

Good Intentions Gone Bad: Unforeseen Consequences of Community Capacity-Building Programs in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

by

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Abstract

Citizens who are active in their communities have, since 1996, been regularly sought by Rio de Janeiro-based non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for capacity-building. These citizens, once trained, graduate and turn into ‘community managers,’ people who can manage, orient, and lead their communities. They can take the small activities they currently work on – like teaching soccer to youth, or literacy to the elderly – and create organizations at the community level to sustain and grow those and other dreams they may have for their community.

In the pages that follow the long-term consequences of such programs on the lives of the individuals who undergo training are illustrated and analyzed, providing ample room in which the reader can gain insight and understanding into the *actual*, as opposed to the anticipated outcomes of such initiatives.

Through a relationship with a large group of these community managers, the author became aware of the consequences and difficulties such programs impose, for the most part unintentionally or unknowingly, on those that undergo them. Six specific problem areas are identified and described, each in its complexity, in the pages that follow: (1) Institutionalization and hierarchical models; (2) Legal barriers; (3) Free labor; (4) Compromising of family; (5) Corruption; and (6) Government co-optation.

Data sources are for the most part primary, and include: original interviewing, site visits, and focus group sessions with community managers in a variety of communities in Rio de Janeiro; interviews with leaders in larger NGOs, public lectures and reports on empowerment programs in Rio de Janeiro and elsewhere.

This essay comes as one contribution following recent calls for planning research that theorizes, as Friedmann put it, “in the *actual* politics of city-building”¹ and that utilizes methods, as Flyvbjerg encourages, of phronetic social science research, “produc(ing) input to the ongoing social dialogue and praxis in a society, rather than...generat(ing) ultimate, unequivocally verified knowledge”².

¹ Friedmann (1988: 253). Emphasis added.

² Flyvbjerg (2001: 139).

Introduction

There I was one Thursday afternoon in mid-March, after a 2-hour bus ride that felt more like a roller coaster tour from Rio's downtown to one of the communities at the city's northernmost limits. Boy, the potholes! Worse than any other road I'd taken these last two years working in Rio.

As I got off the bus I made my way to the small two-story office that the community NGO, CIC, had obtained. For a short while I watched as the volunteer soccer coach worked with two dozen boys. Shortly thereafter, the two community leaders I have worked closely with over these years, Camilo and Pedro, took me into the office to talk. During the several hours we spent there, chatting, drinking soda and eating cookies, all sorts of things were discussed – plans for the future of their respective community groups, needs, ideals of what action they would engage in should they acquire the necessary funds...

These thoughts of hope were punctuated with heavier moments of concern. At one point Camilo, frustrated, alluded to the story of how his marriage had ended and how he'd been lured by the false promises of community leadership inspired by the large NGOs who'd taught him much of what he knew about managing community work.

On this same afternoon, Pedro sat and pondered, point-by-point, whether he should remain with the community organization he'd been central in building over the previous 3 years. "We had to legalize the organization," he explained. "But that changed the dynamics."

I went home that night, mind full of bubbling frustration. What an enormous contradiction. The tendency towards community leadership and problem-solving, not relying on the government to get things accomplished, appears to be a fantastic one. But through my direct and long-term contact with these leaders I was becoming increasingly aware that regardless of the success they have in their community work, not always do they experience improvement in their own lives.

Then came the questions... Is it possible that the work these amazing community leaders do is collectively relevant but personally devastating? Were they victims of false promises by the large NGOs that trained them to lead in their communities? Are the people who are most effective in producing improvements in these communities – the volunteer community leaders themselves – not fulfilled, made happier by these experiences? On the one hand they say they love the work they do. On the other, frustration is rampant.

The ninth largest economy in the world, Brazil has been criticized internally and externally for the severe inequality that explains its "third world" status, inequality which brings Brazil to compete only with two African nations for its oft-held status of "most unequal." The historic lack of government support to low-income urban squatters (Brazil is 80% urban and most poverty is urban) means these communities had to fend for themselves. Despite the stated good intentions and decentralization of funds and responsibility to recent city administrations, the common perception is that they are incapable of handling the accumulated need following

decades of neglect. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, a million residents live in illegal communities. Many more live in poverty within legal communities.

Since the mid-1990s a steady stream of NGOs (non-governmental organizations) have been created locally or have come to Rio from abroad, with the intention of providing necessary social services.

At the same time, the historical need to “fend for themselves” and the local innovation fostered by this process³, along with the “intractable nature of Brazil's social ills, heightened concern over how to solve those problems and growing impatience with government's ability to address them”⁴, has stimulated volunteerism, including that by Pedro and Camilo, within Brazil's low-income communities⁵. Soccer camps, HIV prevention schemes, arts programs, computer training, capoeira classes, volleyball matches, day care centers, door-to-door health promotion, and educational reinforcement are some of the activities handled by this new generation of community leaders who truly love one-on-one interaction, relationship-building, and helping others in their community. We recognize today some attractive though long unrecognized empowering and rewarding outcomes of self- and community self-help⁶.

An important indicator and component of the trend towards both NGO-based social service provision and community self-help, are the “capacity-building” courses established, like a wave across the city, by NGOs and government. These courses train community residents with innate “social entrepreneur” talent to more effectively tailor solutions and respond to the needs of members within their own communities. Heterogeneous communities need tailored solutions, the logic goes, and those living within those communities are the best to devise them.

NGOs, including the French Doctors Without Borders (DWB)⁷, the national Comunidade Solidária (Solidary Community)⁸, the local CIEDS (Integrated Center for Studies and Programs

³ In June of this year the United Nations economist Walter Franco visited Brazil and “defined the nation with a single adjective: creative.” It was due to the perceived creativity in Brazil's development arena that the UN is establishing its International Center for Poverty Reduction Policy in Rio de Janeiro (Beck 2002: 40).

⁴ Buckley (2001).

⁵ Buckley (2001) wrote in *The Washington Post*, “Rio de Janeiro's Institute of Religious Studies reports that the number of volunteer organizations in Brazil leaped from 1,041 to 4,000 between 1988 and 1998. One 1998 study showed 25 percent of Brazil's population of 170 million does some sort of volunteer work, one of the highest percentages in the developing world. And another study, proposed and funded by Johns Hopkins University, found that in 1997 **more than 50 percent of Brazil's volunteers lived in economic desperation**, earning the equivalent of 2 1/2 times the minimum wage, or roughly \$230 a month.”

⁶ This was perhaps most eloquently described by John Turner in 1976, when he devised three laws in relation to low-income housing. First, “when dwellers control the major decisions and are free to make their own contribution to the design, construction or management of their housing, both the process and the environment produced stimulate individual and social well-being. When people have no control over, or responsibility for key decisions in the housing process, on the other hand, dwelling environments may instead become a barrier to personal fulfillment and a burden on the economy.” Second, he told us the important thing about housing is not what it is, but what it does in people's lives. In other words, that dweller satisfaction is not necessarily related to the imposition of standards. Finally, Turner noted that deficiencies and imperfections in one's housing are infinitely more tolerable if they are one's responsibility than if they are somebody else's.

⁷ In 1997 and 1998 DWB did an intensive capacity-building program with **40** community leaders in Rio.

⁸ Nationwide, Comunidade Solidária has done capacity-building with approximately 10,000 people.

in Sustainable Development)⁹, CAMPO (Center for Accessory to the Popular Movement), CEDAPS (Center for the Promotion of Health)¹⁰, GRUDE (Group in Defense of Ecology)¹¹, IBAM (Brazilian Institute of Municipal Administration), Roda Viva¹², and CEAP (Center of Support for Marginalized Populations) have been involved. The municipality's Secretary of Labor, Social Development Secretary, and Environment Secretary have at various times supported such initiatives. In addition, the federal government launched a nationwide program two years ago. And today the local Catholic Church and community groups themselves are even beginning to design programs for leadership capacity-building.

Capacity-building courses appear well-intentioned and beautifully designed according to all the latest knowledge of community needs, harnessing local knowledge and skill, following a methodology of empowerment and strengthening of local initiative¹³. However, long-term evaluations of these programs are difficult to locate. Limited forms of evaluation exist.

For example, one of the first of these courses, and certainly the most intensive¹⁴, resulted in approximately 18 of 40 trainees still working in their communities one year after the course's completion¹⁵. Today, 3 years after completion, community leaders inform that 11 are still performing community work. This is the only information available about the long-term results of that course, and it is relayed not by the organization responsible for the course, but by those community leaders still active after having completed it.

Another program, which conducts an evaluation at the beginning and end of each 4-month course, asks students to complete a quick Yes or No survey indicating their perceptions in various areas at the beginning and end of the course. They ask, for example, if the leaders being instructed feel ready to handle responsibilities in community activities¹⁶. They also ask a set of questions about the leaders' perceptions of the course. For example, if the teachers stimulated

⁹ CIEDS has, since 1999, capacitated at least **510** community managers intensively and **1350** Youth Agents in Rio.

¹⁰ From 1999 to 2001, CEDAPS capacitated **2500** people in various community "Agent" fields (health, development, education, and so on). CEDAPS has also capacitated **40** community health agents and **2800** "multipliers"¹⁰, 10 Youth Agents, and has assisted **50** community groups in establishing local projects, all in Rio de Janeiro.

