Ruth Cardoso and the Comunidade Solidária (Solidary Community): coherence and innovation

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I am honored to participate in this tribute to Ruth Cardoso. I consider myself privileged for having been her student from my undergraduate to my doctoral studies at the University of São Paulo and later having accompanied her in the formulation and implantation of the Comunidade Solidária Council, in her untiring advocacy of the need to reinforce civil society with the correct balance between "*the driving force of moral indignation and the enlightening wisdom of reason in facing the Brazilian social issue*"[2], to paraphrase her friend and collaborator, Vilmar Faria.

I am speaking, therefore, as an apprentice. It is in from this standpoint that I will attempt to present the Comunidade Solidária, its format, areas of activity and its innovative programs, and suggest the relationship between them and some themes that highlighted Ruth Cardoso's trajectory as an intellectual and social activist.

Some concepts, ideas, phenomena and organizations have an intrinsically paradoxical nature. I will explain: understanding of them is almost inversely proportional to the enthusiasm they arouse and the support they garner. This is the case with Comunidade Solidária, whose diffusion took place much more quickly than actual understanding of the phenomenon.

It would be no exaggeration to say that Ruth Cardoso spent a good part of the almost 8 years in which she led the Council of Comunidade Solidária explaining what it was. She understood that, by explaining its principles, goals

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[2] Faria, Vilmar Evangelista. Importância das Estratégias inovadoras de parceria. In Cardoso, Ruth, Franco, Augusto, Werthein Jorge and Draibe, Sônia (Orgs). **Estratégias inovadoras de parceria no combate à exclusão social.** Seminar organized by. Comunidade Solidária, UNDP, UNESCO, Brasilia, January 2000.

and format, she was helping to broaden and renew the debate about the relationship between civil society and the State.

Here I should perhaps qualify my initial statement. I mentioned enthusiasm and support, but it should be understood that the first years of Comunidade Solidária were not easy. There was explicit resistance to the initiative, both from sectors of the federal government and from society, by nature heterogeneous and complex. The media, in turn, not only amplified this resistance but also, most of the time, provided its own interpretation – without ever examining the issues involved in great detail – of what the Council of Comunidade Solidária and its programs were.

I tend to believe that among the critics, more were casual rather than hard line. It was, and still is, difficult to dispel some of the impressions that developed about Comunidade Solidária. Ruth Cardoso's openness to dialog surprised her interlocutors, from the well-intentioned uninformed, to those whose intentions were not so benign and the outright critics.

The most common misconception was the supposition that Comunidade Solidária was responsible for the federal government's social policies and thus demand from it results beyond its scope of action. Although linked with the Presidency, Comunidade Solidária was not the Government. The membership of the Council of the Comunidade Solidária contributed to this misunderstanding since it included representatives of the government as well as different sectors of civil society.

However, Ruth Cardoso would reply, it was not a question of conceptual precision but rather of the need to define the area in which Comunidade Solidária was active and where the programs had been built, because their continuity depended on guaranteeing this autonomy from the government. And this is how things were done, as we will see further on.

People also found this new approach strange. Comunidade Solidária subverted the existing model of social action. Its format and orientation bore no

relationship to the Legião Brasileira de Assistência (LBA or Brazilian Legion of Assistance), an organization that had traditionally been presided by the first ladies of Brazil and that had just been extinguished. Discrete, Ruth Cardoso used to say that being wife of the president (she refused the title of first lady, as was widely publicized) had given her the opportunity to create Comunidade Solidária. But undoubtedly, in addition to this opportunity, it was her intellectual background and her democratic spirit, always attentive to the importance of debating different viewpoints, that enabled her to conceive of Comunidade Solidária as a space that, as she used to say "*tried a new way of undertaking social projects and proposed a new standard for relations between the state and society*[3]".

Resistance to Comunidade Solidária decreased as its innovative programs grew in scale and, consequently, visibility; the rounds of political interlocution promoted by the Council gained in meaning and intelligibility for ever larger circles.

Nevertheless, it would seem that understanding of Comunidade Solidária continues to be restricted to certain areas. Comprehension remains nebulous does not ring true, especially when the organization is credited with the paternity of social programs that diverge radically from everything that Comunidade Solidária and Ruth Cardoso stood for and did.

I have no intention of "explaining" Comunidade Solidária. In addition to not being qualified for such, I believe it is part of Comunidade Solidária's ambiguous nature to never be completely understood. Therefore, I would not dare to circumscribe in half a dozen definitions, ignoring the Ruth Cardoso's sound teaching: always be wary of that which we suppose we understand and of rigid, permanent structures; flexibility and dynamism where her favorite terms when talking about her ideas for Comunidade Solidária and its programs.

