings and sculptures have attracted the attention of large numbers of people. Concerts where tickets are obtained in exchange for given amounts of non-perishable food have multiplied in many states. A group of artists even organized a football team to play in games for which the entrance ticket is also paid for in food.

The participation of artists makes up the most visible part of the Campaign's public face. Its daily operations are, however, sustained by people representing practically all social groups. About 30 state-owned companies have created a committee that has contributed some of the most effective ideas the campaign has implemented. These initiatives involve the use or reallocation of the companies' resources and are especially notable because of the enthusiasm of their workers in offering new and creative solutions to the challenges the Campaign has put to them. Especially significant among these experiences is the use of idle land owned by these companies to raise new crops, through the joint initiatives of several firms, employees' committees and, sometimes, local municipalities. These committees organize the distribution of food, provide the opening of water wells, support the creation of bakeries, vegetable gardens, etc. Sometimes, programs to fight illiteracy are also implemented.

Such kinds of intervention have been multiplying throughout the country.

The solutions to their problems are mostly found by the committees themselves. Collaborations with local levels of government are particularly fruitful. When this is possible, the possibilities of permanently increasing income and employment are greatly improved. In these cases, new sanitation and housing projects that are labor-intensive have been implemented. Support for labor skills upgrading and to the small and micro firms is also provided.

Universities also joined the Campaign in a meeting of the Council of University Presidents in April 1993. A letter was signed by the members stating their commitment to working toward solving the problems of extreme poverty and social exclusion, identifying their causes and solutions, contributing to help communities in need through improving the productivity of their efforts and introducing new techniques of production that may be cheaper and better suited to their environment.

4. DESCRIPTION OF THE INSTITUTION RESPONSIBLE AND ITS ORGANISATIONAL ASPECTS

The Campaign sprang out of the Movement for Ethics in Politics (MEP), which gathered together individuals and organizations that assumed leadership in 1992 of a mass movement against alleged corruption in government and for the impeachment of then-President Fernando Collor. A wave of indignation then took over the country when the extent of corrupt practices was revealed, leading to a general call for ethics and justice, and new ways in thinking about and acting in politics.

When President Collor resigned, the MEP's discussions concluded that nothing threatens democracy more than the existence of extreme poverty. On the view that democracy and extreme poverty are completely incompatible, the Citizens' Action (CA) was launched, led by Mr. Herbert (Betinho) de Souza, the secretary-general of IBASE, to confront the state of deprivation in which a significant share of the population was living.

An appeal was made to all individuals, institutions and organizations all over the country to create committees to take the initiative to fight hunger and poverty. The committees were urged to devise suitable means for concrete actions in their area of operation, concentrating their efforts on the urgent and immediate need for reducing hunger without losing sight, however, of the need for structural changes in Brazilian society and economy in order to avoid the perpetual renewal of the causes of deprivation and hunger.

The response to this call was overwhelming, giving rise to perhaps the largest mass movement in Brazil's recent history. Committees were organized practically everywhere, gathering together people of different ages, reli-

gions, political views and social origins. The movement was joined by institutions other than those usually dedicated to philanthropy, such as trade unions, professional and entrepreneurs' associations, private and state companies, grassroots groups, municipalities, universities, churches, NGOs, etc. Committees were organized by area, workplace, professional affiliation, schools, etc. Each committee is free to choose the ends and means to act, while establishing partnerships and upholding the general principles of CA of autonomy, decentralization, accountability to the community and responsibility. CA thus operates as a catalyst, to increasingly awaken the sense of solidarity among the population, inducing and publicizing new proposals for the operation of committees, and giving support to existing initiatives.

Parallel to this movement, the Workers' Party in 1993 proposed the adoption of a food security program to President Itamar Franco. The President accepted the suggestion and ordered his Cabinet to elaborate a Plan to Fight Hunger and Extreme Poverty. He also created the Council for Food Security (CONSEA), constituted by nine ministers of state and 21 members representing society. CONSEA was chaired by the President himself and has Bishop Dom Mauro Morelli as its secretary-general.