¹¹ GRUDE has, since 1996, trained approximately **1052** people in Rio in a variety of areas, some of which could and do yield actual jobs (in gardening, for example), but most of which help simply to offer alternative activities and worldviews to youth, or to engage community residents in bettering their communities or the areas around them.

¹² In 2000 the Roda Viva capacitated **12** "Community Agents" in Rio de Janeiro, to help with programs of educational reinforcement in their communities. More recent figures are missing.

¹³ One course, organized and funded by the federal government through the NGOs CIEDS and IBAM includes more than 32 topic areas, including "The Brazilian Reality," "Rights and Duties of the Citizen," "Community Planning," "Organizational Forms," "How to Act," "When to Act," "Preparing a Proposal," and so on. Instructors are chosen for the most part based on a personal history of 'militancy' in communities and encouraged to add their own materials which may include newspaper articles, invited speakers, and lectures on inequality.

¹⁴ An intense 5-day (per week), 8-month course organized by Doctors Without Borders and heralded by those community managers who graduated during its 2 years of operation.

¹⁵ Médicos Sem Fronteiras (2000: 9).

¹⁶ The response, for the period May 2001 – March 2002, for example, shows that at the beginning of the course 67% of participants felt comfortable assuming such responsibilities, while at the end of the course 95% said they would feel fine doing so (CIEDS 2002: 99).

their community work¹⁷. A final set of questions aims to discover if the information from the course was internalized.

During the past 26 months I have been in the privileged position of having access and developing working relationships with community leaders trained in such programs. Over this period I have observed their struggles and, through my work, attempted to help them. I would be dishonest if I did not admit to my friendships with all of those individuals whose stories will be detailed in the following pages. It is the formation of these relationships for my own work, and the regular visits I have therefore made to the sites where they carry out projects ranging from HIV prevention to organizing soccer championships and informal sewerage schemes, that inspired me to present a set of cases in the form of this article as an initial evaluation that can help in the outline of future policies. Stories were related to me because they were speaking of their lives in broader terms, as friends do. It is this relationship-building that allows me, in the pages that follow, to go beyond a traditional evaluation survey. This essay aims to introduce an ethical questioning of the capacity-building trainings available, which will inspire a rethinking of such approaches. In forming community leaders, are such programs condemning them to marching down a dead end path?

A set of difficulties and negative effects of the current “capacity-building” trend have been encountered, comprising the subject of this essay:

- (1) Volunteer groups have been torn apart by the institutionalization process and the hierarchical models it imposes;
- (2) Legal barriers make it difficult for some groups to establish themselves;
- (3) Individuals who as a result of training dedicated themselves full-time to projects found themselves penniless as funding failed to come through;
- (4) Family relationships were compromised as a result of dedication to community work;
- (5) The sense of rising responsibility and the needs that arise from institutionalization lead some groups to consider opening up to political or criminal corruption;
- (6) Leaders run the risk of being co-opted, substituting their role as activists for that of an *ad hoc* State, losing their protagonist qualities as they take over public roles.

Since little after-the-fact evaluation is conducted by the NGOs that provide capacity-building to these community leaders, the stories and analysis present herein provide an important opportunity for reflection on current policies in Rio de Janeiro and elsewhere where government and foundations invest in capacity-building for community-based public service provision.

¹⁷ To which 93% said yes at the end of the course, as opposed to 82% at the beginning (CIEDS 2002: 100).

Notes on Methodology

This essay represents a slightly unconventional route in research design and elaboration. I have worked closely with the community leaders interviewed and the organizations presented herein over the past 26 months. Some of these leaders, in fact, inspired me to found a not-for-profit organization, Catalytic Communities, which provides a central website to lend support and outreach for their initiatives and which is forming the basis for my doctoral dissertation. It is through this relationship-building that I was able to acquire their trust and watch their stories unfold to a degree which an essay such as this one can be prepared.

As such I expect there will be those who will question the appropriateness of this article as a contribution to *scientific* knowledge. To them I would like to reply that I am here relying on King et al.'s definition of scientific research in the social sciences¹⁸.

The case study technique is being used. As Yin points out, “a common concern about case studies is that they provide little basis for scientific generalization.” This is incorrect, however, as “case studies, like experiments, are generalizable to theoretical propositions and not to populations or universes.” He continues, “(In) the case study...the investigator’s goal is to expand and generalize theories (analytic generalization) and not to enumerate frequencies (statistical generalization).¹⁹” This essay is relying on case studies because of their important application “to *explain* the causal links in real-life interventions that are too complex for the survey or experimental strategies.²⁰” A generalizing analysis is what is needed here – in order to point out the potential imperfections in a current system, not with the aim of announcing them as general imperfections pertinent to all.

Flyvbjerg²¹ tells us that “it is only because of experience with cases that one can at all move...(up) in the learning process,” from ‘competent performers’ to ‘experts,’ whose behavior is “intuitive, holistic, and synchronic”²². These experts, due to a deep understanding of context, can begin articulating appropriate solutions. The aim in the pages that follow is to provide knowledge that can facilitate the articulation of appropriate solutions to the problems described.

This essay is an example of action-informed academia. The topic area was not chosen ahead of time. It announced itself to me as a result of a growing relationship with community leaders and NGOs, and the development process in Rio de Janeiro. Data were collected in the form of note-taking over two years during monthly meetings of community leader coalitions, visits to their local initiatives over this same period, and one-on-one meetings with the NGOs that work with them. More recently, since May 2002, I have conducted structured, in-depth taped interviews

¹⁸ King et al. (1994: 7-9) elaborate good scientific research as that with four characteristics: (1) The goal is inference – That it be designed to make descriptive or explanatory *inferences* on the basis of empirical information about the world; (2) The procedures are public – That explicit, codified and *public* methods be used to generate and analyze data so that their reliability can be assessed; (3) The conclusions are uncertain – That inference is an imperfect process and that researchers face the issue of uncertainty; and (4) The content is the method – That a set of rules be adhered to of inference and validity.

¹⁹ Yin, Robert K. (1994: 8).

²⁰ Yin, Robert K. (1994: 15).

²¹ (2001: 71).

²² (2001: 21).

with a subset of 5 community leaders and 4 organizations whom I determined, through constant prior contact, provided the most solid examples of the scenarios to be described²³.

In the following pages all names are fictitious. And, unless otherwise stated, all individuals were trained in public-sector or internationally-funded programs administered through respected NGOs considered as models for this increasingly funded area of development in Brazil. Community organizations are also represented with fictitious acronyms, which will not be spelled out because the letters comprising them do not represent actual terms.

²³ These case studies are deemed valuable for the very reason outlined by Flyvbjerg (2001: 74) when he told us that “it is incorrect to conclude that one cannot generalize from a single case. It depends upon the case one is speaking of, and how it is chosen.” In the case of this essay cases were chosen specially to call attention to potential negative consequences of capacity-building programs in existence, and so a small number of carefully selected cases is appropriate.

Scenario I: Institutionalization and Obligated Hierarchy

Just last week Orlando sees me at a public event and asks if I've heard the news. "No, I've been away," I reply. Orlando then proceeds to tell me that Pedro has now left the group. "This time it's for good," he declares.

I ask him why, and he boils it down, as he sees it, to the moment – "Well, I wanted to use the phone at his office, where I teach a class, and he didn't want me to because I didn't agree to open up for him early in the morning." He then makes sure to include, "He then opted for aggression and announced he would no longer be a part of the group." The group being referred to is a recently legalized community-based NGO called SESA.

Only a month before I had interviewed Pedro, and he had told me this was coming. "I have news for you. I don't know, but I may be really leaving SESA. I'm close to a final decision. And this time it'll be for good."

Asked why he left the first time some 8 months ago, Pedro explains:

I decided to leave because there were misunderstandings between my partner (Orlando) and I. I started sensing in him a certain spirit of wanting to boss me around, thinking that because he was the Executive Coordinator he could tell people what to do, give orders. But it's not like that. I see it like this – I'm a *volunteer* in an NGO, I don't earn anything for this, so I think I deserve better treatment, understand? So when he started treating me badly on the telephone one day, wanting to tell me off over the phone, I started arguing with him. In meetings we started butting heads. And then I discovered also that he lied to me, and I don't like lies. I get along great with you, but if I find out one day that something that happened was a lie, (the friendship's) over.

But Pedro came back to the community group all those months ago. He did so because he didn't want to create hostility with people he'd worked so close to, through adversity, in building the community organization, and out of respect for a partner organization in another community with which SESA had developed a proposal that was accepted and funded by the national government. The fear was that his pulling out would jeopardize the chances of future proposals being approved in favor of the broader coalition of communities he remained a part of. After all, how would it look to a funder if an organization were so unstable?

This time around, however, Pedro could not hold out:

Now a few things are happening, like we just lost funding from FAT²⁴. FAT funds professionalizing programs and the coordinator of (a local institution) brought us this contact with FAT, including a list of projects – courses – to be implemented in the community. They needed a community NGO to organize these courses... We were going to negotiate directly with FAT because the (other

²⁴ FAT is the Fund for Labor Support, funding available from the federal Ministry of Labor for professionalizing programs.

local institution) isn't an NGO...(To make a long story short) Orlando didn't agree to it because the courses would have to be conducted in the space belonging to the other institution (even if the administration and funding of the courses was our group's responsibility).

