

Principles and Conceptions of the Comunidade Solidária (Solidary Community) Program

Simone de Castro Tavares Coelho

First of all, I would like to thank Columbia University for their invitation to participate in the tribute to Professor Ruth Cardoso. It is a great honor for me to have been a student of hers, maybe one of the most constant ones. When I was still an undergraduate student, I had the privilege of having Ruth as my advisor. That continued in my master's degree and, finally in my Ph.D. It had been twenty-six years, of a close relationship where our professor / student interaction evolved to a relation of friendship and sharing of intellectual interests and concerns. The evolution of the themes of our discussions partially reflects the development of forms of relationship between the State and the civil society.

During the eighties, Ruth promoted discussions with her group of supervised students, that focused on investigating the grass-roots organizations of the Brazilian society. By then, we had already understood – differently from most analysts – that the social change would not occur based exclusively on a party-like action, but it should also require the efforts of the organized society. As a matter of fact, many of the social movements of this time went through a process of institutionalization, becoming legal organizations, and allowing the formalization of partnerships with governmental agencies easier and feasible.

Even after the end of my Ph.D., Ruth and I remained involved in continuing discussions based on our shared interests in the theme of the strengthening and the performance of the Third Sector organizations. Ruth agreed to the new developing perspective that had emerged in the 90's, and in which it is understood that the economic growth is not sufficient for making a society more dynamic and for decreasing social exclusion. The prevailing premise is that the social and human resources of a nation must be developed, and that such development does not depend exclusively on the society's ability of generating wealth. In order to fight poverty, the personal and social competences and skills

of the population must be developed, allowing the individuals— by themselves or collectively – meet their needs and improve their quality of life.

Regarding the relationship between the State and the Third Sector, Ruth had the unique opportunity, as First Lady, to promote and build new bases for such relation. In her text "*O fortalecimento da sociedade civil*" ("The strengthening of civil society"), she stated that she believed the concept of Third Sector "describes a space of participation and experimentation of new models for thinking about and acting on social reality". She also explained the emerging of the Comunidade Solidária project, which is the bonding of this theoretical perception with a practical and objective action of consolidating a space for a dialogue, a platform of common actions, involving the government and different sectors of society.

Ruth's intention, thus, was to facilitate the combination of two logics: the governmental one – distinguished by the universality of the political procedures – and the one of civil society – marked by specific interests and the experimentation of new forms of action. However, she advised against the danger of an easy enchantment by the actions performed by the Third Sector, characterized by innovation, experimentation and dynamism, which stimulated analysts who believed this was a way for overcoming social problems. According to Ruth, the space for the governmental actions is clearly demarcated, ensuring the essential and universal rights of the citizens. The relationship between the government and the Third Sector became an effective and inspiring partnership, and they are complementary.

A passionate advocate of the improvement of such relationship, Ruth, with her subtle but firm convictions, had always urged the government to get more creatively committed to the Third Sector's success. As a matter of fact, the project for the creation of the Comunidade Solidária Council, in 1995, expresses a critical view of the historical pattern of the Brazilian social politics. Ruth takes a risk by proposing something new, facing controversies and introducing questions about the old forms of relationship between State and civil society.

Therefore, the Comunidade Solidária program emerges not as an institution intended to "accommodate" the First Lady, but as something that had been extensively planned and studied by a whole group of intellectuals led by Ruth

Cardoso. It also established a space to put into practice and test convictions of new forms of relationship.

In the sphere of the Comunidade Solidária program, reflections started to be produced that pointed to the advancements of this partnership. Such reflections ranged from the development of concrete actions to the very improvement of the Brazilian legislation that regulates both - the sector and the relationship itself. They pointed to the growth of the citizen protagonism and the number of its organizations acting within the public sphere; and, moreover, to the configuration of spaces for the collective deliberation of values and interests, allowing the emergence of a **network society**.

Those reflections drew the attention to the concepts of Social and Human Resources, emphasizing their relevance for the development of public policies. They alerted to the fact that the great challenge for those responsible for the public policies, consisted in articulating the offer of public programs and services, with the identification and mobilization of these local social resources. As a consequence, the beneficiaries could participate in the implementation of the proposed actions.

Little by little, different sectors in Fernando Henrique's government started to understand that this kind of organizations presented a redistributive efficiency and an aggregating efficacy. In this perspective, the intent was to replace actions and programs with an exclusive assistance characterized by actions that reinforce the autonomy of societies and partnerships.

