

## Ruth Cardoso – A Tribute April 10, 2009

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I know Ruth Cardoso as an extraordinarily generous spirit, a supportive friend, an inspiring mentor, and a visionary leader. I am honored and grateful to the organizers of **Ruth Cardoso: a Tribute** for the invitation to contribute to this conference on her legacy.

As a journalist, rather than an academic, I would like to attempt to provide some personal insights to Dona Ruth's life based both on my relationship and information I gathered from people who worked with her closely in **Comunidade Solidária** and continue in **COMUNITAS**.

My first professional contact with Dona Ruth was in 1997 when, as Chief of the NGO Section of the Department of Public Information of the United Nations (DPI), I had the opportunity to invite her to deliver the key-note speech at the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual DPI/NGO Conference. At that point **Comunidade Solidária** was barely two years old. She spoke of it as a unique example of a government/NGO partnership. "**Comunidade Solidária**" she said to the audience of over 1000 representatives of international non profits "fosters an enabling environment for NGOs throughout Brazil. It envisions a reform of the present legal and regulatory framework which governs the relationship between State and civil society; it established an information network for the non-governmental, or as they are known in Brazil, the Third Sector organizations; and it created a national network of Regional Volunteer Centers, in order to bring about conditions for a participating citizenship based on solidarity."

This takes me to the first point I want to make about D. Ruth's legacy:

Ruth Cardoso believed it was important to abandon the view that sees poverty only as privations and needs. For her it was more effective to concentrate on the potential found in marginalized communities themselves. This new way of looking calls for flexible projects, those that are able to promote community participation and strengthen leadership at the local level, linking demands with the search for sustainable solutions.

I listened carefully and three years later in November of 2000, upon retiring from the UN, I called on Dona Ruth to tell her about the establishment of **Brazil**Foundation – a Diaspora Philanthropy with the purpose of generating resources in the United States for transformative social projects in all regions of Brazil.

She was most encouraging and fully supportive of our objective to build a new donor community and engage individuals as well as corporations in efforts for a more just Brazilian society. **Brazil**Foundation today provides a range of options to social investors in Brazil. It promotes community participation, strengthens local social leadership and offers new opportunities for young people whose access to learning and income generation is limited.

On her next trip to New York, Dona Ruth and I met for lunch. She brought Malak Popovic, her assistant and close friend, and Thereza Lobo, an economist and political analyst with World Bank experience, who joined Dona Ruth in 1994. I came with Marcello Hallake, the young Brazilian lawyer, the volunteer who bought in to the idea of establishing **Brazil**Foundation and incorporated it as a New York public charity.

I described the lunch to Susane Worcman, our Vice President in Brazil, in an e-mail, saying that we toasted the newly established foundation -- and how amazing it was to actually hear the words **Brazil**Foundation pronounced by others! Dona Ruth saw the potential in our purpose. She told us to count on her for what we needed. She did not vacillate in accepting the invitation to serve on our Advisory Board – a tremendous asset for the fledgling organization. She said she would share the experiences of **Comunidade Solidária**, would provide us with NGO contacts in Brazil and, when we were ready, help us select our first grantee-projects.

That is the second point I would like to make about Dona Ruth's legacy: When she saw value in an idea, she gave it full support and over the years we were privy to her experience and guidance. Her enthusiasm for every step of our growth and accomplishments pushed us to conquer new challenges. Dona Ruth's experiences enriched our own.

As President of its Advisory Council, she saw **Comunidade Solidária** as a mobilizing instrument of popular participation, strengthening the capacity of people and communities to solve problems they faced, enhancing the quality of their lives, looking to the development of social capital. It was an innovative approach if compared to previous social programs that contributed to a passive population, dependant on charity – private and/or public.

Among the lessons we learned from **Comunidade Solidária** in its quest to strengthen Brazilian society and promote development through innovative policies, were the "new ways of seeing and doing things" such as:

- **decentralization of programs** to institutions close to the beneficiaries – such as community associations, NGOs, universities, state and municipal governments -- thus bringing in new resources and competencies .
- Fostering multiple and flexible **partnerships** by engaging business and corporations, public agencies and civil society organizations.
- Each program of **Comunidade Solidaria** has a specific **focus** – a target group based on age, family income and location in the poorest municipalities or metropolitan peripheries. Dona Ruth considered establishing focus as essential in the fight against poverty and called for new methodologies that would develop the latent capacity and talent she was sure existed in each of the target groups ;
- The importance of **transparency** – each program of **Comunidade Solidária** has its own information system, monitoring and evaluation components, accountability (a word which does not exist in Portuguese and that she described as *medir custos e prestar contas* – measure costs and produce reports on results).

In a recent meeting with Thereza Lobo , she talked about the beginning years of **Comunidade Solidaria**, an experience which rang familiar to me thinking of the first years of **BrazilFoundation**.