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[3] Cardoso, Ruth. Apresentação. In Cardoso, Ruth, C.L; Franco, Augusto et alli (orgs). **Comunidade Solidária – Fortalecendo a sociedade, promovendo o desenvolvimento.** Rio de Janeiro, Comunitas, 2002.

The Council of Comunidade Solidária : format and areas of activity

Created by decree in 1995 by president Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Comunidade Solidária, as I mentioned previously, consisted of government representatives, such as ministers from the social area , and 28 representatives of civil society: leaders of NGOs, university students, intellectuals representing the business community, the cultural area etc.

Comunidade Solidária's activities took place on three main fronts:

- Promoting public dialog, by means of what were called "rounds of political interlocution";
- The strengthening of civil society and
- The development of innovative programs

The rounds of political interlocution

The rounds of political interlocution promoted by Comunidade Solidária stemmed from apprehension of the need to build new channels for dialog and negotiation between the government and society.

This question was not new to Ruth Cardoso; it had previously been evident in her intellectual concerns. In the 1980's Ruth Cardoso had undertaken a number of studies into social movements, based upon which she wrote an article in which she stated that the new movements, the new forms of pressure were a manner of presenting rather than representing interests; it was a form of pressure which gets close to the State or whoever will present the claim, presenting its interests because it is outside the traditional system of representation[4].

[4] Cardoso Ruth, Os Movimentos populares no contexto da consolidação democrática. In. Reis, F. W. e O'Donnell, G. (orgs,). **A Democracia no Brasil: problemas e perspectivas.** São Paulo, Verbo, 1988.

As we are aware, one of the main issues in contemporary political science is the question of representative democracy and forms of representation in society. Ruth Cardoso indicated the need to establish other representation mechanisms. Although aware of the difficulties involved in arriving at them, because far from being a unanimity, civil society by its very nature is a mass of contradictions, Ruth Cardoso considered it essential to insist on this issue and propose other mechanisms of representation that went beyond the traditional ones.

These conceptual antecedents were to be resumed in the middle of the 1990's, when Comunidade Solidária elected as one of its key themes the discussion of the relationship between civil society and the State, leading to rediscussion of the concept of civil society itself.

This is the context in which the rounds of political interlocution took shape. It was in fact a new Comunidade Solidária strategy. Instead of continuing to directly engage the government on the question of the urgency of establishing a development agenda – the response to which was insufficient[5] – Comunidade Solidária sought to open a space for public debate on questions of fundamental importance in improving living conditions for the people:

Starting in 1996, with the question of agricultural reform, fourteen rounds of political interlocution were conducted up until 2002[6]; each of which was carefully prepared and involved government and non-government stakeholders linked with the specific question. In total, 500 interlocutors were directly mobilized. Recognizing conflicts and always seeking points of convergence between the interests of the different stakeholders, Comunidade Solidária sought to establish an agreed agenda of procedures that demanded the

[5] In May 1996, the Comunidade Solidária Council had written and sent a document to President Fernando Henrique Cardoso in which it requested that economic and social issues be given equal priority. Dissatisfaction with the reply to the document and the resignation of two of its councilors led Comunidade Solidária to revise its position and invent a new manner of promoting dialog between the Government and society. The three areas of activity were thus defined during this moment of crisis.

[6] For a detailed review, see **Seis Anos de Interlocução Política – metodologia, resultados e avaliação 1996 -2002**. Brasília, December 2002.

participation of the three branches of State power – the Legislative, Executive and Judiciary – and of civil society.

I will not examine each of these rounds of political interlocution and the ways in which they contributed to the resolution of the questions in debate. I will limit myself to stating that perhaps one of the main merits of these rounds was to show that it was possible to establish a new standard of relationship between the state and society and rehearse new ways of presenting and representing interests.

Strengthening civil society

In the introduction to a publication on Comunidade Solidária[7], Ruth Cardoso wrote: "*The course of Comunidade Solidária was not concluded on December 31, 2002. And in a way, neither did it begin on January 1 1995. Strengthening society and promoting development have been strategic priorities for a long time and do not have a scheduled date to end*".

For Ruth Cardoso, Comunidade Solidária should necessarily reflect the transformations taking place in Brazilian society, in which the need to strengthen society and overcome inequalities through innovative programs will always be fundamental questions.