We don't have other coordinators at the moment (just Orlando and his girlfriend Lisa)...So what happens? When a decision needs to be taken quickly, we have to do it just us three.

This project would have brought respect to the community. Any organization that receives funds from FAT, that's a tremendous thing.

Now I'm no longer thinking of staying here because this isn't the first opportunity that comes to us that they veto. It's not the first idea I bring, generally I bring a lot of ideas, and most of my ideas don't pass in meetings (with them).

When I asked him what he would do once having left the group he confided, "I want to continue with my art program and register it as a separate institution, this time with me as President or Executive Coordinator...Then I'll be pulling together a team, like with the volunteers who have expressed interest in working with me. I'll ask them, 'what do you think about setting up a project like this?'...I won't be running the risk of losing opportunities (like they have)."

The relationship between Pedro and Orlando was directly impacted by the creation of hierarchy inherent in processes of institutionalization. Pedro explains, "Before, our relationship was normal, one of partnership, ever since the (capacity-building) course. Ever since we started the informal community group. It was so much so that we struggled together to legalize the group, mounting the modules, the projects. Things were normal through those times. But after that happened (Orlando's personality change), things changed. I continued on over the past months but things haven't been the same."

Pedro had been running a community arts program in his spare time for several years, and Orlando had his own computer course. They both seemed to make do just fine. "Why was legalization of the group necessary?" I asked, thinking if it imposed such a hierarchy and constrained their activities, they might have been better off without it. As if I'd asked a ridiculous question, Pedro responded:

Because we *had* to be a legal entity. Before, we were just individuals working together. And as individuals with their own project it is difficult to fundraise. Because the funders, they don't fund individuals.

We had to set it up, right? Because any institution needs to have a structure, a President or a Board. Isn't that right? Because one person alone can't register an organization. You need to have directors, subdirectors or a president, a treasurer, and so on...to have a Statute you need all of this.

Though Pedro, Orlando, and hundreds of community leaders like them had been coordinating small community projects in their neighborhoods for years, a new sense of importance in institutionalizing their initiatives had surfaced after their involvement in capacity-building courses set up by large NGOs and government. “I consider SESA to have been born as soon as we finished the course, you see,” explains Pedro. “It was born when we (the small group of leaders who’d participated in the capacity-building training from the same community) formed a separate group to act in the community. SESA (the legal entity) was born when NESA (the informal group) was born, because the activities we do are the same as before. What changed NESA to SESA was the registration, today we have a Statute.”

Dee Hock, in *Birth of the Chaordic Age*, points out that humankind’s “current forms of organization are almost universally based on compelled behavior”²⁵. In his book, he charts the course of his life as he builds a successful company, VISA, based on a new set of principles focusing on the idea of community²⁶. He focuses on the relationship between leader and follower. “Leader presumes follower,” he tells us, and “follower presumes choice. One who is coerced to the purposes, objectives, or preferences of another is not a follower...but an object of manipulation”²⁷. He deems that today’s institutions are unhealthy because they do not take advantage of the benefits that freedom of choice (of one’s leaders, and within one’s community) brings with it.

“At the time, part and parcel of the capacity-building course was the idea that we should set up an NGO,” said Camilo, one of Pedro and Orlando’s peers²⁸. Clearly neither Orlando nor Pedro, when they followed the steps they were encouraged to follow, knew that it was important for them to think of the consequences such a process would impose on their ability to work as a team. The difficulties associated with institutionalization described by Hock were compounded, in their case, by the absence, it seems, of emotional intelligence²⁹ in their appointed leader, Orlando³⁰.

Orlando wasn’t chosen as Executive Coordinator because of his set of leadership gifts. The capacity-building course did not guide the community managers in suggesting roles for different

²⁵ Hock, Dee (1999: 6)

²⁶ “The essence of community,” he explains, “is the nonmonetary exchange of value; things we do and share because we care for others, and for the good of the place...It arises from deep, intuitive, often subconscious understanding that self-interest is inseparably connected with community interest... In a true community, the values others hold that we do not share we nonetheless respect and tolerate, either because we realize that our beliefs will require respect and tolerance in return, or because we know those who hold different beliefs well enough to understand and respect the common humanity that underlies all difference.” [Hock, Dee (1999: 42-3)]

²⁷ Hock, Dee (1999: 67).

²⁸ The summary materials prepared by the NGO that trained Camilo expressly stated that “it was not enough to train, but that it was necessary to create the minimum conditions so that the leaders could develop their projects in their communities and create, over time, conditions that guaranteed the sustainability of their projects through **legal and legitimate channels** within our society.” The idea here is that institutionalization was a logical component of capacity-building.

²⁹ Emotional intelligence was deemed by Daniel Goleman (2001) to be the best indicator of effective leadership in nearly 200 large global companies.

³⁰ Pedro’s critiques of Orlando’s behavior that led him to opt out of the organization indicated lapses in Orlando’s leadership ability with regard to all 5 components of Emotional Intelligence as defined by Goleman (2001) – self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skill.

personalities, for example. Actually, as Pedro (who is older and has a longer history with community work) explains, “I was originally going to be the Executive Coordinator. I let Orlando take the position...because the Executive would have more responsibilities, would have to respond on behalf of the organization to various agencies. If there were going to be meetings, seminars, the Executive would have to be there. I wanted to keep myself more open to develop the (actual) community programs (themselves).”

As they tried to institutionalize their community group the leaders had worked hard on just the right statute. They spent over a year working with a variety of partners in academia and NGOs. One of the issues they had hammered at was reducing the hierarchy. Instead of a President, for example, they had various coordinators. Even so, Pedro explains, “There *is* hierarchy. The Executive Coordinator is the one who is most responsible for the institution.” Existing options for institutionalization did not provide a non-hierarchical model that might have helped avoid the disintegration of SESA.

Was the capacity-building training’s emphasis on institutional capacity-building truly useful? Was it, in actuality, *necessary*?

Scenario II: Stuck in Time – Legal Barriers to Effective Action

Camilo tells me straight out, during his interview: “And that’s how it happened. A *lot* of people fell into this nonsense of creating an NGO, and were left by the wayside.” It’s strange to hear this from him. After all, Camilo was relatively successful in establishing his community group as an NGO. A week before I spoke with him, Sofia, during her interview with me, referred to his community’s organization with reverence: “Today Camilo is the *President* of an *institution*, as *recognized* as CIC is, with *various* projects and income sources.”

Why, then, would *Camilo* be upset about the effect that institutionalization had on his life? Or was his concern just with other leaders, like Pedro, he’d seen fall by the wayside?

Sofia’s reverence turned to concern, however. “But Camilo himself can’t receive a stipend,” she tells me. Tânia, who works with Sofia in an organization that has not tried to legalize itself explained that “SIPA still isn’t legalized...Our greatest fear about registration is – how are we going to end up? As long as you function as an NGO people can’t receive salaries. This is the big problem that Camilo faces. He can’t, because he’s the president of an institution. Even if he’s the Executive Secretary (as well) he must have at least another source of income from which he receives a salary.”

This represents a case of one community learning from another. Instead of repeating what they perceive as the mistake of institutionalization, today they rely on the structure set up by Camilo’s organization to obtain their own stipends. “Until we’ve got a respected NGO, one that can truly take advantage of its CNPJ³¹, we can take advantage of this trade (with CIC), which doesn’t only involve using their CNPJ, but also always being in their community strengthening their work, organizing together. So as long as we have the option of using CIC’s (legal status), we will.” Unfortunately, however, this dependence on another institution limits SIPA’s ability to grow and be taken fully seriously in its own community.

In Brazil, as in the United States, those officially comprising the board of directors of an organization are not allowed to receive salaries for their participation on the board of the organization. But whereas in the United States individuals that serve on an organization’s Board can be paid for work as staff, in Brazil an individual that sits on a Board is not allowed to receive a salary under any circumstances. What happens in the case of community groups is that, in legalizing their organizations, they are required to name individuals to a Board. And the titles associated with Board seats – President, Treasurer, Secretary – are those that are respected by community residents. There is comparatively no meaning in “Executive Director,” for example. In addition, these organizations do not know who they can trust to govern their organizations, and so tend to form their groups’ boards from those that are involved *within* their organizations.

As a result, situations arise as that described by Camilo:

³¹ CNPJ stands for Cadastro Nacional de Pessoa Juridica, and represents an institution’s legal status in Brazil.

Informally I receive R\$300³² as a donation (each month). How does this work? This is what causes one of the problems in my life. Because the coordinator of this project funded by the government receives R\$470. So what did we (community leaders involved in the project) agree? Since I am the one effectively coordinating the work, Tânia signs for this money, as if she were the coordinator. Of the R\$470, she passes R\$300 on to me. The other R\$170 goes to pay the bills here at CIC.

Camilo was unaware of this potential problem until it was (he deems) too late. When I asked him what he wishes the capacity-building course had taught him in addition to all he learned, his reply was swift. “The institutional administration of a social organization,” he told me. He went on:

They told us how to legalize our organization – the real part but not the technical aspects of how a legalized organization works. For example, that the Board of an NGO, of a social institution cannot ever receive a salary. That you’re going to follow their advice but that if you put your name down as a Director you won’t be remunerated.

I didn’t know this until I reached the point of legalization, right before I signed the document. But by then it was too late because all of the internal articulation had taken place. The community does not recognize another figure (other than “President”). Even funders only recognize the President.

