13 - Social innovation, non-governmental organizations, business, and the state

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SORJ, B. *brazil@digitaldivide.com: confronting inequality in the information society* [online]. Rio de Janeiro: Centro Edelstein de Pesquisa Social, 2008. Social innovation, non-governmental organizations, business, and the state. pp. 140-144. ISBN 978-85-99662-48-9. Available from SciELO Books <<http://books.scielo.org>>.

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13 - Social Innovation, Non-governmental Organizations, Business, and the State

The Lessons of Viva Rio

Like any social experiment, Viva Rio has some characteristics that cannot be reproduced in other environments, while at the same time it indicates models and approaches, which, with adequate adaptation, can contribute to the fight against digital exclusion in particular, and social inequality in general.

The Fight against Violence - Urban violence has become one of the main social and political problems of the new millennium. In this area lies what is perhaps the principal innovation and contribution of Viva Rio: the use of the Internet as part of a repertoire of actions (research, analysis, campaigns, and social projects) aimed at reducing violence.

Urban violence affects citizens around the world, in both developed and developing countries, and has taken a center stage in electoral campaigns. Urban violence has fed racial prejudice against immigrants in Europe, blacks and Latinos in the U.S., and the residents of low-income areas in Latin America. In response, however, the political imagination of political parties and civil society has been inadequate, and **the fight for peace and the fight for development are still treated, in practice, as separate themes by the majority of international agencies, governments, and NGOs.**

One of the biggest problems here is that, in Brazil, as in many parts of the world, the fight against violence has been seen as falling strictly under the jurisdiction of the state security apparatus. This has led to the development of two non-compatible discourses: one that affirms the need to preserve human rights without indicating practical solutions, and another that puts efficacy ahead of respect for civil and rights. Viva Rio's work has been pioneering in combining a discourse of peace and respect for human rights with concrete public security projects that confront specific problems of policing and armed violence, delivering practical results.

Viva Rio realizes that violence must be confronted by acting at a number of different levels: the socio-economic -generating employment and providing access to education- as well as the particular -restricting the circulation of firearms and training police officers. Viva Rio has been very successful in showing that the fight against urban violence is important to all sectors of society, that a culture of peace and the rejection of violence can create a social movement capable of dealing with the many problems of human security without falling into a mindset that relies on police violence and the stigmatization of *favela* residents.

The experience related in chapter 12, in which Viva Rio got the governments and police of Brazil and Argentina to cooperate in the fight against illicit arms traffic, illustrates the importance that NGO networks can have in the fights against crime and international terrorism. The rigid structure of national governments and the lack of institutional systems of international cooperation in the fight against new forms of organized violence both limit the effective exchange of information and flexible, rapid cooperation between state security agencies. NGOs specializing in the fight against violence can play an increasingly important role in defining national security policy, as well as fostering a shift in public opinion away from simple, reactive fear, toward a pro-active vision of cooperation and resolution.

Scaling up - The principal limitation of most NGOs actions is that they are *ad hoc* local actions, undoubtedly relevant for the target communities, but without a large-scale societal impact for the simple reason that they are not replicable. Instead of complementing government action, all too often they end up substituting the state, relieving it of its responsibilities to low-income communities.

Given the rigidity and bureaucracy of the state, NGOs have an important role to play as social laboratories, sources of innovation and new techniques of social intervention, and eventually, as implementers and supporters of government action. But the ability of NGOs to innovate is only relevant to the extent that the experiments they develop are transformed into public policy and/or attract the attention of private enterprise to the potential of low-income communities as consumer and labor markets. For this to happen, NGO action must go beyond homespun programs, whose particularities, functional logic, financing, and management make them non-reproducible. Unfortunately, many NGOs actions sometimes resemble a cemetery of well-intentioned projects.

The relevance of Viva Rio's approach is that its projects have a well-defined format, a managerial structure and evaluation system that can be reproduced on a large scale, allowing them to be taken over eventually by the state and transformed into public policy. Viva Rio's experience indicates that NGOs themselves could benefit from training in how to overcome amateurism and create social projects whose success doesn't depend solely on the good will and sacrifice of NGO staff, by creating prototypes that can be transformed into public policies. Without such training, local efforts will likely result in little more than temporary improvements, or at best, the social mobility of small groups targeted by projects.

The professionalization of NGOs will of course produce some tension in the recruiting of teams, between the demands of a moral ethos that attracts people willing to accept lower-than-market salaries -but not always fully qualified-, and a professional ethos that calls for highly qualified personnel with their accompanying expectations for higher salaries. This is a problem faced by NGOs everywhere: throughout the world, and professionalization of NGOs is well under way, spurred on by new requirements from financing agencies whose bureaucratic systems for evaluation and approval of projects requires more and more specialized staff.

Self-sustainability and Market-Readiness - The legal definition of NGOs as not-for-profit organizations can, unfortunately, often be restated as “institutions with non-sustainable social projects”. NGOs need constant external support to create and experiment with social projects, which are all too often cancelled when funding dries up. To have a permanent effect, projects must aim either to be declared of public interest or absorbed by the state, or capable of sustaining their own operating budget. Viva Rio has shown an enormous capacity for success in both senses, developing projects that can be absorbed into public policy, and developing projects with potential to sustain themselves. For example, the Future Stations are different from most other NGOs tele-centers in Brazil because there is a fee paid by the users, helping the program sustain itself and allows users to value their effort in accessing the services.

Improving the self-image of sectors with no self-image – One of the principal arguments for the fight against digital exclusion is the need to value local cultures at risk of losing their ethnic and linguistic identities. This is correct in so far as it doesn’t see local culture as being in opposition to global culture; we should not forget that so-called local culture is always a mix of various traditions that can be interpreted in many ways, and that the Internet is a two-way street, through which content flows out to the world and the world can enter in to local communities.

