

PROVIDING **FOR** PARTNERSHIP

Brazil's First Lady, Ruth Cardoso, has forged a partnership for progress between government and citizens that is transforming her nation's social welfare system and giving new meaning to community service.



TEXT | Daniela Hart

ILLUSTRATION | Elvis Swift

BRAZIL IS CHANGING ITS ENTIRE APPROACH IN dealing with social welfare, and that is due in great measure to Ruth Cardoso, the wife of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, and the Community Solidarity organization over which she presides. When her husband took office in January 1995, everyone expected Dona Ruth, as she is affectionately known, would spend her time locked away in the library with the books she so loves to read. A distinguished anthropologist, she seemed more at ease in university classrooms than in the corridors of power and the cocktail parties of the capital, Brasilia. ¶ She had made it clear during the presidential campaign that, unlike her predecessors, if her husband won the election she would not preside over the Brazilian Legion of Assistance, the government welfare organization that distributed food and funds to the needy. But when the government closed down both the Welfare Ministry and the Legion of Assistance soon after her husband took office, Cardoso came out of the shadows and set up Comunidade Solidaria (Community Solidarity), an organization with a very different strategy for dealing with social problems. ¶ Brazil ranks eighth among world economies, yet it has one of the most unequal income distributions in the world. Alongside a sophisticated First World nation is a poor, forgotten nation, often hidden away in rural areas. In past governments, dealing with poverty was left to the Welfare Ministry and the Legion of Assistance. But the latter was known to be a hotbed of political favors and corruption, and inefficiency was seen as unavoidable. ¶ When she set up Community Solidarity, Cardoso knew that a different kind of organization and a new approach were needed. Drawing on decades of experience in academic research, she gathered a team of researchers to study the problem and suggest possible courses of action. They found that, contrary to common belief, many Brazilians actually do a lot of community service, but in an isolated, uncoordinated way. Cardoso and her team decided there was a need to coordinate activities, to make information available, and to reach and train willing volunteers. The government had projects nobody knew about, while communities had willing ▶

workers, and businesses had the money. They just needed connecting.

Out went the idea of government handouts, and in came the idea of community responsibility and joint government/private-sector action. Cardoso was on familiar ground: As an academic, she had long been researching community action and popular movements.

She was professor in the Department of Political Sciences at the University of Sao Paulo and, later, after the 1964 military coup forced her to leave the country with her husband and three children, professor of anthropology at the University of Chile and the Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences in Santiago.

With her simple and straightforward

"I think in Brazil there is enormous solidarity and readiness to help. Yet if we handed out a questionnaire about volunteer work, people wouldn't even think of what they do as volunteer work."

manner and unaffected style, she has become a much-loved public figure. Even the opposition and the press, only too keen to find fault with her husband, steer shy of criticizing Dona Ruth.

Q: What inspired you to start Community Solidarity?

A: The government closed down the Welfare Ministry and the LBA [Brazilian Legion of Assistance] because they were ineffective in dealing with social development. Also, LBA funds were distributed to an enormous number of organizations—resulting in tiny amounts for each one—and according to highly questionable criteria. So this was not the right model, but nobody knew what the new model should be. The government program mentioned, rather vaguely, Community Solidarity, something that would connect civil society and government. The issue of mobilizing civil society

is exactly what had always interested me as a researcher and anthropologist.

Q: What exactly is Community Solidarity? How does it work?

A: It has full government support but is not a government organization. Our function is to provide a link, to bring civil society and government together to discuss problems and find solutions.

Q: What is the difference between Community Solidarity and the earlier social services structure?

A: The first major difference is that we do not receive government funds. The government provides resources but no financial help. Our funds come from society at large, with whom we establish a partnership. We always plan our actions

thoroughly, starting small and expanding programs as we evaluate their efficiency.

Q: Is Community Solidarity really effective in dealing with Brazil's huge social problems?

A: People criticize us for being slow; they say the problems are too big, that we can't solve them this way, and so on. Obviously we can't solve the huge problems of a massive country—problems based on enormous social inequality—in the space of 10 years or so. They can be diminished but not solved overnight. What matters is the change of focus.

Q: Illiteracy is one of the country's big handicaps. How is Community Solidarity approaching this problem?

A: We have a literacy program that epitomizes our way of working. The Ministry of Education covers 50 percent of costs, but not in money. They have an agreement with us: For all the funds we can raise from businesses, they will provide an equal amount in materials, transport, and salaries for project coordinators.

We also have an extraordinary contribution from universities, with university professors working voluntarily. We made preliminary studies and are concentrating our efforts in those regions where the problem of illiteracy is worst. Each university and business adopts one or more municipalities. The businesses contribute the funds, which are very low (about US\$9 per student per month). University professors go out to these regions and find people with a good education who are eager to teach. These volunteers receive a month's training at the university campus before returning to their regions to set up literacy classes for young people and adults. Since they come from the area, they are able to convince people to come to their classes.

We are showing that for a very low cost, we can efficiently teach students to read and write in six months. At the end of the course, we have a letter-writing competition, and it is very touching to see these students able to write their own letters. We started working in 32 municipalities with illiteracy rates of over 60 percent, reaching about 9,000 students. After two years, we are now in 740 municipalities and have reached 800,000 students.

Q: Unemployment currently affects a large part of the population. Is there any action on that front?