If you tell people outside the organization (you are the ‘coordinator’), they’ll ask ‘but who’s in *charge*?’

So Camilo signed on the dotted line as ‘President’ and sentenced himself to a future of creating arrangements that would allow him to continue with his more than full-time work at CIC³³ while not officially taking a salary. This means in order to continue with this work Camilo gives up the possibility of having a *carteira assinada* recognizing formal employment, health plans, and so on.

In addition, and even less expected by him, he found that having a legal organization heavily increased his workload, and not for the best...

When we legalized, work skyrocketed. There was more work. Today in addition to working with the kids, in addition to looking for sources of funding, and articulating with different groups, there’s also all the bureaucracy. The bureaucratic, legal, administrative part of an institution, that we have to maintain.

³² For reference throughout this essay, note that the exchange rate in September 2002 is approximately 3:1, or R\$3.00 to US\$1.00. That is, divide R\$ by three to obtain the dollar amount. R\$300, for example, is currently equivalent to approximately US\$100.

³³ To the question, “How many hours do you dedicate to community work?” Camilo replied, “I can tell you I sleep at most 4 hours a night. And when I’m not sleeping I’m working. Except for every 15th day when I pick up my kids on a Sunday. But I take them to battle...always when there’s a march or a community event (on Sundays).”

For example, electricity, the telephone, taxes, document renewal, maintaining staff, outreach, and institutional articulation. In the old days I articulated with the community. But today I have to articulate with other institutions. We are *legal*. It's not good enough to partner with a guy from another institution. Today we have to formalize the partnerships legally.

You send a project and it's approved? They require enormous amounts of documentation. Certifications, licenses. They ask for all sorts of things, and we don't have the resources to provide it all. The worst of it is that the funders don't fund administrative costs.

Then we wonder every month. How to maintain the group? How to hold on?

In the meantime his peers across town, Sofia and Tânia, take what happened to him as a forewarning. After all, they depend on stipends from this work to maintain themselves and the community groups they have worked hard to build.

Not all community groups take one of these two paths (legalization or chosen informality). And obviously issues of hierarchy and leadership from the previous section do not cause rifts in all cases. Has the process of legalization of community organizations caused any other problems?

According to Camilo, "(Trained leaders) started setting up their NGOs. That is, until they got to the part with the expenses. Setting up an NGO isn't easy, today you have to invest at least R\$1000. With less than R\$1000 you don't set up an NGO. And this is without including the headquarters. So then people couldn't handle it. Then afterwards came all the bureaucratic process – go to the registration office, go here, go there."

In the case of a recent course, one of the course monitors told me:

Young people between 17 and 24 years old, all from (low-income) communities (took the course). They took the course, they were active. Then at the end they set up an NGO (as part of the curriculum), put together the Statute, everything perfect. When the only piece left was legalizing the organization, they gave up. That was (to be) the last step in the course. (Of the youth in the course) the only one that continues doing social work is Luciana who's working in CIPP. But that's a large NGO, where she works as an employee and not as a protagonist. They don't even take advantage of her ideas, don't even consult her. There was one other student in this course that's doing well, coordinating a project for another NGO. But she's basically in the same situation as Luciana, (working for a large external NGO and not in the community like the course had intended).

There is a clear barrier to community groups imposed by the official institutionalization processes available to organizations in Brazil. First, the process of institutionalization is time-, material-, resource-, and cost-intensive for these communities. And in addition, when organizations are established, the forced hierarchy and terminology used for positions

(‘President’ being on the Board, for example) make it difficult for community groups to work efficiently. Finally, the bureaucracy created compounds the work involved.

Instead of trying to address these issues, recent policy-making time in this arena in Brazil has been invested in establishing an alternative type of organization, the Civil Society Organization for the Public Interest (OSCIP). However, instead of working to facilitate the above processes, this type of organization was created for a different reason – to form a separate classification for NGOs created specifically to provide public services. These OSCIPs are required to present more paperwork, clearer budgets, and so on. In return, they can receive funds directly from the public sector. Effectively, then, no attempt has been made by Brazilian officials to facilitate the establishment of community-based not-for-profits through a streamlining of the institutionalization process in Brazil.

The next question one might ask, then, is why the community leaders who participate in capacity-building courses do not simply work as they did before – as part-time volunteers in their communities. Regardless of the emphasis the courses may place on legalizing community groups, *why do these groups not simply operate as they did before, on an informal basis? What happens when they do?*

Scenario III: Induced Altruism / Opting for Destitution

“Some of the (leaders) went there (to the course) because there were R\$60 in the game. Others went for the R\$60 and ended up embracing the cause. Still others went for the R\$60, (finished the course,) and continued with their lives, went to work. So out of the 60 (community) managers, only 10 remained working on projects,” Franco informs me.

It is clearly necessary to provide a stipend to participants in the capacity-building courses. Not only do they provide incentives to individuals who might well “embrace the cause,” but they also make it possible for many who are already committed to their communities to attend. But this does point to a very important issue – how many people “get a taste for” community work and then become, essentially, full-time volunteers or, at best, a cheap labor version of public service?

“I became unemployed (from my job as a sales clerk) in 1995,” Tânia tells me, in a concerned voice. “Then in 1996, 97, what did I do? I got the money I’d received and invested it in materials, started working for myself. Except that didn’t work out. I lost money. Then what happened? I was stalled, unemployed, not selling anything. I started getting a little depressed...I thought to myself, ‘It’s not possible. I have primary school complete. I have to feel useful.’ When I looked for work there was nothing available because I was reaching 40.”

Tânia started doing community work shortly thereafter, when she found out she could take a course at a local university and learn skills to teach others to read. That became her passion and she worked as a volunteer for some time. She then enrolled in and became trained through an intensive capacity-building course.

“One of the most serious problems with the capacity-building course,” Camilo tells me, “is the fact that...most of the community people who look for a capacity-building course to enroll in do so hoping that this course will provide them employment opportunities, that it will facilitate their employment.”

Camilo then speaks of participants he knows in four of the capacity-building courses taking place in Rio at the moment:

In the beginning they go in thinking it’s a job opportunity³⁴, that his or her life will improve. Not that the course is a job opportunity, but that it will make it easier for them to find a job, because he’s taking a *course*. They think it’s a professionalizing course...The instructors don’t say this but that’s how we see it.

Even when *I* took the course I saw it this way. The first idea that struck me was, ‘If this is what I do already, and I don’t earn anything for it yet (then with this course I’ll be able to earn some money for what I already do).

They (the instructors) don’t need to say that to us. That’s how we piece things together. ‘They’re telling us lots about the government, the City, large NGOs. Will I be able to land a job more easily with this experience?’

³⁴ Perhaps this is due to the stipend that many of these courses carry (of, for example, R\$60 a month).

Soon community leaders taking such courses learn the hard truth: that they are unlikely to find dependable employment doing such community work, even if they develop a set of skills and learn the steps to establishing a community NGO. Of the community leaders I interviewed, two are financially better off than they had been before the course.

One is financially better off because she came out of a situation of unemployment. Tânia had been unemployed and previously did community work to pass the time. She now earns R\$300 a month, some of which comes from the federal government and the rest of which comes from a community-based sports facility (and the political candidate running it) that benefits from her work.

The improvement in the other individual's financial status is because he has a different set of priorities than do many other leaders that have continued acting since graduating from their respective courses. Pedro very consciously prioritizes stability of employment and providing for his family over his community service work, which he continues to conduct primarily on weekends. He works for a state government-funded community-based service organization coordinating its activities during the week. Though this is a job reflective of community leadership, it was likely his years of contact with the group and his militancy in the current governor's party that led him to be chosen for the post. Pedro now makes a reliable R\$550 a month relative to the unreliable R\$300-R\$400 he made before taking the capacity-building course. When asked if he took the job because of the higher salary, he said that "No, it wasn't the higher salary (that was most important in the decision). It was the stability. Here I have a set salary each month which I didn't have when I painted signs."

Pedro described the volunteer work to me back in March. "It snowballs," he said. "The community-based volunteer work, if you let yourself get involved before you know it you don't have time for anything. And in management it's even worse. Because then come the meetings, the partnerships. Then you feel the need to develop partnerships with this NGO over here and that one over there. Then come more meetings...some days there are three, four, even five meetings."

But he set his priorities and told me last month how he'd decided to manage this. "I think the following way," he told me, "if this work caused any damage (to my family life) I would stop. I'd stop, forget community managing, stop developing social projects to be able to take on a job that would bring financial return to my family."

Many of the community managers trained through capacity-building courses who continue to do community work do not do as Pedro, however, and dedicate only their extra time to such activities. Camilo, for example, let the work, as Pedro put it, "snowball." He tells his dramatic story:

Before the course, we (the community managers who took the course) were in basically the same situation as a typical community resident economically and socially, because we live in a situation of social exclusion...We had a *slight* difference only in our perception of the possibility of changing that reality – a

consciousness. And the course stimulated this (even more). As a result of the course, we climbed up a notch, different from the typical resident. In terms of conscience, knowledge of our rights, citizenship, of how to go about getting out of that social exclusion. To not keep waiting for someone to come and do things for us. To claim our rights because that (inequality, exclusion) is not normal.