While Viva Rio action in this area celebrates pre-existing identities, ignored or restrained by the dominant culture, the central importance of its projects is in transforming the self-image of *favela* residents -and the negative image that other social groups have of them- by showing how *favelas* have produced **new** forms of cultural and social creativity. Instead of opposing and isolating, the goal is to integrate, to show the positive dimension of *favela* life, its cultural wealth.

Social prejudice, a journalistic ethos of high-impact news, and even the well-intentioned focus on social exclusion all tend to present these communities in a negative light, as places of violence and suffering. Without denying these realities, Viva Rio tries to create bridges with the outside world, showing *favela* life in all its dimensions to local residents and to the rest of society, which in large part has never visited a *favela*.

Community Relationships / Networking – One of Viva Rio’s primary characteristics is that it works in cooperation and partnership with local communities, at the same time maintaining a certain autonomy in relationship to each. This aspect is sometimes criticized for not being entirely rooted in the target communities, with social projects arriving “from the outside”. This criticism merits detailed commentary, as it is based on several myths of an “alternative” discourse based on local knowledge that has now been appropriated by the majority of large foundations and international organizations.

Viva Rio is structured as a network of face-to-face relationships that is empowered by telematics, but which is renewed constantly through every-day contact. This networking approach allows Viva Rio to be present in many communities, without being linked solely or particularly to any one locale; it permits a global vision of the problems facing the city, and the proposal of solutions and organizational models that go beyond the specific needs of each place. At the same time, by working directly with local organizations, a central pillar of Viva Rio's philosophy, local organizations and NGOs are valued and empowered, allowing them to leave behind a provincial and often narrow vision of their problems and the available solutions.

In the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, a large number of community leaders are directly, indirectly, or potentially at risk of blackmail by drug traffickers. This alone would be sufficient reason not to leave the management of projects entirely up to local residents. But those who emphasize the empowerment of communities would argue that this is circumstantial, and thus temporary. This vision relies on an idealized and thus distorted view of the community. These communities are in general controlled by oligarchic structures, which, without external control, tend to back projects that at best reinforce their power, and at worst channel scarce resources into their own interests.

Thus it is important to value the expressions of local community leaders, without mystifying them as the sole source of know-how. In some cases, truly effective leaders do arise in the *favelas*, usually youth who have attained a certain level of educational qualification, who demand for themselves the right to be true spokespersons for their communities. Without a doubt, such leaders are crucial to community development, their work creative and necessary, but their legitimacy is based precisely on the fact that their knowledge has been obtained outside the community.

Size and Diversity – Although some people see NGOs as highly efficient in comparison to the public sector, they are often extremely wasteful of human and financial resources caused by the interruption of projects due to lack of funding.

Viva Rio suffers from symptoms common to the life of most NGOs, in particular financial instability. This not only puts the continuation of its projects at risk, it makes it difficult to recruit qualified personnel, especially when experience in the formal labor market is required. However, the quantity and variety of Viva Rio's projects function, to a certain extent, as an antidote. Through sheer size, Viva Rio has accumulated a critical mass of resources that allows it to maintain a permanent team of qualified professionals throughout fluctuations in cash flow, to sustain projects that run deficits until new financing can be found, and to cover the cost of pilot programs before formal financing has been secured.

Future Stations as Multi-use Community Tele-Centers – One of the principal characteristics of the Future Stations -in contrast with the majority of tele-center experiments associated with so-called solidarity and citizens' networks- is the variety of their sphere of

activities. With a wide range of services beyond simple Internet access and computing courses, the Future Stations represent an experimental step towards the creation of multi-use community tele-centers. As we have mentioned before, given the importance of tele-centers for the democratization of the Internet, it is necessary to constantly evaluate different experiences, their technological, managerial, and financial models, their range of content and services offered, and their relationship with local communities. The creation of multi-use community tele-centers will permit the elimination of redundancy in tele-center investment, at the same time creating dissemination poles of Internet use. .

Press Relations – Viva Rio ability to stay in the news has generated some marginal resentment from some politicians and NGOs, which sees in Viva Rio's media savvy a clever exhibitionism in place of actual work alongside the needy. We believe, and this book has sought to show, that this is a doubly unjust criticism. First because Viva Rio carries out an impressive amount of local work and second because the role of non-governmental organizations is above all, to disseminate moral messages. In the current world, the capacity to reach hearts and minds passes through access to the means of communication. Violence in Rio de Janeiro has an enormous capacity to strengthen fascist attitudes. Viva Rio's campaigns to improve the image of the *favela* residents and encourage society at large and government in particular to take responsibility for the issue of violence have been a central factor in neutralizing these tendencies by advancing effective propositions for fighting crime while protecting civil rights.

Solidarity and Representation – Viva Rio's approach raises a theme whose discussion is beyond the scope of this work, but which should nevertheless be mentioned. NGOs frequently confuse solidarity and vocalization of the needs of low-income groups with actual representation of these groups. There are all manner of NGOs, and there are certainly many that are direct expressions of social movements, while others have such strong roots in their communities that they can claim to represent them. But in general, solidarity cannot and should not be confused with representation, since no matter how well intentioned, this amounts to a kind of usurpation.

Viva Rio, through its campaigns, seeks to give voice to the desire for solidarity that runs through society, and at the same time develop products that offer answers to specific problems of the urban poor. These projects are, whenever possible carried out in partnership with the government and/or private enterprises, and always in collaboration with local organizations. But this collaboration does not authorize Viva Rio to consider itself a representative of or substitute for local actors. Viva Rio distances itself from a model, still dominant among Latin American NGOs, of radical discourses about an alternative society, in which the NGOs themselves are self-proclaimed delegates of the popular will.