

## **Funding social justice**

### ***Human rights funding in Brazil - Building a sustainable movement***

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**Civil society emerged in Brazil, as in many other countries, in the struggle against authoritarian rule. The human rights movement was thus shaped by the need to protest and seek fundamental change in the way the country was governed. There was a widespread perception that with the transition to democracy human rights violations would diminish, especially for the poor and most vulnerable, but this did not happen. Paradoxically, civil society independence is more at risk now, in a 'friendly' democratic environment, than it was in the past, under a hostile authoritarian regime.**

Human rights organizations have now begun to reshape themselves to work under a democratic regime with a fragile rule of law, but there is an urgent need to increase their sustainability and autonomy. Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, funding for human rights organizations has also become more problematic. However, a new initiative, the Brazilian Human Rights Fund, offers hope of creating a more soundly based and sustainable human rights movement.

#### **The human rights movement in Brazil today**

The Brazilian civil society sector is one of the most vibrant in the world. According to a recent study,[1] there were some 45,000 self-identified rights-related groups in Brazil in 2002.[2]

These 45,000 groups include:

- organizations that monitor and denounce human rights violations – it is particularly important for these groups to be independent of the state, since the state is often the prime target of their activity;
- those that seek to build awareness through rights education;
- those that focus more broadly on social change and innovation.

Many of these groups are focused on protecting the rights of the most vulnerable groups (including those of African descent, women, children, people with disabilities and indigenous peoples) or of people living in vulnerable situations (prisoners, people living with AIDS, slum dwellers, etc).

Activists working in these organizations frequently put their lives at risk, especially in the country's most remote areas. In her last report in 2004, Hina Jilani, UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights Defenders,

listed Brazil as one of the 13 most dangerous countries in the world and highlighted the lack of effective response from the government.

Overall, the main challenge for those involved in strategic human rights work in the South is to create the basis for a more effective, autonomous and sustainable movement. This means investing in the creation of a stronger infrastructure for human rights in four areas: education, networking, the legal framework for NGOs, and autonomous funding. This article will consider only the last of these.

### **Sources of human rights funding**

Human rights organizations were traditionally funded through volunteer action, the contributions of committed individuals, churches, international foundations and international cooperation. All were rooted in a community based on common cause, and very few had the professional capacity to raise funds. Resources, like action, tended to focus on immediate issues with very little medium- or long-term planning because the organizations were often officially outlawed and their future extremely uncertain.

With democratization, many international foundations and cooperation agencies have reduced their support for human rights. The Ford Foundation is one of the funders that have continued to support human rights work. Two new players in this arena are AVINA and Ashoka, which support human rights through the idea of the social entrepreneur.

Funds for core institutional support have also diminished, and instead there is a focus on projects. All these things jeopardize the sustainability of human rights NGOs. In response, they and other social justice groups have been struggling to find support from national foundations, the private sector and the state. However, reaching and working with these national sources presents a number of challenges.

### **The problems of finding funds in Brazil**

Among the main problems are the underdevelopment of the philanthropic sector and the fact that human rights is not among its priorities; the need for new language and new approaches to the private sector; and the need for a better understanding of the problems with public funds for human rights.

#### *Foundations*

Many corporate foundations tend to be operating rather than grantmaking foundations, which means that they are using money for their own projects rather than providing much-needed funds to grassroots groups.

#### *The private sector*

In a society with high levels of crime, where human rights activists are seen mainly as defenders of criminals, it is difficult to convince the private sector to fund human rights activities. Private funds more often go to areas like education and poverty alleviation. Moreover, social justice and human rights present particular problems in a society where wealth is built on extreme inequality. However, examples of private sector support for human rights such as from Fundação Abrinq, Natura Cosmetics and Fundação Depaschoal provide grounds for hope.

### *The church*

Church support for human rights, either through providing funds to grassroots organizations or through pressure from the church authorities, has also diminished in the last decades, with the removal or retirement of progressive archbishops and priests. With the election of the new Pope, there are few expectations that this trend will be reversed.

### *The state*

A new element of human rights support is funding from the state. With democratization, many human rights activists or sympathizers became part of the government, both at state and federal levels.

There are, however, limitations on the use of such funds. It is very hard to raise money from the same government that you are accusing of gross human rights violations, so state funding can be directed only to certain kinds of activities like human rights education or more neutral advocacy issues. When it comes to hard core human rights reporting or litigation, public funds are useful only if they are channelled through an independent body that is capable of making impartial and transparent decisions.

### **The Brazilian Human Rights Fund**

In the last year a small group of well-established human rights organizations, in collaboration with the Ford Foundation and other funding sources in Brazil, came together to create the Brazilian Human Rights Fund. Its aim is to provide autonomous funding for small grassroots organizations and innovative human rights projects around the country. It will also contribute to the training of human rights activists, including exchange programmes with organizations in Brazil and other countries. Finally, it will seek cooperation with other similar initiatives nationally and abroad.

But there is much to do. To forge a long-term sustainable human rights fund in Brazil, we have to meet at least four enormous challenges:

- to convince the private and philanthropic sectors that there is an urgent need to strengthen human rights;
- to persuade the state that it needs to channel resources to civil society impartially and in such a way as not to compromise its independence;
- to secure tax incentives for contributions to human rights activities;
- to improve the legal framework of the non-profit sector.

The Brazilian Human Rights Fund will be launched on 10 December 2005, with an initial donation from the Ford Foundation and other funders. In the following months, our first task will be to refine our mission and make choices about areas of investment and number of organizations to be supported. At the same time, we will work hard to raise additional resources from Brazilian companies and foundations and from international donors.

Although it will not solve all the needs of the human rights movement at large, we firmly believe that this new fund can provide the basis for a more active and independent human rights movement in Brazil and have an important long-term impact on the promotion and protection of human rights in the country.

1 *As Fundações Privadas e Associações sem Fins Lucrativos no Brasil* – 2002, IBGE/IPEA/GIFE/ABONG, 2004. In 1996 there were 11,000.

2 However, no more than 500 organizations are affiliated to the National Movement of Human Rights, the largest human rights umbrella organization in the country.

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