Because the problem with social exclusion is not that we are excluded, but it's us thinking that that state of affairs is normal. Think that that space we occupy is normal. Is it normal for you to be unemployed, not give your address out to people, not be able to arrive home at certain times of night, take a bullet during your lunch hour? All that's normal.

...After you leave the course, when you go practice (what you've learned) in your day-to-day life, your situation becomes relatively worse than the typical resident. Economically and at times socially. Economically is obvious because you start involving yourself, involving yourself, involving yourself, doing for others, doing for others, and you climb down the (economic) ladder.

Camilo today makes a total of R\$300-400 each month, more than half of which goes to sustain his 4 children who no longer live with him. Before starting the course, he made R\$400 working in a lawyer's office 3 days a week and on construction sites 2 days a week. At the time he supported only his wife and one child. "If when I started I had the 4 kids I have today I wouldn't have gotten involved in this (community managing) way of life...I would be working like crazy, which is the right thing (to do)...to support my family, my kids," Camilo tells me.

One leader, Sofia, receives significantly less now than she did prior to her involvement in community work. But she is more than happy with this arrangement, since previously she was making money by providing domestic services to drug traffickers. She makes R\$250 each month today, mostly working with HIV prevention, as compared to the R\$500-R\$600 a month she used to make cooking and washing clothes for the 'boys.' Sofia is a single mother raising two boys, one of whom she "took off the street as a 10-year-old when he was already abusing a toxic substance," and who today "lives in (her) house with (her) son. Has a life of dignity like (her) son. (Will) go to school, though he has difficulty hearing...But even with (her) minisalary (she) gives them dignity."

In addition to the bulk of community leaders interviewed experiencing either losses or stability in their salaries prior to and after capacity-building, there is yet another hurdle that complicates this picture. Government, foundation, and other sources of funding streams for their projects are generally short-term and one-time. Community leaders have to reorganize to constantly search for new sources of funding. Since their course finished in 1999, Sofia and Tânia spent one year operating with funding from FUNDAC (Fund for the Development of Community Action), a one-year only fund created specifically to support their cohort's completion of the capacity-building course³⁵. During this year they received R\$100 each month. They then spent one full year working as unpaid volunteers on their projects (involving literacy for the elderly and sports

³⁵ And which is by no means a common component of capacity-building courses. In fact, FUNDAC, representing a one-year grant of R\$3600, was one-of-a-kind.

with kids) until they were able to acquire funding. During that period they depended on relatives to get by. After that they were able to obtain a stipend from a political candidate from their community (R\$150 per month for each of them). And now they receive R\$100 each from the Ministry of Health for a project that will be ending in January. After that, they have no idea where their funding will come from.

Camilo describes the attitude of funders. He tells the story of how he adapted to their language and their needs:

In the beginning I talked a lot about the community when I went to ask for support: ‘CIC is a *community* institution. It was us, (individuals) *from* the community, that founded and are developing this NGO. It is *genuinely* a community organization. It is *composed of* community residents, and managed by inhabitants of the *favela*. This is a *new* phenomenon in the (world of the) NGO. And we are *protagonists* in this process.’³⁶

I thought, well, that this would build our partners’ sensibility, our partners outside (the *favela*). Because this way we’d be showing them ‘look, it’s possible for us to do this. And we *will* do it in a practical way because we are here *inside* the (local) reality.’ (Theoretically,) we should be the ideal for any funder. But in practice we aren’t, because the funder or NGO...(is) more preoccupied with the (measurable) social impact that he’s going to cause. He wants *numbers* and *comfortable* results. Like, (for example,) a report every month. He wants to put his money in the hands of an institution, first that he can discount in his taxes. Second, that won’t have any trouble reporting (back). Third, that won’t be asking too much. That will give him reports with *lots* of numbers to publicize.

And when I tell him I’m a community leader he’s already going to think a ton of things. ‘Damn, these guys are all needy, going to keep on (insisting). If I give them something and (their work) starts having too many (positive) repercussions I’ll have to give more.’ So he doesn’t trust (us) because he thinks we’re vulnerable. Tomorrow there’s a death (in the community), an invasion, and then (he) loses everything.

As an established NGO’s executive director told me, “Most of the funding is trapped in a handful of ‘King ONGs’³⁷ with a handful of (powerful) people comprising their boards.”

When community groups do receive financial support, it often comes in at less than they request. “In the proposal to the Ministry (of Health) the (community) agents were supposed to earn R\$150 (a month). We sent the budget to the Ministry and they cut it. They cut the stipends so we had to cut all sorts of things out (of the final project),” describes Sofia.

³⁶ All emphasis added by author.

³⁷ A play-on-words with “King Kong,” “ONG” is the Portuguese acronym for NGO, or non-governmental organization.

When asked what salaries they deserved, the leaders interviewed, all of whom comprise the top echelon within their local groups, responded with answers ranging from R\$500 to R\$1200 a month. Interestingly, one of the large NGOs that initially organized the capacity-building courses, advertised in its 2000 program summary publication: “Attentive readers might (well) perceive what these people are able to do with (only) R\$300/month!” The underlying assumption made by the large NGO is that they are satisfied with this level of income. At the time of publication of this NGO’s material, however, the community leaders trained in its program delivered a public speech in which they said: “(Our foremost difficulty) is lack of funding. Without funding, we work for free, prejudice our personal lives, and cannot ensure the quality of our projects...”

Though community-based volunteerism is relatively common in Brazil³⁸, this does not imply in the stability of such initiatives. The lack of funding for community efforts creates a permanent sense of instability for the organizations that conduct such initiatives. As Camilo tells us:

So we do the dance each month – to maintain the group, hold on. You get a project. The funding that comes in for that project’s not enough. So then you have an instructor working on this project. What if this person lines up a (stable) job and leaves you dry? You have to articulate well, because most of the people (helping on each project) don’t earn anything. You need to be well articulated internally so that everyone understands that at one moment in time that guy earns something, and at the other moment in time someone else will receive (payment).

Due to insufficient funding of their initiatives, some capacitated leaders do not adhere to the ethical principals derived in the courses³⁹, or simply opt out of leadership roles for economic reasons. One community manager explains,

Of the four leaders from my community that took the course with me, none decided to stay with the group we formed. Maria still works with community work as part of the Neighborhood Association, but everything she learned about ethics went out the door. Because she’s in an institution that’s extremely rotten and working with the drug traffickers. Nilce is still in some sense involved, as she returned to her home in the North (of Brazil), gave up on Rio, she couldn’t stand it because she lived in the worst part of the *favela*. And Olivia, who’s the one who spent the most time working with me (after the course) abandoned ship. Last I heard from her she was working on a public works project.

There came a time when she said, ‘now it’s about me, that’s it.’...I can understand her side, saying ‘now it’s about me and my family.’ Because really, with this work, if you keep getting involved, involved – and she also had a lot of kids – the community work starts eating up all your time, so she had to leave.

³⁸ Buckley (2001).

³⁹ According to the summary prepared by the NGO that organized the course: “the ethical principles of the community manager (were) formulated by the students (during the course).”

Even when trained community leaders get together to host large public events targeting other low-income communities like their own, they receive limited public support. A recent seminar hosted by community leaders who, as a group, receive funding from the National Ministry of Health to fight HIV in their communities, received public sector support only in the form of a plane ticket (from the Ministry of Health for a speaker to fly from a distant city), some printed materials, and 100 meal tickets for the seminar participants. A local public university provided the space. All other purchases – transportation, coffee, water, snacks, room and board for the guest who arrived, and so on – were taken on by the leaders themselves. As made clear above, these individuals for the most part live at a loss relative to how they would live were they performing typical professions.

Once again, it is important to dig down beneath the numbers. A formal survey about public support for the event organized by these leaders might well yield a statement like “the State Secretary of Health provided 100 meal tickets to the event.” But when asked for general reflections regarding the public sector’s support for the event, Sofia emphasized the *attitude* of government officials towards the event. She expressed, more than clearly:

The State Secretary, for them to give us the actual tickets, they kept us hanging until the day of the seminar, you understand? The tickets arrived yesterday, in the morning, in the hands of Giselle. They didn’t even trust us to bring the tickets (ourselves), to go there and pick them up ahead of time. They didn’t trust us to do that. Giselle brought the tickets, placed them in Camilo’s hands at the moment she arrived. So that means, if there were some accident with Giselle, those 100 people (from low-income communities) who were there would not have had a meal.

Even with regard to this they stressed us out. Because on the clock Tânia and I had to run to the Municipal Secretary to get (printed) materials. The meal tickets arrived on the day of the seminar...only the Ministry (of Health) provided their support ahead of time. Did they think we weren’t capable of realizing a seminar? Or is it that they didn’t think we were to be trusted? That we are poor, that we were going to pick up the (meal) tickets, then go out there and do our grocery shopping? Certainly we could benefit from that (grocery shopping) given the necessity and difficulties we put up with.

Reflecting on the enormous difficulties these leaders confront in realizing their projects – from the difficulties the system creates for them in terms of institutionalization to the unavailability of funds and the lack of trust they perceive in the public officials on whose behalf, in a sense, they are providing public services – *why then do full-time community leaders under such conditions stay committed? Why don’t they jump ship?*

Scenario IV: Shattered Families

Back in March Camilo alluded to what had happened with his family. Within a much broader conversation he told me that he “paid a very high price for the mistake (of legalizing his NGO).” “My family danced in this game, you understand?” he told me.

