

CSO CASE STUDY 10

Title: From educational intensive care towards an educational city – the case of Araçuaí (Minas Gerais State, Brazil)

Country: Brazil

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The handing-over of the Secretary of Education of Araçuaí to a local non-governmental organisation is a noted example of 'scaling up': of micro level action influencing the macro context. Within just over a year the Popular Centre for Culture and Development (CPCD) had raised local educational performance rates through the design and implementation of an emergency educational programme. The 'Araçuaí: From educational intensive care towards an educational city' project was based on the NGO's 20-year expertise in popular education in the region, and responded to statistical evidence of the extremely low levels of educational performance in the municipality.

Introduction to the case

Through an innovative popular education project, the Popular Centre for Culture and Development (CPCD) - a Brazilian non-governmental organisation based in one of the country's poorest areas, the Jequitinhonha valley, has offered the municipality of Araçuaí, in the south-eastern State of Minas Gerais, the possibility of an educational revolution, in an attempt to combat the alarming statistics of the local educational standard. The 'Araçuaí: From educational intensive care towards an educational city' project was designed by an unconventional collaboration arrangement between the NGO, the local Secretary of Education and the Municipal Council of Children's Rights, where CPCD is responsible for designing and implementing local educational policies.

The type and extent of policy change

For the first time in Brazil, a local government appointed a non-governmental organisation to run its Department of Education, which entails the full design and implementation of local educational policies. Since August 2003, due to a number of factors, in particular the alarming results of research on the performance of the public educational system, CPCD has been responsible for Araçuaí's Secretary of Education. As there is not even legislation that allows a governmental body to be run by an organisation, the NGO director is the 'official' responsible for the secretary. However, in practice the Secretary is run by a team of CPCD's collaborators who work on a voluntary basis in close collaboration with the local civil servants.

Some thoughts on the explanation of the policy change

Under the argument that the educational activities carried out by CPCD were being more effective than the local educational policies, the then mayor of Araçuaí, affiliated to the Workers Party (PT), appointed CPCD to run the municipality's educational network formed by 38 educational units, comprising 2,344 students and 140 teachers. Araçuaí has a population of approximately 36 thousand inhabitants, of which 43% lives in the 66 communities of the municipality's remote rural areas, the main target of the project.

a) The political context

The good working relations between the NGO and the local government, added to the dramatic situation of the municipal educational system, led the mayor of Araçuaí, who had particularly good professional and personal relations with the NGO team in Araçuaí, to acknowledge that the NGO was performing much better than the local schools, as the employment of the NGO's methodology by some of the local nurseries and a few local primary schools indicated. And based on the NGO's claims according to which their projects aimed at influencing public policy, in particular educational policy, the mayor offered them the opportunity of not merely influencing, but actually implementing educational policy in the municipality. The decision was made by the mayor herself, with the support from the Secretary of Education. It is important to remember that the local administration, affiliated to the Workers Party (PT), had a very popular nature, having implemented 'participatory budgeting' locally, and being open to incorporate civil society initiatives into governmental action. This is to say that the political environment was particularly favourable in Araçuaí for such a policy change.

b) The ways CPCD tried to affect policy change

CPCD's historical path of successful results represents a key driving force for the policy change under analysis. CPCD has been developing and implementing non-formal (i.e. outside the governmental sphere) educational projects that combine popular education and community development since 1984, having won national and international acclaim for its creative work in Curvelo and Araçuaí, both located in the Brazilian State of Minas. Due to their successful approach to education they have persuaded local governments to replicate their methodology in a number of Brazilian regions, and also in Mozambique. The NGO's first project (Sementinha or 'little seed' project), aimed at 4-6 year olds, had already been employed by several municipal nurseries in Araçuaí, based on the evidence that the children who had taken part of the project were clearly better students when they entered formal education than other children who hadn't had access to the project.

c) The nature of research-based evidence

At the same time, local public primary education demonstrated very poor excellence rates according to research-based evaluation, widening the gap between the NGO's and the public service even more. The strategic popular education project was based on official statistical research data collected in 2002 by the Educational Evaluation System of the State of Minas Gerais (SIMAVE) and the Centre for Public Policy and Educational Assessment (CAED). According to CAED's diagnosis, Araçuaí's educational system proved to be disastrous. Of the 1,684 students enrolled in 2002, 75% of those in the 4th grade, and 97% in the 8th grade reached insufficient or critical performance rates, and 20% of the local population above 10 years of age were found to be illiterate.