CONSEA was a partnership between the state and society in the search for means to overcome extreme poverty. It is also a space for society to exert pressure on the state toward changing the latter's form of operation in favor of greater sensitivity toward social demands. Because of these pressures, some agility was imparted to the decision-making process of the federal government in the distribution of stocks of food to the population in the northeast of the country, stricken by a lengthy drought. Some families have benefited from programs of family settlement in rural areas. Among other results is the improvement in the distribution of food for schoolchildren.

The Campaign against Hunger thus runs along two channels: CONSEA, which concerns actions by the state; and CA, where private individuals and organizations organize themselves to fight hunger and, beginning in 1994, to support the right to work and a decent living standard for all. The main result of the Campaign was doubtless to give hunger, extreme poverty and employment a central place in the political agenda of the country, awakening in the population the will to participate in the process of change that Brazil is experiencing. Solidarity and the discovery of new dimensions in the politico-ethical question that make explicit the link between a new politics and a new, less unequal social structure must lead to the end of a long-established feeling of indifference with respect to the living conditions of the poorer social groups in the country. The campaign has so deeply marked Brazil's recent history because it allowed the feeling of powerlessness in relation to the social situation in Brazil to be overcome.

5. PROBLEMS OR OBSTACLES ENCOUNTERED AND HOW THEY WERE OVERCOME

Brazil has the tenth largest Gross National Product (GNP) in the world, and it is the third largest food exporter. The economy is also characterized by deep social inequality, expressed in (but not restricted to) a very skewed structure of income distribution. Social and political inequalities are, in large part, inherited from the country's past of colonialism and slavery, and are strengthened by the ways in which agriculture has been modernized and by the accelerated advancement of urbanization and industrialization.

The CA movement has gone very far in the mobilization of Brazilian society because it gives concrete meaning to abstract claims for human rights and for ethics in politics, and at the same time opens up a space for participation in a country long accustomed to alienation and passivity. The Campaign against Hunger has opened up to a large part of the population the new possibility of participation and of understanding basic community links.

6. EFFECTS OF THE PRACTICE/INNOVATIVE EXPERIENCE

The power to mobilize has been overwhelming. Even convicts have contributed to the Campaign after female inmates in Rio de Janeiro took the initiative of donating the equivalent of one day's food rations a week. Unfortunately, the strength of the movement, which is its decentralized character based on self-organization and local accountability, is also the greatest impediment to a more adequate assessment of its results. It is practically impossible to calculate the amount of resources that have been utilized to this day in the Campaign even if the time and effort of all the volunteers are not taken into account. For example, just the publicity inserts on Globo Network, which reaches 80% of the TV audience in Brazil, would have cost about US\$5 million in six months.

According to opinion polls by IBOPE (one of the largest Brazilian public opinion institutions), conducted in December 1993 and, again, in July 1994 among those 16 years or older, 62% of the population was informed about the Campaign against Hunger; 32% declared their intention to participate or to contribute to the Campaign in some form; and 11% were members of a Committee of Citizens in Action. This degree of participation would be very significant in any community, but it is particularly meaningful in Brazil given its social and political situation.

7. SUITABILITY AND POSSIBILITY FOR UPSCALING

By the end of 1993, the Campaign was undeniably successful in conveying the message that hunger had to be combated immediately, and in mobilizing the population to do it. It was then thought that a step forward could be taken toward finding more permanent solutions to extreme poverty. The urgent nature of the Campaign in 1993 was explicit in its slogans, such as “Hunger Can’t Wait”, but it has always been clear that a definite solution to the problem could not be restricted to merely distributing food, but required creating jobs. A new slogan was then offered to summarize the next stage of the movement: “Food Against Hunger; Jobs Against Misery”. Action should turn both to supporting initiatives to resume economic growth with income distribution and to defining means **of** stimulating the communities to find local employment for their unemployed, supporting the creation of cooperatives, small firms, etc. This new form of the movement is still in the initial stages but there are already many successful initiatives to its credit.