Months later I take the time to learn more. I sit down and ask him if the capacity-building course he took all those years ago (in 1998) had some effect on his marriage, his family. Camilo quiets down and becomes pensive. Then he begins:

In my family life I think the (capacity-building) course had a huge effect. Because it's impossible for you to reconcile (responsibilities). (Being a community manager) started to cause problems...my wife would complain. We didn't have privacy. And she didn't want to come to (the community) work. I tried to bring her but she didn't want to (come). But my life was too social. On Sundays at my house, all the kids would knock on the door. At night people would stop by. At times I had to leave to resolve things and returned at dusk. At times people would wake me up to resolve community problems. This (lifestyle) started creating problems, problems. I'd arrive home hot headed. With time you're so preoccupied with other peoples' kids, other peoples' wives, other peoples' husbands, the families of others that your own family goes to pot.

And then stews combine and Camilo relates this experience to the topic of the last section (of this essay):

This doesn't even count the fact that with regard to community work, what most prejudiced by personal life was not being able to maintain my job. That's when problems started generating. Not only for me but for many people who abandoned (community work). Because the family starts to hold you accountable. 'Gosh, you work from Sunday to Sunday, live doing this (stuff), arrive at dusk, leave again, but you don't have a job? You don't have a *carteira assinada*⁴⁰? You have a child, a wife, a husband (in the case of other leaders).' The very people you're helping tell you this. And it snowballs. Then the family is destroyed...Most of the people who are out there really fighting, even those that survived...*No one is, like, 'I'm happy with my volunteer work.'* *No one is.*

Pedro warns against exactly what happened to Camilo. He has actively avoided Camilo's outcome in his own life. With extreme confidence and in a very persuading way, Pedro tells his story:

Yes, (the capacity-building course) messes a bit with your family structure – because it's *volunteer* work...The wife becomes anguished...(Back when I started the volunteer work) when I didn't have (daily paid) work to do, and things were lacking around the house, there was no money, I'd hear a little complaint. Because when I wasn't (doing paid work) I was off to meetings and participating

⁴⁰ A signed document that indicates formal employment.

in community forums. A community manager carries this responsibility with him – when he finishes the course he continues to participate in seminars, forums, to continue improving his knowledge about community management. We end up paying out of our pockets (to get to) these meetings because we've never received funding. This creates tension with the wife because then you have to explain how you have time to go to a meeting when there are things missing (on the shelves) at home.

There's also the problem that I started spending less time at home. A seminar might go all day, and I'd end up spending less time at home with my family. Then I'd get some complaints from my family but, thank God, I always knew how to overcome and today can say no damage was caused to my family.

Especially because I have a tendency to think in the following way – if some damage were caused (to my family) I would stop. I would stop – stop being a community manager, stop developing social projects to be able to find a job that would bring a stabilizing financial return to my family.

I always say this to the other (community) managers. I always tell them at meetings when I see that one is having family problems, because I know there are managers who lost their families by throwing themselves head first into social work. And I don't agree with this, I tell them. Because if you're developing a project in your community to bring benefits to the families of that community, how can you (do so)...if yours doesn't have help and you're even losing it (your family)?

To use Pedro's words, Camilo threw himself head first into community work. And that is what sets him aside and makes his situation more complicated than that of Pedro who was, from the beginning, more cautious. Camilo explains, "The community extracts (everything) from you. It's inside of you. The community is as if it were your family. People go there to your house at midnight. You get out into the street and they (approach you)...The demand is enormous. Then 'Fulana's daughter is sick. She needs to go to the doctor. Talk to Camilo because he's a leader.'"

Unlike a large NGO that has employees working in different communities, a community NGO is installed *in* the community from the outset. This means locally-based leaders have no where to go to 'get away,' as Camilo describes:

Some people want to make community work into a profession (after the course), but we see that that's an illusion because you *live* there, you are *there*, and the demand is very, *very* large. The resident doesn't understand. He's not used to receiving any (help). The city (government) is far away. Then you show up and start doing things, you're close to him, so he starts sucking at you, sucking at you. There's no control.

‘Fulano was taken away (by the cops),’ (someone tells you). It doesn’t matter whether it’s night, day, or a holiday. ‘Fought with your family? Go there (to Camilo).’ ‘Separated? Without pension? Without food?’ Then there’s no way to separate (work and home life). And if, on the other hand, you try to impose this rule, the community rejects you (and your work).

Camilo is an extremely dedicated, aware, and concerned neighbor and citizen. The capacity-building course, with the best of intentions, gave him a set of tools to use to make good on these attributes, to use to maximize the return to his community. Camilo is doing just that – he worked hard to legalize his institution, he articulates with major players inside and outside the community, and he provides a set of seven extremely useful and desired community services – among them the distribution of condoms to the organization of soccer championships, a “Big Brother” type program, and capoeira⁴¹ classes. On the surface his work appears to be a masterpiece of devotion. And it is, but at great cost.

When asked whether he ever thinks of leaving his community work, what is Camilo’s answer? In a sad voice he turns and says, “Sometimes I do...Sometimes I think, ‘this work is going to take me to the end of my sanity.’” But then he recollects and centers himself. Camilo then continues:

It’s not like it’s a profession, you know. It’s not really a life(-sustaining) option...We don’t say, ‘I’m going to do this,’ as if it were a profession, like working on construction or painting. *It’s inside us, you know?* To stop being a leader (at this point) I would have to leave the community. When I think about leaving this work I (have to) think about leaving the community.

If one day I have to reduce my rhythm with this work I’ll have to leave, because I won’t be able to live in there (the community) the way things are (with people calling on me at all hours).

So Camilo continues to live the way he does – working for what he himself deems as peanuts, with minimal time to himself, for his children – effectively against his will. There is no doubt he finds this work attractive and fulfilling. But it is exactly that fact, combined with his proximity to the work (that then takes over his entire life), and the low pay he receives, that creates this enormous contradiction within his mind: whether to continue or to give up.

What, then, do community leaders do to keep the work going? Those who find it fulfilling, who are truly committed, but who recognize the need to maintain themselves? What do they do now?

⁴¹ Capoeira is a Brazilian dance form / martial art whose philosophy and physical manifestation emphasize harmony and reconciliation over conflict and aggression.

Scenario V: Sliding Ever Further from the Ethical

“To guarantee your (community group’s) work, you have three options,” Camilo tells me. As he sees it, given all the conditions described in this article, a community leader has three options if he or she realistically wants to see his or her work take root⁴².

First, he or she can “Get support from the drug traffickers...But you’ll be owing them, you’ll be on the ball from the outset,” he warns. In some cases one has *only* this first option if one’s goal is to do community work in a given *favela*. Franco, for example, speaks of the difficulty, in his case, of developing a community radio show *without* the support of the “parallel power”⁴³. He left the community where he lived and where he ran a community radio station (that spoke of social issues, in addition to playing music) because of the influence of the traffickers, who knew of him as an announcer from the radio show. As he explains:

The parallel power started wanting to tell me what to do. In particular, they wanted me to stay at the pool performing...for free (because of the popularity that came to me from being on the radio). It started turning into a form of terror...So it wasn’t possible for me to stay in a place like that working. And before I came here (where I’m living now), before I left there, I already knew this community. I was already developing a project here. So I moved.

Another community leader, Vitor, had to abandon his community work entirely because of the influence of the narcotraffic. He ended up working downtown at the large NGO where he originally attended a capacity-building course.

Another option, Camilo tells us, is that as a community leader, you can “Affiliate yourself with a politician and sell your work to them. Then he pays your bills...and the community comes on board while the (narco)traffic stays away, and you can always maintain (your work). Then you’re selling all your work to him. You’ll never be the protagonist. And the day you disagree (with him) he’ll (re)discuss (the arrangements).”

Finally, Camilo offers the option that involves the greatest initial investment but that is clearly most in line with the ethics of ‘community management:’ “Gain support through community mobilization. That’s what we learned in (the capacity-building course). To work with the community. Bring the community in to work together with us. The community becomes our backbone. The residents support us. Because when the community is in favor of you it becomes your strength. At that point not even the (narco)traffic, the politician (will confront your work), because they won’t want to have the community against them.”

Camilo’s approach guarantees the project’s survival in a different way. Whereas the first two options (that of depending on the drug traffic or a political candidate) provide *monetary resources* to the group, this option provides *human resources* and a certain level of long-term security. This third option does not address Camilo’s earlier concern, however, that legal

⁴² As compared with the seemingly ideal options presented to them in their courses.

⁴³ The “parallel power” refers to the narcotraffickers, who are, in many senses, the governors of Rio’s *favelas*. “Parallel power” contrasts with “public power,” the term commonly used to refer to the public sector.

sources of funding do not like to support his type of community-based initiative, and Sofia's frustration that existing supporters do not *trust* them to handle the support received. Stability within the organization requires that people be remunerated regularly. This is not guaranteed by the third option.

Camilo told me last March:

(In the capacity-building course) they directed us to set up an NGO, to set up an institution. Then they forgot to show us how to manage an institution...(So) today we are on the path that led to what happened with the neighborhood associations⁴⁴. Because we learned how to write proposals, we have projects in progress, we set up an institution, so where's the money? How are we now going to maintain all of this⁴⁵? That's when you sell yourself...to find the money somewhere else.