A: Community Solidarity cannot deal with unemployment itself, which is a structural problem. But we can do something about the enormous number of young people entering the job market with little or no formal education. This makes them especially vulnerable. So we set up a program of professional training in large cities, aimed at these youths in particular. Besides professional training, we found it was important that they develop notions of citizenship, knowledge of their rights, and some minimal schooling. ►

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The funds for this program come from the business sector. We do the planning, select the projects, monitor the program, and pass on the funds. Various nonprofit organizations, usually small groups such as local mothers groups or neighborhood associations, actually run the programs. Because of high unemployment in traditional jobs, we ask the groups to come up with different, creative proposals. There have been some very imaginative ideas. One winning proposal from a fishermen's association was to train youths in their community in mussel breeding since fishing was dying out. This group is working together with a university, and, because of the strict monitoring, all the best restaurants in Rio de Janeiro are now buying their product.

We started the program with 1,500 youngsters and today are working in six major cities, reaching 35,000 youths. The most satisfying result of this training program is that 50 percent of the youngsters go back to school. One girl in the program summed up her experience by saying: 'In this course, I learned that I can learn.'

Q: You recently launched a program to support local craftspeople. How does it work?

A: Last year during the drought in

the northeastern part of the country, the government offered support and emergency funds to various rural areas. We saw it as a challenge to make sure that these funds were really well-used. So we started this program to reestablish traditional craft activities that could provide an income to drought-affected families. These craft activities were all disappearing—only one or two people in the community still practiced them.

The result was absolutely fantastic, because in recovering their traditional crafts, people learned to value their traditions and culture. In opening up an opportunity for these craftspeople, the whole community benefited. We are now in 20 municipalities, working in partnership with the Folklore Museum, which has studies on all traditional Brazilian crafts. Consultants go out to the communities, help create craft associations, take necessary materials, and improve the quality of the crafts so they can be sold. We also have business consultants to instruct on the sale possibilities of each of these products. We don't want to have government shops. We want to enable these associations to become autonomous. Community Solidarity never stays long—we are interested in furthering autonomy. Even if Community ▶



"Other than a slight loss of marshmallow, the operation should be a complete success."

Solidarity were to end tomorrow, these programs could all continue.

Q: How was your academic career helpful to you in setting up Community Solidarity?

A: I worked for more than 10 years on these issues, so my vision of Brazilian society was rather different from that of most people. I knew that in Brazil, particularly among the poorer sectors, there is enormous solidarity and readiness to help. Yet if we handed out a questionnaire about volunteer work, people wouldn't even think of what they did as volunteer work. They might have painted their kids' school or looked after children, but they wouldn't call it volunteer work.

Also, I realized the need for thorough research and planning before setting up programs and for having continuous cost/benefit calculations. That is something I bring from my academic experience that is a new concept in this area.

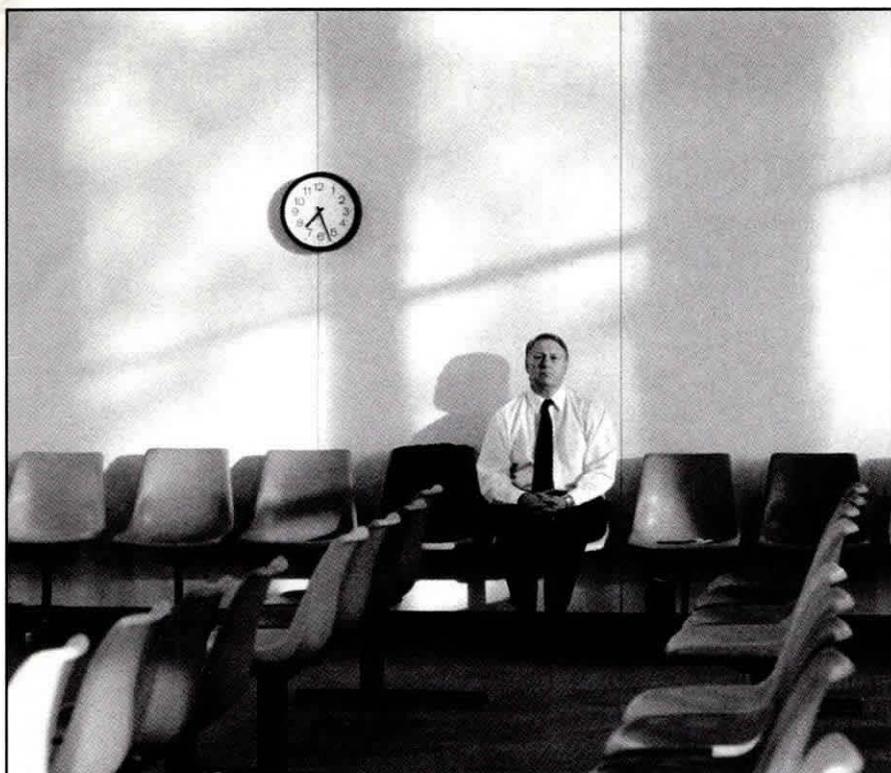
Q: What do you consider your biggest success?

A: I think it has been to show that this partnership between the state and the people is fundamental for things to work well. Civil society need not agree to everything the government does, neither does the government have to submit, but when the two reach an agreement, the partnership is very positive.

Q: What would you like to be doing five years from now?

A: I don't think that far ahead. I used to make plans, until the day I had to pack up my house and leave the country with three small children. I learned it was useless to plan far ahead; we don't really have that much control. But there are many things I like doing. I think I'd like to go back to teaching and doing research, something I always enjoyed. /END/

Daniela Hart, a freelance writer, is a native and resident of São Paulo.



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