According to the document in which it was established, the Comunidade Solidária Council intended to be "*a new instrument for political dialogue and promotion of partnerships between State and society for fighting poverty and exclusion by means of innovative initiatives of social development*". Ruth stated that she did not wish to create an institution that lasted long, but that only built programs based on partnerships between public agencies and organizations of society. She believed that, in this way, it would be possible to achieve a greater rationality in the use of the resources of private and public origin.

As a matter of fact, Fernando Henrique's government was the first to recognize the importance of such decentralized initiatives, commanded by different actors, and despite acting in accordance with their own logics, aimed at public or collective goods and services.

If, on one hand, there was the acknowledgement of the importance of those organizations' performance in facing the social issues, on the other hand, the insufficiently institutionalized practices, which were only rarely political, also draw the attention.

The actions of the Comunidade Solidária Council promoted an unusual commotion within the governmental area. Commanded by Ruth, the Council's intention was to articulate more concrete actions, structured in a partnership between the three sectors – government, market and civil society. All of these themes were (and maybe still are) controversial, and there was no consensus, not even among the different governmental areas, on what concerned to the possible trends of such relation.

The need to involve the different governmental sectors into the discussion about how to regulate the partnership with the organizations of the civil society, resulted in the fact that the very structuring of the Comunidade Solidária program forcibly promoted such interaction; 11 State ministers and 21 members of the civil society, representing different sectors, had seats in its Council.

The discussions promoted by the Council were extremely important, due to the following reasons:

- 1st. Bring into the political agenda the understanding of the need to establish partnerships with the market and civil society;
- 2nd. Make the government aware of the dimension of the social actions that take place outside the governmental sphere;
- 3rd. Discuss and encourage a series of alterations in the legislation, so that the market and civil society were stimulated to make more investments in the social area and the State then could count on better instruments in these possible partnerships

There were considerable advancements regarding the bureaucracy that an organization had to face to be considered public utility and to obtain exemptions or subventions. But, we also learned that, some of those organizations that had obtained those privileges ***were not being effectively inspected.***

Coordinated by Ruth, those discussions generated the amendment of a considerable portion of the legal mark that establishes norms for the existence of such entities; over twenty alterations were made in the legislation or in the norms of regulating agencies. Still in Fernando Henrique's first term in office, a document was issued presenting eight themes as priorities¹:

- 1- The more adequate classification of the **administrative records** of these organizations, in order to ensure the acknowledgement of their specificities and the simplification of legal procedures;
- 2- The adequacy of the mechanisms regulating **contracts and formal agreements**;
- 3- Investment on the credibility of the organizations, creating **instruments for self-regulation** to ensure a greater social control over the actions of public interest;
- 4- **Institutional mechanisms for making** the entities managers **accountable** for administrating the resources;
- 5- The quest for a new model of funding – the **incentive to donations**;
- 6- The **regulation of the voluntary work**, with the constitution of a specific legislation;
- 7- The facilitation of the labor norms in order to allow **fixed-term contracts**.
- 8- Creation of a **unified system of information** about the Third Sector, made available to the public.

This was an important document, which guided the establishment of specific laws such as the one that regulates the Nonprofit Organizations of Public

¹ Document Produced by the Comunidade Solidária Council, *Marco Legal do Terceiro Setor: sexta rodada de interlocução política do Conselho do Comunidade Solidária* (Legal Regulation of the Third Sector: sixth round of political interlocution of the Comunidade Solidária Council), 1997, p. 21.

Interest (*OS/P*) and those regulating the voluntary work and the temporary contracts, among others.

In 2004, during Fernando Henrique's second term in office, the Inter-ministerial Work Group of the Legal Mark was created, based on the interlocution experience established by the *Comunidade Solidária* program. The work group was coordinated by the General Secretariat of the Presidency. It brought together, members of the ministries of the Staff: Social Development, Education, Finances, Justice, Social Security and Labor. It aimed at discussing the improvement of the legal aspects regarding the Third Sector.

The general recognition by society about Ruth's serious purposes when promoting such discussions acted as an endorsement for several institutions representative of the Third Sector, such as the Group of Institutes, Foundations and Corporations and the Brazilian Association of NGOs, to participate and (ok) present propositions, in order to improve the present legislation in force.