Because of the strong emphasis on ethics in their capacity-building course, none of the community managers interviewed showed strong deviations towards fulfilling this potential image so vividly described by Camilo. Others, however, have. As was mentioned earlier, at least one trained community leader has gone to work for a Neighborhood Association deeply involved with the local drug traffickers. Two others have gone to work directly with the narcotraffic.

None of those interviewed for this article seemed inclined to work closely with politicians, either, though this relationship may be a bit more negotiable. On the one hand, one hears Camilo's strong (as always) opinion, that:

Today that kind of relationship (with a politician) is just like that with the drug traffic. I used to think that if I worked more with this sort of consciousness-raising (to vote for those you research and truly believe in) the resident wouldn't go out to the street (to support a candidate because of his or her patronage in the community). But the politician uses a weapon that he's got in his hand and that's difficult to put an end to – and that's poverty, unemployment. So he's always going to get leaders to go to the streets with little flags because there will always be people unemployed who want to make R\$50 a day and wear a little flag.

Though Camilo feels this way, he is currently in negotiation with a political candidate. He explains that the relationship being built will not involve any campaigning or public support by Camilo or his organization. Instead, Camilo is offering a new candidate the opportunity to speak publicly in his community. "I told him we're not going to wear his t-shirts, that we want a *representative* for whom we can vote. In exchange (if he's elected) we want him to always keep

⁴⁴ As an institution in Rio de Janeiro, neighborhood associations have essentially failed. It is for this reason that new leadership is being built by NGOs and government. Over several decades, neighborhood associations have succumbed to corruption in almost all cases, either to drug traffickers or clientelistic politics.

⁴⁵ When asked how much it would cost to maintain all of his community NGO's infrastructure – including staff, electricity, Internet, and so on, Camilo told me that with "R\$3000 per month...then the level of stress would be *much* less." R\$3000 at the moment is equivalent to approximately US\$1000. Camilo's organization currently has 25 people working on 7 projects.

the channels (of communication) open...I did it because...politics is our right. Every segment needs its representative. Don't the metalworkers have their representative? Why shouldn't we have ours?"

This is a truly exceptional approach being taken to developing a relationship in Rio's favelas with political candidates. Across town, in Minxias, the situation is a bit more traditional. Sofia and Tânia receive financial support from a candidate for State Representative. They explain that he comes from their own community, that he began giving them a stipend before he was an official candidate, when he was the vice-president of the community's sports facility. They said they pursued him, and that he agreed to fund their work because it brings benefits to his clients. Sofia explains:

Since we *need* this stipend, since we still don't have any other (dependable) income⁴⁶, we continue to embrace the cause. But that doesn't mean we are *involved* in his political campaign.

The night that I interviewed them, Sofia and Tânia took me to a party organized and promoted by this candidate. But Sofia continued to explain her stance:

We would support a federal-level politician if he or she wanted to support our work. But not in exchange for publicity. Because that would prejudice our long-term success.

Now if he really has a good project to develop with SIPA and he gives us a signed letter pledging his commitment to SIPA after he's elected, then *that's* something to consider. We often say 'the great institutions have their great politicians,' right? So I even think we need a person (politician) in order for SIPA to grow a bit more, but someone who's serious.

Without the proper structures in place to support leaders that experience capacity-building trainings after their courses end, it appears that the tendency is that this investment by large NGOs and the public sector will succumb to the same corrupting pressures as are experienced by other community institutions. *Can anything be done? Shouldn't government be called on to lend financial support to such initiatives?*

⁴⁶ They do receive a stipend from the Ministry of Health but, as pointed out earlier, that funding expires at the end of this year.

Scenario VI: The Institutionalization of Solidarity: the Paradox of Participation

A few nights ago I went to see a play put on by the Theatre of the Oppressed⁴⁷. As occurs with all of their plays, the actors, in this case residents of a low-income community, represented scenes from their daily lives, and at the end audience members were invited to change the course of events by stepping on stage and taking over the role of a character whom they perceived as experiencing some form of oppression. This particular play focused on a woman who contracted HIV from her promiscuous husband. She then went to the community health center, where everyone was working as a volunteer. At this center, she was greeted by her friend and neighbor, the volunteer Health Agent⁴⁸, who searched for her forms and called her in to see the volunteer doctor.

At the end of this scene individuals from the audience came on stage hoping to represent Aparecida, the character who was HIV+. One of the audience members, however, wanted to represent the doctor. ‘How is the doctor oppressed?’ asked the director, before letting this Paulista⁴⁹ take on the role. The Paulista’s response was swift and invited a wave of applause, “Because *something* has to be done about this – the institutionalization of solidarity?!” He then proceeded to take on the role of the doctor at the point in the play where she was going to give up on this volunteer job because she needed to take care of herself and felt she was performing the state’s role for free. Instead, the Paulista created a new scenario in which he represented the doctor and explained to the Health Agent the unjust nature of events – that they were from the community and were there performing free public services while the government did not even pay them a fair salary – and convinced her to mobilize the community for change.

In a 1988 article, Mauricio Salguero spoke of the promising movement towards collective self-help in Latin America. He wrote about the enormous debt that piled up in many countries, those governments’ inability to deal with that debt and, consequently, disinterest or inability to care for their people. He then tells us, “the most hopeful sign in...Latin America...where the traditional development models have been all but exhausted...is the new activism of civil society that we have come to know as social movements”⁵⁰. According to him, the growth in civil society rests in the “utter inability of the modern production sectors to provide a sufficient livelihood for any but a minor fraction of the working population, and a state whose repeated attempts at countervailing policies have proved ineffectual”⁵¹. The influx of rural migrants during the past decades, which was not productively absorbed into the economy, created needs and “political demands on a state increasingly unable to respond to them with available resources...lead(ing) to a breakdown of this model and rising urban violence”⁵².

⁴⁷ An NGO that coordinates the international movement of the Theatre of the Oppressed, a form of theatre developed originally in Brazil by Augusto Boal.

⁴⁸ Which happens to be the first of the new wave of leadership positions in these communities that the federal government recognizes as a ‘profession.’ Health Agents in general are trained with funding from the federal government by local NGOs, as occurred with our leaders above.

⁴⁹ Person from São Paulo.

⁵⁰ Salguero (1998: 109).

⁵¹ Salguero (1998: 110).

⁵² Salguero (1998: 114).

In this context, Salguero was optimistic of the “surge of new activities in the barrios⁵³ of large Latin American cities: a growing capacity for self-organization, self-reliance, and self-governance in a process of collective self-empowerment”⁵⁴. It may be possible, he predicted, that “as the community becomes progressively empowered, the local state...is itself subject to transformation: its structures are being adapted to the demands of a participatory process”⁵⁵.

In 2001 Julia Paley published her anthropological study depicting the changing dynamics of power and social movements in a democratizing Chile⁵⁶. Chapter 5, entitled, “The Paradox of Participation” offers an enlightening perspective on the events described in this essay and in relationship to the hopes and expectations of Salguero expressed above.

Paley describes the events in a low-income community called La Bandera in the southern part of Santiago. There she witnesses, over several years, the difficult process of questioning by civil society of the new form of participation being introduced by officials in the new democracy. The public sector engages in campaigns to educate citizens on how to behave in order to prevent illness, for example, without treating the causes of illness – garbage dumps, contaminated water, and so on. The new form of ‘participation’ involves taking responsibility for one’s actions as a private citizen and getting involved in caring for one’s community, something very attractive to citizens accustomed to decades of military rule during which they were not allowed to organize themselves at all.

The new type of participation at the time proposed by the Chilean government was borne out of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which called for “strategic partnering and the *active engagement of civil society*, the business community, and institutions of democratic local governance to bolster the *ability of local communities to play a lead role in their own development*”⁵⁷. “Local empowerment,” according to USAID, involves “‘citizens working together to solve their own problems and build their own future.’ In this process ‘there is growing interest in the ‘privatization’ of public functions at the local level in which *reoriented public sector facilitates business and civil society provision of local services.*’ The state...coordinates local efforts...assigns tasks...mediates disputes...(and) produc(es) the motivating discourses for citizen activity,” summarizes Paley⁵⁸.

She then describes the battle of one community health group, Llaretta, that calls attention to the inherent problems with this new type of ‘participation.’ Paley reflects on this groups’ qualms:

How could leaders hold the government accountable if they were providing services under its auspices? Why should people who for the most part lacked secure jobs offer their labor for free?...What would happen to urban social movements if they were organized not around local interests but instead around the needs of the state?...How might participation simultaneously operate both as a

⁵³ The Portuguese equivalent of the Spanish *barrio* is *favela*. In English one might call them shantytowns or slums.

⁵⁴ Salguero (1998: 115).

⁵⁵ Salguero (1998: 115).

⁵⁶ (Paley 2001).

⁵⁷ Paley (2002: 145) quoting USAID NPI Resource Guide (1998). All emphasis added by Paley.