While the movement maintained its urgent nature, the kinds of measures that had to be taken were relatively easier to identify. It was largely a matter of redistributing food in favor of those below a certain level of income. Initiatives in this direction could be taken by anyone. However, when the creation of jobs is the goal, the only possible course of action is exerting pressure on the government, in the normal course of politics.

As a matter **of** fact, many committees had already advanced solutions to the emergency hunger problem that involved creating possibilities for the communities themselves to open up definite opportunities for income generation, utilizing the unemployed or “disguised” unemployed. Projects such as organizing production of consumption goods that involves labor rather than capital goods were already being implemented. Small plants to manufacture clothes, shoes and sandals, processed food, construction materials, furniture, etc., were created in many communities. Groups of workers were organized to supply services like plumbing, house painting and office services. The creation of community vegetable gardens and courses to help improve the skills of workers is also within reach of the movement. These efforts can be very effective in instilling and cultivating in the people the need to fight against social exclusion, to practice solidarity and to build citizenship bonds.

One important concept has been consolidated in all these actions: **partnership**. It **helps** cooperation not only among citizens, but also with the government and with all kinds of institutions, like private and state-owned firms, non-governmental institutions, etc. Again, as with the first stage of the campaign, the quantification of its material results is not possible for the moment.

8. SIGNIFICANCE FOR (AND IMPACT ON) POLICY-MAKING

The initiator of the campaign, Mr. de Souza, used to insist that one of the principal goals of CA is to change the way in which politics is understood and engaged in, by changing the conscience of the public as to how society should be organized. To give priority to the fight against inequality, exclusion and misery **is** to create a society that is safe and stable because all of its members recognize it as their own. The goal of the Campaign is to awaken the sense of responsibility of those who are members of Brazilian society as well as to awaken in those that are excluded, a consciousness of their rights. The degree of social exclusion and indifference reached in Brazil threatened to paralyze it. A new opportunity for Brazilian society was introduced with the struggle for clean and ethical politics. CA hopes to be able to help keep the torch lit by opening up spaces for the building and exercise of citizenship, to ultimately contribute to the creation of a democratic culture in the country. Even if all the other initiatives of CA were to go awry, at least one of its banners would be successful; the dimension of the problem of social exclusion is now public knowledge.

Some left-wing groups have criticized the alleged “assistencialist” character of the Campaign. The criticism is, in fact, deeply misguided. The campaign is actually an exhortation to society to look the problem of exclusion in the face and to understand the need for change. The traditional left tends to see the state as the only solution to every problem. CA believes that society, not the state, is the solution. Citizenship is born when one sees one’s neighbor as a bearer of rights, not when the state declares him or her **so**. If society changes, the state sooner or later will also change. CA relies on the power of society to organize itself and has not been disappointed.

It is particularly important to stress that CA is not just a solidarity movement of the privileged toward the needy. Its central concept is partnership. It **is** not just a question of donating, but of organizing. Many of the most significant initiatives the Campaign has inspired involve the poorer communities organizing themselves to improve awareness of the use of their resources, with or without the help of higher-income groups.

CA believes that it is, in fact, combating a form of paternalism that has been deeply rooted in the minds of the traditional left that only sees the state as the solution to social problems. However, recent history has shown that the alienation **of** society itself is a more serious and difficult problem.

9. POSSIBILITY AND SCOPE OF TRANSFERRING TO OTHER COMMUNITIES OR COUNTRIES

CA has already reached nationwide dimensions in Brazil. While it is a concrete reaction to Brazilian circumstances, its main principles can be valid for many other countries in similar conditions.

Notes

- (1) The poverty line is defined by the level of family income that allows the purchase of a minimum food basket that covers, for the whole family, the minimum nutritional requirements set by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)/World Health Organization (WHO).
- (2) Available supplies include initial stocks of food, plus additional production, and imports less exports.
- (3) Data for 1990, taken from *Mapa do Emprego* (Employment Map), produced by the Central Statistical Office of Brazil (IBGE).
- (4) The **18** largest rural establishments occupy an area equivalent to the whole of Portugal, Switzerland and Holland put together. Of the around 400 million hectares that are privately owned in rural Brazil, only **15** million ha. are officially considered idle, and thus potential targets for redistribution.