It was **focus and unity** that allowed the team at **Comunidade Solidária** to be "learning by doing". There was no strategy or model to follow. What helped the development of

a strategy were the principles she adhered to – development of partnerships, decentralization, building networks with ample opportunities for collaboration, and maintenance of constant communication.

This leads to the third basic point of Dona Ruth's legacy. She saw creativity as part of sustainability, and encouraged new ideas and openness for incorporation of diverse interventions. In this way, not one of the programs of **Comunidade Solidária** looks the same as when it started, says Thereza. **Alfabetização Solidária** was one that was subject to most molding. This was only possible because of Dona Ruth's leadership, her level of sensibility in recognizing spaces for new action. She knew it was not possible to advance over closed political systems. It was necessary to perceive new developments. To her, political partisanship was not as important as working in a climate of political respect. She told her colleagues not to be pedagogical, but to show by doing, the results would speak for themselves.

Thereza remembers how Dona Ruth would go to meetings with ministers – e depois vinha o desabafo (and would come back to vent). Her way to deal with people was with *gentle hardness* (dureza suave).

She had a difficult time dealing with the media, hating the way they referred to the Programs as hers. She fought for "desruthização" de-Ruthization, saying that the Programs exist because they were good. She knew how to surround herself with strong colleagues. They now carry the work forward on their own.

Long before her husband became President, Dona Ruth, who had developed deep roots in the Brazilian non-profit sector, was working on the mobilization of the private and public sectors to stimulate change in Brazilian society, riddled with poverty, injustice and marginalization. I count this as a fourth and perhaps most tangible of her legacies.

She saw the Third Sector as a growing force in all countries, assuming responsibilities, taking initiatives and leveraging new resources. She felt that alternative models had to be developed to face poverty and injustice, and that these models were not to be found in charity, based on just giving, usually characterized by inefficiency, or else in

obsolete social policies centralized by the State. She was to share this vision more fully later as a Board member of the UN Foundation.

“What I can do to promote effective change in the social sector is not to accept what is already being done as sufficient”, she used to say.

To enhance the dialogue with the State, 14 Rounds of Discussions were held by **Comunidade Solidária** on different themes. The first had to do with agrarian reform. With these Rounds of discussions, **Comunidade Solidária** was giving voice to both governmental and non- governmental actors, an opportunity to express their interests and vindications. Through the Rounds of Discussions, institutional networks were built and a new level of interactions was achieved between the State and Society. Dona Ruth was very clear about guarding against the special interests of the participants in these Rounds and was opposed to the manipulation of some by the others. She understood that NGOs could not substitute the State in the implementation of social policies. She believed however, that they could and should contribute to the renewal of social policy themes and help governments apply them at the municipal, state or national levels. These Rounds of Discussions were also responsible for correcting institutional mistakes and contributed to the development of new programs for **Comunidade Solidária** itself. The **Comunidade Ativa**, a strategy for Local Integrated and Sustainable Development in the poorest corners of the country was one such new program.

As part of this new public private partnership strategy, Dona Ruth promoted the reform of the legal status of non- profit organizations. Through the government edict of August 2002, that establishes OSCIPS – **Organizações da Sociedade Civil de Interesse Público** – or Civil Society Organizations of Public Interest, legislation was created to provide tax exemption to non- profit entities found to be of public interest at the federal, state or municipal levels.

Dona Ruth also made a concerted effort to bring corporate resources into play in tripartite partnerships between business, government and the Third Sector organizations. Thereza Lobo tells with excitement how **Social Consultancy** became an important

activity of **Comunidade Solidária**. In 2003 resources for social investments were appearing in the budgets of private corporations. A number of these corporations approached Dona Ruth for methodologies developed by **Comunidade Solidária** and for contacts with organizations of civil society. These discussions turned into consultancies that helped establish desired parameters for corporate social investments, all based on the principles that guided the work of **Comunidade Solidária**.

In 2006, anticipating President Cardoso's completion of his second term in office, **COMUNITAS** was founded -- to act as an umbrella organization and to give continuity to the individual **Comunidade Solidária** programs, now transformed into independent non-profit organizations.

**Social Consultancy** spawned BISC – Benchmarking em Investimento Social Corporativo (Benchmarking Corporate Social Investment) in Brazil. Founded by Dona Ruth, it is now headed by Renata Camargo Nascimento and run in partnership with a select group of Brazilian corporations. The program defines corporate social responsibility as going beyond the strict fulfillment of corporate obligations, such as generating jobs and paying taxes. It underscores the power that these corporations have to influence life in communities where they operate and reminds them of the privileged position they hold and the responsibilities they have to protect the environment and generate social solidarity.

Seeing the growing influence of both private sector and civil society on issues of public good, the leaders of BISC want corporate CEOs and managers to use the tools of BISC in their social programs as they develop knowledge about their projects, communicate their objectives and evaluate the results of their corporate social investments. A Forum with 20 Brazilian corporate leaders was held on September 9, 2008 and a report -- a macro analysis of the Brazilian social corporate investment environment -- was produced. It stresses the importance of personal engagement of the CEOs in providing the leadership needed for greater impact of private sector social investments.