Besides leading those alterations to the legal mark, the *Comunidade Solidária* Council took on a new profile as an instrument of political dialogue and construction of a more strategical view. According to the documents, the Council functions were the following:

- Propose and opine about priority actions in the social area;
- Identify new themes and propose strategies of action in a partnership with the government and the civil society;
- Encourage and strengthen the actions of the organized civil society and the citizens' participation;
- Propose ways of interaction with the Third Sector in order to increase the efficiency and the range of action of the civil society's organizations around social themes;
- Promote conscience-raising campaigns for the public opinion in order to fight poverty and social exclusion.

More importantly, the *Comunidade Solidária* Council was accountable for stimulating the mobilization of society and the implementation of innovative

experiences, and for agreeing about and selecting the priorities in the social area.

However, emergency actions for fighting poverty were required, in which resources from different ministries were employed. The Executive Secretariat of the Comunidade Solidária was created to coordinate and articulate these federal actions. It was linked to the staff of the Presidency of the Republic and it operated together with the ministries, to identify the areas of poverty concentration, in order to select more efficient actions to fight it and to guide the employment of resources. The Secretariat was intended to promote the articulation between states and municipalities, trying to integrate actions within the selected areas.

It is important to emphasize that the Comunidade Solidária program had to face a lot of resistance when it tried to implement a **new referential of social action** within the different governmental spheres, which were already accustomed to their own logic of action. They were often subdivided in political feuds and scarcely used to acting in an integrated fashion.

However, the interesting aspect in the Comunidade Solidária action is that, being aware of the federal resistances, it focused its action on the municipalities. In its Council's view, within the local sphere the possibilities of formation of partnerships were broader and the public actions could be better controlled by the community.

The Comunidade Solidária set off a number of programs: Voluntary Work, Solidary Literacy Education, Solidary University, Solidary Qualification, and, later, the Solidary Arts and Crafts . . . All of them were significant examples of the efforts of the Comunidade Solidária program, and their implementation and operation characteristics were based on the establishment of a broad partnership, congregating different governmental sectors, market and organizations of the civil society.

The different themes in each Program allowed a national approach, and, very soon, the extension of their respective actions reached several states and municipalities, with a very significant number of assistance actions.

Shortly before the end of Fernando Henrique second term in office, Ruth made every possible effort in order to transformed the programs in to an independent and legally formalized organizations, apt to subsist as a social action and not to be discontinued in the next government. The Comunidade Solidária program itself also became an organization by the name Comunitas, with actions that were different from those of the specific Programs.

The whole movement – stimulated and promoted by the Comunidade Solidária Council – contributed to the occurrence of growth, not only in the number of organizations in the civil society, but also in the number of Brazilian private companies that were developing some kind of social action.

As a matter of fact, according to the census executed by IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística – Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), in 1996 there were one hundred and seven thousand (107,332) nonprofit organizations in Brazil, and, in 2005 that number had grown to two hundred and seventy-five thousand (275,895), which represented an increase of one hundred fifty-seven percent (157%).

Anyway, by stimulating the growth of the Third Sector and the public / private partnership, the Fernando Henrique government gave an important step towards its structuring. When his office ended and the Lula government started, the Comunidade Solidária Council was dissolved, and some of its smaller programs migrated to the NGO Comunitas.

Although Ruth had predicted its termination from the very beginning, the closing of that space for interlocution was a great loss for the sector. Nothing similar was instituted in the following office and, especially, in a time that was crucial to go on planning strategies to establish norms for that relation. After all, the significant growth of those organizations and, consequently, the increase of contracts with governmental agencies have also resulted in problems for the establishment of more effective control and regulation mechanisms. News about deviations of public funds and frauds started to emerge in connection with those organizations. The governmental agencies intensify their inspections in a less rational way, presenting countless obstacles for the concretization of contracts and agreements.

Unfortunately, we have walked backwards on what concerns the establishment of a more harmonious relationship between State and civil society. The re-establishment of a space for discussion and articulation should be introduced in the political agenda. After all, the actions are occurring, and the social dynamism expresses itself in the response to the internal and external stimuli and in their absorption. The globalization allows, inclusively, an interaction with international institutions, collecting resources that are pulverized in a myriad of actions. If the global experience has been demonstrating that the cooperative relationship between the government and the Third Sector has been advantageous for both parties, it would be worth to resuming some of the regulation propositions of the Comunidade Solidária program. Especially those focused on a technical rationality and a control of results in a methodologically more consistent fashion. A great challenge for the public administration, no doubt!

It is within this context that Ruth Cardoso – with her indisputable seriousness, her prudent attitudes and her respectability conquered in every sector – will be missed, not only by us, her former students and colleagues of investigation and intellectual formulations, but also by the entire Brazilian society.