There was a reason for Ruth Cardoso to think in terms of a continuum. These questions had accompanied her when she was a social researcher. Viewed from this perspective, Comunidade Solidária was a consequence of ethical and intellectual concerns that had arisen 20 years earlier at the beginning of the 1980's, and which were given form when her husband Fernando Henrique Cardoso was elected president of the republic.

[7] Cardoso, Ruth, C.L; Franco, Augusto et alli (orgs). **Comunidade Solidária – Fortalecendo a sociedade, promovendo o desenvolvimento.** Rio de Janeiro, Comunitas, 2002.

In 1981, together with some colleagues and advisees[8], Ruth created Cedac (Centro de Estudos e Documentação para a Ação Comunitária or Center of Studies and Documentation for Community Action). The main objective of the center, which operated from a pleasant house in São Paulo, according to its founding charter, was "*to provide support for community institutions, groups and associations through the development and management of projects of interest to the community, the organization of courses and seminars and the development of social studies and projects*".

Ruth Cardoso stressed that Cedac, more than a research center, was a space for "*discussion and criticism, where academic competence may dialog with the demand and the questions generated by the dynamics of contemporary society*"[9]. Based on this understanding, Cedac functioned for around 5 years as a kind of laboratory for discussing the themes put forward by the social movements or sectors (young people, the feminist movement, unions, grass roots organizations) in a society that was undergoing transformation and was gaining a voice with the redemocratization of the Brazilian State.

By the 1990's, civil society had become much more complex and contradictory. Fortunately, by this time the Brazilian State was much more democratic than the one we had at the beginning of the 1980's. The Council of Comunidade Solidária was betting on the "effectiveness of a partnership between the State and civil society as a channel for action"[10]; we might also add the mission of the pioneering organization Cedac: "so that [the Council] may dialog with the demands and the questions posed by the dynamics of contemporary society"[11].

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[8] Guita Debert Green, Eunice Durham and José Augusto Guilhon, among others were among its founders and first directors.

[9] Charter of the creation of the Centro de Estudos e Documentação para a Ação Comunitária. São Paulo, 1981.

[10] Cardoso, Ruth. A experiência brasileira no cenário latino-americano. In Cardoso, Ruth, Franco, Augusto, Werthein Jorge and Draibe, Sônia (Orgs). **Estratégias inovadoras de parceria no combate à exclusão social.** Archives of seminar held by Comunidade Solidária. Comunidade Solidária, UNDP, UNESCO, Brasília, January 2000.

[11] Cedac Establishment Charter, 1981.

One premise in the activities of the Comunidade Solidária Council was the understanding that public policy should not be mistaken for state policy, a point underscored by Ruth Cardoso in nearly all of her lectures: "*offering public services is an obligation of the State, but working towards decreasing inequality is a task for the whole of society*"[12]

Ruth Cardoso left no doubt as to the State's duty to provide universal services in the areas of health, education, and human rights. But in the case of more specific social questions and/or more discriminated sectors that require differentiated expertise and approaches in the formulation of affirmative policies in order to achieve inclusion (such as the question of women, young people, blacks, homosexuals), the participation of civil society organizations is fundamental. Ruth Cardoso did, however, make one proviso: on planning its interventions for these sectors, civil society should bear in mind the place occupied by its projects in the overall body of opportunities offered by the State. These are, without doubt, public policies, and the challenge is precisely to integrate them into the existing institutional context. A good example of this kind of cooperation is the Alfabetização Solidária (Literacy) program, which mobilizes universities and resources from companies in districts in which illiteracy rates are very high. The objective is to bring people who cannot read and write together and show that they have the capacity to learn and put them into special classrooms. But the mission does not end there: upon achieving a minimum level of proficiency, the students are encouraged to enter the public teaching system; for this to happen, the Alfabetização Solidária (Literacy) program provides local governments with the information they need so that they may compete for the funding available for this particular educational area and thus expand their capacity to provide services in the municipal district.

Another reason for cooperation between civil society organizations and the State in the formulation and implementation of public policies is the capillarity of the former; they are able to reach places inaccessible to the State and thus achieve greater effectiveness.

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[12] Cardoso, Ruth. "Sustentabilidade, o desafio das políticas sociais no século 21". São Paulo em perspectiva. Vol.18. nº 2 , São Paulo, April/June 2004.