"We have to continue," says Thereza Lobo. "The commitment does not end with Ruth Cardoso. Her vision and her legacy were internalized by many and the principles she

believed in are shared by a large number of people. We are proud to show that it is possible to make a difference in the social sector, with dialogue and communication. It is important to invest in the younger generation, in the local community associations, and **COMUNITAS** can provide support to the private sector in achieving a ROI (Return on investment) that is guaranteed."

The fifth and final legacy point I will emphasize has to do with scale. Programs developed by **Comunidade Solidária** impress by their scope and prove wrong the paradigm that social projects – created by society and for society – are inevitably small. As an example, I will share some statistics of Alfabetização Solidária, better known as **AlfaSol**.

**AlfaSol** is the program charged with promotion of literacy, and more than literacy, in compelling people to further their basic education. Working with the philanthropic arms of such corporations as Bradesco, Chevron, Vale, Microsoft Brazil, General Motors, TV Globo, the Law Offices of Pinheiro Neto and the Brazil-Energy Group - literacy is being taken to communities with limited access to education. By 2007 the program had taught 5.3 million students; it involved 244 thousand teachers; training took place in 2.099 municipalities.

This partnership model has now been replicated in São Tome and Principe, Mozambique, East Timor and Guatemala. In 2008 **AlfaSol** became the first Brazilian organization in the field of education to be registered with the Organization of American States. In March of 2009, **AlfaSol** was recognized by CEPAL (The UN Economic Commission for Latin America) as an innovative effort, with high potential for replication, benefiting communities, uniting the private, public and nonprofit sectors -- as it strengthens Education for young people and adults.

The program **Capacidade Solidária** – provided technical and professional skills to 114,000 young people entering the job market. **Universidade Solidária** networks with over 300 universities and gives tens of thousands university students opportunity not only to serve their country but to get to get to know it during their summer vacations, working in social and educational projects.

Each of these programs expanded the horizons of opportunity and touched the lives of countless number of people.

On a personal note, at the **Brazil** Foundation grant making event last year, we had 44 project leaders from different parts of the country come to Rio for a four-day meeting where they had a chance to get acquainted with each other and the foundation staff, exchange experiences and participate in capacity building workshops.

We began the proceedings with a minute of silence for Dona Ruth, a member of our Advisory Board. As the minute elapsed, one project leader stepped up to say he would not be there with us if it wasn't for Dona Ruth and her program **Universidade Solidária**, which gave him the opportunity and inspiration to work in the Third Sector.

Ruth Cardoso did inspire strong opinions, even among those who did not know her personally. Like the taxi driver, a dozen years ago, driving me from the Rio airport, who said "I did not vote for President Fernando Henrique, who like all politicians often takes unpredictable stands on issues. However, if the candidate had been Dona Ruth, there would be no doubt for me –I know where she stands, she stands for the people."

It is not that Dona Ruth was not political – she actually was a master politician who had been asked - but firmly refused - to run for Presidency.

Amaury Souza, political scientist, puts it nicely "Ruth was very political, but she was not electoral".

In an interview published on December 20<sup>th</sup>, 2008 by the newspaper O Globo, President Fernando Henrique Cardoso said that one of the characteristics of his wife's work was "not to give up her convictions that social policies were not only the responsibility of the State, nor were they to be used for party or personal politics. According to the President, initiatives undertaken by Dona Ruth in his government helped "despartidarizar" (promote non-partisanship) and to reduce electoral and special interests in the social area.

Paulo Renato Souza, minister of education during the eight years of Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government, described Dona Ruth as having her own identity – a highly

respected university professor, an academic with deep interest in education; her engagement with the non-profit sector helped establish her dialogue with society and her life experience and militancy for social rights gave her the political vision based on rule of law.

Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira, feminist and colleague of Dona Ruth since the mid 1970's, talks of the time when Dona Ruth was asked to conduct the Latin American hearings on women's health issues for the UN Conference on Population and Development. Dona Ruth used to say that feminist victories were not only victories for women but victories for humanity. For her, women were not victims, they had important contributions to make and societies that did not give access and opportunities to women, were the losers. With **Comunidade Solidária**, she opened new leadership opportunities for women in Brazil.

"In the reaction to her death – there was national unanimity in the expression of an enormous respect for her style, her way of being, her intelligence, transparency and honesty. She was consecrated by the media and anointed by the political elites, who accepted and respected her", said Miguel Darcy de Oliveira. He worked with her ever since he joined President Fernando Henrique's team in Brasília. "Ruth was the most innovative thinker in the social sphere. She wanted and she forged a role, a function of her own - not a political office in the government. Her contribution is the new relationship between State and Society. " That is a remarkable legacy."

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