⁵⁸ Paley (2002: 145-6) writing and at times quoting USAID NPI Resource Guide (1998). All emphasis added by Paley.

motivating force and a mode of control—a form of governmentality—that is characteristic of democracy amid neoliberal economics?..And what, if any, forms of resistance have developed to respond to this form of power?⁵⁹

A welfare economist might well add to Paley’s criticism of the delegation of public service provision to the community level, or to the NGO community more generally. Charity, to an economist, is a public good⁶⁰ susceptible to all of the problems associated with a public good, including the ‘free rider’ effect. Milton Friedman, in 1962, told us, “It can be argued that private charity is insufficient because the benefits from it accrue to people other than those who make the gifts...(We) might...be willing to contribute to the relief of poverty, *provided* everyone else did”⁶¹. In the case of public goods, like charity, “the market is either inefficient or fails altogether; if the good is to be provided at all, it will generally have to be publicly provided”⁶².

One form of resistance is developing in Brazil. Francisco, a self-proclaimed protagonist who works for a large NGO in the Brazilian city of Florianópolis, combating HIV/Aids told our Rio-based leaders in a recent encounter:

The problem is that when you create (service-providing NGOs), who is going to be inside these NGOs? Will they be public servants entering into these NGOs? Because today inside many NGOs there exists a level of militancy. And some NGOs have already lost this role because they created shelters. This isn’t their function. This is the role of the municipality, the state. Our role isn’t to establish shelters, soup kitchens, day care centers. This is not the role of an NGO. It’s to mobilize to ensure that they (government officials) fulfill *their* obligations.

A visible example of this in Rio is the Group for Ecological Defense (GRUDE), whose director told me their “greatest victory” was succeeding in protecting 60% of a large urban forest (285,000m²) through protests and negotiation. But when I asked why the group stopped those sorts of activities in favor of organizing capacity-building courses, I was told that “Today there are few NGOs that do activist work. Only Greenpeace plays that role. The others listen to environmental politics or try to do the education work.”

In another case, rather than approaching his local government as an activist, Hélio, a neighborhood association president⁶³ from a neighboring municipality to Rio, took a proposal he elaborated for a community street cleaning program to the local government in his district. He tried and tried, but they were uninterested. He finally got support from a new US-based foundation. Hélio explains:

We prepared the proposal (to clean up the trash in the community) and looked for the Urban Cleaning Company of Nova Iguaçu. It would be a pilot project for one

⁵⁹ Paley (2001: 146-7).

⁶⁰ A public good exhibits three technical characteristics: (1) Non-rivalness in consumption, (2) Non-excludability, and (3) non-rejectability. See Barr (1998: 104) for a full explanation.

⁶¹ Friedman (1962: 191). Emphasis in original.

⁶² Barr (1998: 105).

⁶³ As a neighborhood association president Hélio is in an official position to submit ideas and receive funding from the public sector. His organization has legal standing.

year, they'd provide a 4-person crew organized to clean the community. They told us 'We don't have money to pay them.' So I told them, 'In that case you provide the crew and we'll train and coordinate their work.' They then told us, 'We can't because we don't have many employees.' So finally I just asked them to provide the material – the trash cans, a little cart. They told us, 'We still don't have that (to give you).'

So we sent the project to the...Foundation and insisted a lot because it didn't fit in the 3 topic areas the foundation was interested in funding. I insisted, kept on them. Then we got it through!

Hélio tells me he insisted in the same way with the outside foundation as he had done with his own city government. But only with the outside foundation was he successful in acquiring support to provide for his own community what is the most basic of city services – trash removal⁶⁴.

Marcos Alvito⁶⁵ explained in a recent lecture at the Pontific Catholic University of Rio de Janeiro:

Think about it. If there's a day care center, and there's no food...when the day care center belongs to the State, the citizen can complain because that (food) is a right he holds and the governor or the mayor must then send money to that day care center for food. But if the day care center is managed by an NGO it's not the same. Because the NGO doesn't have an obligation to do that, it's there voluntarily. So the State has disobliged itself and the people are not going to argue with the priest, the nun, or that well-intentioned person that's there working at the NGO so that they will feed their little children.

In last week's *Jornal do Brasil*, one of Rio's main daily newspapers, a photograph on the front page called attention to an article about 'Saving the Lagoons,' describing the loss of 80% of the area of many of Rio's lagoons. Under the photo, the process to save the lagoons is described: "To try and save what's left, the NGO Ser Conciante will remove 800,000m³ of sludge from the lagoons. A partnership with a contractor will permit the removal, at no cost to the State, from the most critical areas"⁶⁶.

One wonders, *sure government funds are limited, but where are existing funds going? What are the government's priorities?* In the current election year, state public funding has been focused on high visibility projects in which millions of dollars have been programmed for spending in ways that produce votes by targeting middle- and upper-class voters, along with the fearful poor.

⁶⁴ In her speech recognizing this and other selected initiatives, the foundation representative who selected them commented to a broad upper- or middle-class public, "I want to share with you what I found with these NGOs (I interviewed), volunteers, and more generally with that population we always think of as 'poor thing, poor thing' – those 'poor things' have enormous talents, enormous desires, and an enviable strength!"

⁶⁵ A professor of History at the Fluminense Federal University in the city of Niterói, across the bay from Rio, Marcos Alvito is an anthropologist and author of *As Cores de Acari* (2001).

⁶⁶ "Salvação das Lagoas" (August 29, 2002: A1).

Rio de Janeiro's current governor is spending R\$586,000⁶⁷ per month to rent (from an American company) a zeppelin that will fly over the city and its metropolitan region at up to 150km/hour to patrol the city from above. A set of cameras, one of them infrared, are costing the federal government R\$1.2 million⁶⁸ and will allow the government to "register a license plate or a criminal's face from 15 kilometers away"⁶⁹.

In the meantime, there are only two sources of public funding, both at the federal level, targeting community-based organizations (CBOs) and their public service initiatives. The Ministry of Health fund is specifically designated for programs to fight HIV/Aids and offers a stipend of R\$100⁷⁰ per month. That "pot" of money, however, will be terminated this December when the responsibility for funding local initiatives in health will become local. The other source is the Fund for Labor Support (FAT), organized by the Labor Minister, and which supports professionalizing courses in the community. None of those we interviewed have received support from FAT.

These are important criticisms and concerns of the trend towards the institutionalization of solidarity, as our Paulista put it, or 'participation,' as the new government in Chile has attempted to establish it. In fact the potential of Salguero's optimism was qualified years before, in 1985, when Ruth Cardoso, a Brazilian anthropologist and today's First Lady, "argue(d)...persuasively that the 'new' social movements are neither new nor radical; that, by their very nature, *they are easily co-opted by the state*, and that neither in their intentions nor in their effects are they transformative of existing relations of power"⁷¹.

All this said, I am now rereading the factsheet I received from an NGO whose main task is the coordination of one of the larger capacity-building programs in Rio today. Openly and honestly, it reads:

The insertion of our NGO in the Third Sector occurs at a moment of important social change, when the relations between Civil Society and the State, as with the *social responsibility of citizens*, is being redefined. With this in mind, our social action strategy emphasizes the strengthening of local actors and institutions, building their capacity and accessorizing them in managing community development in a holistic and integrated way. To do this, (we) elaborate and execute projects that seek to train community managers.

As Paley put it, one risk of these trends is that we are entering a time during which social movements become organized around the needs of the state. And Francisco's concern, that community leaders who would normally be 'protagonists' of change will, instead, be co-opted into a process of rebuilding society in a way defined by the public sector and its associated elites, also appears frighteningly plausible.

⁶⁷ Costa (2002).

⁶⁸ Pena (2002: C1).

⁶⁹ Costa (2002).

⁷⁰ Approximately US\$33.

⁷¹ Salguero (1998: 110). Emphasis added.

It is important to take a moment here, however, to state that to my knowledge those supporting capacity-building programs do not intend to dilute the ability of communities to mobilize. In fact, many of the courses are coordinated by individuals or NGOs that have in the past been considered ‘militants,’ or ‘activists.’ They do, indeed, pass these values on to the leaders they train. In one course I attended, the instructor, Carla, was teaching her students about the Statute of the Child and the Adolescent, a federal law protecting youth. One student said, “This law is (just) a theory,” to which her instructor replied, “Yes, there’s a lot missing before we (can say we) receive full protection (under the law).” Carla then points out all of the inequalities in our society, between schools in the (wealthy) South Zone and those in the North, condominiums and *favelas*, rock concerts and funk concerts...and how people are treated differently in each. Carla finishes the class asking why it is important for us to know the law even if it is not enforced. “Because we need to know our rights so that we can claim them...You need to know you have those rights for them to take effect,” she explains.

The problem, then is not in the courses themselves. In fact, all of the community leaders interviewed for this essay said they felt “positive” or “very positive” with regard to the effect of the course in their lives. Camilo, who has had the most personal difficulty associated with the course, told me, in response to this question:

Positive. Despite *everything* we talked about, very positive. Because inside my reality, of the options that I had of routes I could follow, today I still find the strength to fight the battle. And I’ve lost a lot in this process – but do you know the sensation that you’ve saved various lives? We’ve saved a lot of lives, especially kids and adolescents...Because we live with them *day-to-day* we know...The greatest gain to being a community manager for me is this one.

Leadership and capacity-building courses should be viewed critically to ensure that their content does not result in the sort of ‘participation’ occurring in Chile, or the co-optation Cardoso warns of, or the lack of protagonism Francisco fears – a form of institutionalized solidarity that prevents true mobilization. *With this in mind, how can we build something new, use these courses and the potential they offer more constructively?*

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