Perception of the transformations taking place in the State and society in Brazil, allied with Ruth Cardoso's intellectual clarity and her coherence with democratic values, led Comunidade Solidária, after a wide-ranging consultation with leaders in the Third Sector, to develop a Civil Society Reinforcement program[13] active on three fronts:

- a review of the legislation governing Third Sector activities in Brazil;
- encouraging volunteer work with creation of a Volunteer Program and a network of Volunteer Worker centers nationwide;
- support for the production and dissemination of knowledge/information on and for the Third Sector.

I will not dwell on these questions. However it is important to stress the pertinence of these subjects in the Brazilian agenda, in particular the revision of legislation governing Third Sector activities at a moment when these were growing and diversifying a great deal and were governed by legislation dating from the 1930' and 1940's. It was imperative to initiate discussions on this legislation and on the whole concept of civil society. Certainly, to better understand these questions in the context of Brazil it would be necessary to undertake a comparative study of the differences between the Third Sector in Brazil and in the United States; since this is the theme of Simone Coelho's doctoral study, she will certainly comment on these differences.

The innovative programs

Why are the programs that originated from Comunidade Solidária, such as Alfabetização Solidária (Literacy), Artesanato Solidário (Handicrafts), Capacitação Solidária (Training) and Universidade Solidária (University) innovative?

[13] The program received financial support from the Inter-American Development Bank

In addition to their positive results in combating poverty and illiteracy in Brazil, results which have been systematically assessed, the programs are innovative for a number of reasons.

Firstly because they rupture old social policy paradigms. Poverty costs a lot of money, which means it is necessary to go beyond social assistance measures that merely reinforce the dependence of the beneficiaries – generally those considered to be "needy" or "excluded".

I should explain that Ruth Cardoso knew that some forms of assistance are necessary, even inevitable. But she believed that social policies should be lead to emancipation, promoting local development and vesting those involved with autonomy. They should be conceived to combat poverty and not just domesticate it with isolated hand outs.

She used to say that social programs should not be eternal, feeding an ongoing cycle of misery. They should have a beginning, a middle and an end. They should have clear objectives. They should be assessed, and they should present results. The innovative programs originating from Comunidade Solidária adhere to all these principles.

The second innovative characteristic is the focus of social policy. She stated the poverty is not the same everywhere; it manifests itself in different ways and divisions along the lines of gender, age and generation, among others, need to be taken into account. We have to be attentive to these different manifestations if we want to present alternatives for overcoming poverty.

At the beginning of the organization's Literacy Program, Ruth Cardoso argued that pockets of illiteracy should be prioritized; thus the first municipal districts to be selected to implement the program were those with the highest illiteracy rates.

Although focus is essential, it alone is not enough to ensure success in fighting poverty. In addition to determining the target public, it is also necessary

to establish the methodological resources necessary to raise the self-esteem of the people involved, to recognize the potential of the communities and the potential to develop social capital. Without resorting to innovative methodologies, there is a serious risk that this focus could lead to discrimination of the beneficiaries, making inclusion even more difficult.

The Artesanato Solidário (Handicraft) program exemplifies how these considerations are translated into field projects.

Created in 1998[14], Artesanato Solidário proposed to look at the Brazilian reality, especially the country's poorer regions, in a differentiated way. It is based on the premise that alongside the material poverty in these places there is great wealth, in the form of the people's know-how, their traditions. This immaterial wealth is expressed through handicrafts. This is the starting point for generating work and income and thus improving living conditions for inhabitants in regions selected because of their low human development index. This innovative conception employed in Artesanato Solidário corresponds to a social technology focused on identifying a local asset, in this case, traditional handicrafts, raising the self-esteem of those engaged in the project and developing social capital.

From the more than 100 projects undertaken, I am going to talk about the Veredas project, which covers 5 municipal districts in the state of Minas Gerais. In the Veredas region, manual spinning and weaving, important activities for inhabitants of the region in the past, were undervalued and on the verge of disappearing. Very poor, the region offers virtually no opportunities for work, the main economic activity being the cultivation of cotton on large rural landholdings.

[14] In 2002, Artesanato Solidário was instituted as a civil association. In ten years, the number of places attended and craftsmen involved in ArteSol's work has increased. Today there are more than 100 projects involving different types of handicrafts in 17 states. More than 70 craftsmen's associations have been formed as a result of its activities.

The starting point for the Veredas project was to promote the revitalization of manual spinning and weaving so they could present an alternative of work and income for women in the region. A diagnosis was conducted in the five municipal districts to gather information about the handicraft techniques and the socio-economic profile of those interested in participating in the project. This served as a basis for detailing the field work.

