The Evolution of Child Rights Councils in Brazil

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If it is true that a child rights framework alters our views and actions towards improving children’s lives, it is also true that the breadth of the concept makes concrete implementation difficult. In this paper the expansiveness of the concept is addressed by focusing attention on a community-based model of child-care derived from the Child Rights Legislation in Brazil. Departing from a general view of the child related policies in Brazil, the child rights monitoring system currently in place in that country is described. The potential contribution of this structure to child well-being is considered, taking account of the fact that the system is still scaling up. It is recommended that key aspects of the structure be systematically evaluated to place it on the most secure operational platform in Brazil. Such an effort will advance the generalizability of the Brazilian experience to other countries and guide applications of this model, particularly in democratically developing societies.

Brazil, Children and Social Policy

As a country, Brazil is surpassed in measures of income inequality (GINI coefficient) only by nine countries. In 2003, the Human Development Index (HDI)—a composite of longevity, education and income information—for Brazil was 0.79, placing it at 63rd in the world, behind other Latin American countries such as Costa Rica or Panama (United Nations Development Program, 2005). Important internal regional differences exist: while a HDI of 0.80 in 2001 would rank the South and Southeast regions of Brazil at 50th in the world, the
Northeast, with a 0.67 figure, would be rated 112th. Even in areas where progress has lately been made in Brazil, such as infant mortality, in which about a 20% relative decrease has been observed each 5 years since the 80s, the contrast between the rate found in the Northeast (44.2) and in the South (19.7) regions is still striking. Racial inequality is another important issue: Brazilian Whites would be ranked 46th (HDI of 0.81) and Blacks 105th (HDI 0.7) (United Nations Development Program, 2003).

Besides regional and racial disparities, there are also age disparities with children being disproportionately affected by poverty. About 30% of the total Brazilian population is younger than 15 years, and 45% of those living below extreme poverty (less than $61 per capita) are in this age group. And the situation is even worse for those who are younger: almost 40% of 5 year olds live with less than $61 per year, compared with 25% in the general population (Neri and Da Costa, 2002).

Despite the negative numbers, significant changes have been happening in Brazil in the last decades. Popular participation has been increasing in a number of areas, after the 20 years spent under dictatorship. The 1988 Federal Brazilian Constitution was drafted by groups determined to develop and solidify democracy in the country. Decentralization of government decisions, actions and control through popular participation was a major objective, and one avenue for this decentralization was the creation of the Municipal Participatory Administrative Councils. Municipal Participatory Administrative Councils are fully implemented and operative in social areas as central as Health (98.5% of the municipalities) and Education (91.0%) (IBAM, 2001), and extensive to areas such as tourism, budget and others. The mean number of Municipal Participatory Administrative Councils in the country is 4.88 per municipality.

It is in a context characterized on the one hand by lack of resources and great social inequality and, on the other hand by a pervasive structure of popular participation that strategies aiming to address children’s conditions have to be considered. In the health area, the remarkable achievements related to AIDS treatment are a good example of the striking impact that social participation can have. The AIDS movement is considered a result of a long-term “large social movement fighting for the democratization of the country via both its political systems and its social practices” (Albadía-Barrero, 2003).

Currently, the most substantial strategy from the Brazilian federal government to tackle children’s needs involves income redistribution schemes based on behaviour incentive programmes. These programmes are directed at a well-defined population (e.g., households with monetary income per capita below $30 per month), conditional on some behaviour on their part, such as school attendance. Similar strategies are in place aimed at child labour and nutrition.

It has become clear that a major problem is the lack of coordination among different programmes. Since the lack of opportunities for a child is almost never