Of the almost 150 women, resident in the five districts, around one third are family heads, almost 20% are unable to read and the great majority, although declaring that they can read and write, did not finish the first stage of basic education. Around 20% are aged up to 40; the great majority are over forty, the main concentration being in the 40 to 50 year age band.

As in other projects administered by Artesanato Solidário[15], the Veredas project organized training in different areas, as well as more ludic and cultural activities. Undertaking these activities required the implementation of a rigorous work plan by ArteSol and demanded sensibility and flexibility so it could be adapted to the needs and interests of the craftswomen and to the resources available locally.

The project lasted 3 years (2003-2006). Its main goals were to raise the craftswomen's self-esteem and encourage them to organize a handicraft production group. Thus, the field activities always had two dimensions: the individual, that is the personal development of each woman participating in the project, and the formation of a production nucleus of woven products.

Thus, leaving the house to meet up with the other women, having a program of project-related activities and a space for the group meetings are simple factors that contribute towards raising the women's self-esteem, encouraging them to take greater care with their appearance, helping them get organized and achieve some independence from household and family chores.

[15] From 1998 to 2008 Artesanato Solidário (Handicraft) had already developed more than 100 projects in 17 states in Brazil, directly engaging more than 5 thousand craftsmen in its activities.

By using local know how as a starting point, Artesanato Solidário was able to identify the master spinners and the master weavers, in general the older women, promoting them to the position of teachers in the workshops organized to disseminate this know-how. In addition to making them feel valued and more important, this decision helps strengthen the links between the different generations and underscores the importance of transmitting this immaterial heritage. Further work involving self-esteem was undertaken in the form of organizing meetings between the craftswomen and the surrounding community, ensuring that they gained recognition. Examples of these activities are visits by the craftswomen to historical and commercial centers and the organization of craft exhibitions in town halls, among others. What was important was to provide opportunities for these women to develop a feeling of belonging to their communities and to achieve recognition for their know-how.

The Veredas projects provokes different kinds of impact in the region. In addition to generating work and income for 150 women (benefiting around 750 people indirectly) it brought about profound changes in the lives of each of them. I mention in particular the women's self-confidence in performing activities which, before participating in the Veredas Project, they would not have dared to do, considering them to be too difficult[16]. In other words, what they considered to be difficult before is now easy for them. Furthermore, they have incorporated new activities and responsibilities into their daily routines; they have their own income; they are determined to get ahead and are proud of the activities which they undertake with such creativity.

The Veredas project is representative of another concern that Ruth Cardoso had. For her, small organizations (associations, cooperatives etc.) are important instruments for strengthening civil society and, for this reason, they should be supported and encouraged.

[16] The handicraft-related activities to that the women consider difficult include: establishing a price for the products (89%); transporting them (79%); buying the raw materials necessary for the work (86%). Other difficulties pointed out relate to their daily routines: public transport; getting and checking change (52%); reconciling housework and handicrafts (62%).

Thus after the handicraft production groups are formed, Artesanato Solidário encourages them to become formalized as craftsmen's associations or cooperatives. To continue with the same case, in Veredas a series of workshops were held, covering areas such as managing collective work, interpersonal relations, working associatively, among others; today the craftswomen are organized in five associations, one in each municipal district. Working cooperatively, they form a single production chain, with each association specialized in a specific activity (spinning, dying fabrics with natural dyes and weaving) producing yarn, shawls, covers, table mats and other handcrafted products that already have an established consumer market.

Effectively, for Ruth Cardoso, only through learning, exchanging experience and know-how and dialog is it possible to create opportunities to overcome isolation and social inequality and develop social capital. This perception might perhaps be attributed more to her background as a social scientist and university teacher than to her more recent reading on the subject. It is no coincidence that all the programs originating from Comunidade Solidária have a learning component: literacy, providing young people with professional training, conceiving traditional handicrafts as know-how to be shared. Education – in the broadest meaning of the term – thus took on different formats in the programs originating from Comunidade Solidária.

The Literacy (Alfabetização Solidária) and University (Universidade Solidária) programs, for example, engage students and universities as partners in activities projected to promote literacy or citizenship. The Training (Capacitação Solidária) program is aimed at organizing contests and management courses for small civil society organizations to develop vocational training projects for young people in the areas in which they operate.

We derive our learning from the encounter between the ideas of Ruth Cardoso, in the form of the Handicraft program (Artesanato Solidário) and the 150 craftswomen from the Veredas region: overcoming limitations, establishing communications and broadening horizons are always the best way of fighting poverty. The Veredas women, now more than ever prepared to fight for a better

life, are proud of their know-how and of the feeling of solidarity that gives them strength.

In conclusion, the programs originating from Comunidade Solidária are innovative because they creatively strive to confront old and new social problems (illiteracy, lack of work and opportunities for generating income, lack of professional qualification among young people, the isolation of communities, lack of access to information, among so many others) and are attentive to the possibility that their missions and social technologies may have become obsolete. They are flexible enough to question whether they still fulfill the purpose they were created for or whether they are merely reproducing actions which are no longer relevant or required by society.

The transformation of these programs into civil society organizations was begun in 2000. This process stemmed from what was already underway since 1996. The point that most stands out is Ruth Cardoso's bet on the strengthening of the Third Sector as a partner to the State in conducting social policies. Secondly, the program design already took this into account: by preserving their autonomy from the government area, the intention was precisely to ensure their future continuity[17]. As a result, each one of the innovative programs - Training (Capacitação Solidária), University (Universidade Solidária), Literacy (Alfabetização Solidária), Handicraft (Artesanato Solidário), in its own time and way, developed along its own course. They are all now civil society organizations that are fully autonomous from the Comunidade Solidária Council.

In April, 2003, the Comunidade Solidária Council was extinguished by a decree issued by President Luis Ignácio Lula da Silva.

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[17] Cardoso, R.C.L. " A experiência brasileira no cenário latino-americano". In Cardoso, R.; Franco, Augusto *et alli.* (orgs). **Estratégias Inovadoras de Parceria no Combate à Ação Social – Avaliação, diálogo e perspectiva**. Comunidade Solidária/UNPD/UNESCO. Brasília, 2000

Final Considerations

Transformations in the State and in civil society are not linear. They frequently suffer from regressions and setbacks and it is common to see the reemergence of old concepts and outdated practices in the field of social policy and in the struggle to extend citizenship.

Irrespective of these fluctuations, however, there is a larger, positive movement towards an increase in both government and, more particularly, non-governmental initiatives to confront social problems. According to an IBGE[18] study, there are currently close to 300 thousand Third Sector organizations in Brazil, with highly pulverized areas of activity.

As is to be expected in a Third Sector of this size, there is a high degree of internal heterogeneity. In these organizations, generally speaking, it is possible to see a positive movement towards specialization of services, a refinement of technologies and investment in training personal, in management and in planning.

This drive by Third Sector organizations to improve performance and results (in terms of the classical indicators of efficiency and effectiveness) occurs, understandably, in parallel with increased competition among them for public and private funds, which are finite. And the efforts to ensure the sustainability of the innovative Comunicade Solidária programs, today all constituted as civil society organizations, are a testament to this.

In addition to the funding difficulties faced by Third Sector organizations, which tend to increase as a consequence of the global financial crisis, Brazil's social policy does not help strengthen them nor does if favor the emergence of innovative social programs in the sphere of the State itself.

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[18] As Fundações Privadas e Associações sem Fins Lucrativos no Brasil: 2002", study conducted by the IBGE in partnership with IPEA, ABONG and GIFE.

On a number of occasions in tributes to Ruth Cardoso, we have heard that the Bolsa Familia (Family Stipend), a very popular social program run by the current government, was inspired by Ruth Cardoso. Undoubtedly the intention of the speakers is to honor her. However, these references, as well as illustrating the limited understanding of what Comunidade Solidária represented in the social policy area – with its new way of seeing the Brazilian reality and proposing alternatives for overcoming its serious problems -, also demonstrate how poverty is associated with dependency-creating social assistance in Brazilian political culture.

The most serious consequence of this misunderstanding, as is already evident, is the regression we are seeing in the way social programs are conceived and implemented in the country.

Currently, the Government's biggest social program is the Bolsa Família. Although the program undoubtedly has a focus, which is the starting point for any initiative to combat poverty, Bolsa Família does nothing to develop the latent capacities of the groups it is targeted at. The benefits handed out to poor people via this program currently constitute a great obstacle to innovative social initiatives that promote community engagement and the proposition of sustainable solutions, the kind of initiative normally executed by civil society organizations. Even if there is one program or another government program oriented to strengthening citizenship, these are unable to compete with the reigning model of the State as provider, which has been nurturing the dependence of the poor. This is even more serious in a context in which it is fundamental to reduce government spending as a result of the international crisis.

But we should not feel perplexed. After all, Ruth Cardoso had already warned us: when associated with clientelism, forms of assistance are transformed into dangerous instruments of power.