A second source of research-based evidence that led to the policy change was CPCD's successful design and implementation of community-based educational technologies on the basis of an ongoing research process of local knowledge, practices and beliefs, which have been translated into educational technologies that are being replicated in other Brazilian regions and developing countries of Portuguese language such as Mozambique. Examples of CPCD's technologies are the construction of original games and toys to assist local teachers, the incorporation of local knowledge into teaching materials, the

involvement of parents and community members in teaching activities, and so forth. These results led the local government to involve CPCD in the process of subjecting the local educational system to an 'intensive care' process, protecting their children and adolescents from an early 'civic death'.

d) The mechanisms they used to get the evidence into the policy process

The main approach employed by CPCD was to highlight local assets, rather than the region's social and economic difficulties. The project was divided into two main stages. The 'intensive care' stage involved mobilising all rural communities to look after their children and adolescents in need of improved levels of 'care'. This was done by transforming sources of local knowledge (stories, recipes, toys, practices, beliefs) into pedagogical resources. Once local students have been rescued from the premature 'civic death', the 'educational city' phase aimed at transforming each rural community of Araçuaí into a 'learning community', where local knowledge, abilities and attitudes are made available to every child, young person or adult of this micro-universe. This is to say that the main mechanism used by CPCD in order to get the research evidence into the policy process was to incorporate the NGO's social technologies developed since its foundation in the early 1980s into the local education policies.

Conclusions and lessons learned

The Araçuaí case tells a great deal about opportunities and challenges that civil society - government collaborations entail. While the project reported enabled the local educational system to reach unprecedented levels of learning and ownership by local communities in a relatively short period (as three evaluation processes carried out since the beginning of the project indicates), the continuity of the project was subject to political factors, and was only guaranteed due to the victory of the Workers Party in the 2004 municipal elections, which had the project in the core of its educational policy for the 2005-2008 period.

In addition, the fact that it has not happened anywhere else but in the remote town of Araçuaí, relates not only to the willingness of a local government to acknowledge its failure and civil society organisations' success, but also to the presence of a truly capable organisation to take over such a challenging task, with realistic chances of succeeding. Finally, it is worth remembering that the decision was based on a gradual process, as elements of the NGO work had already been in use by a few municipal schools and nurseries for at least 5 years. The main research-policy-practice lessons learned from this experience are:

- Policy changes that incorporate small-scale successful experiences of civil society organisations depend not only on good results, but also on a favourable political context and good working relations with the policy-making sphere;
- Trust in local civil society organisations by policy makers can enhance their potential and promote social change more widely, enabling NGOs to reach the policy arena;
- Research-based evidence can highlight local challenges and opportunities, and provide empirical arguments to support the decision-making process for constructive change.

Sources of documentation to support the case

- Key document: 'Projeto Araçuaí: de UTI Educacional à Cidade Educativa' (URL: <http://www.cpcd.org.br/release/Projeto%20UTI%20refer%EAncia.pdf>)
- See also 'Relatório Fotográfico Maio-Julho 2005 - Projeto Araçuaí: de UTI Educacional à Cidade Educativa (Araçuaí, MG)' for a photographic report on the project's development (available on <http://www.cpcd.org.br/uti.htm>)
- For further information (in Portuguese only) about the project visit <http://www.cpcd.org.br/uti.htm>

Basic information on the autor

Monica Mazzer Barroso is currently a final year PhD student at the Social Policy Department of the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she also concluded her MSc degree in Management of Non-Governmental Organisations with distinction. Her PhD thesis examines the role and relevance of radio communication in the livelihoods of traditional populations in Brazilian Amazonia. Her field experience as an NGO practitioner in Brazilian Amazonia led her to co-found Projeto Bagagem, a Brazil-based organisation that promotes community-based tourism in regions where successful community development initiatives take place.

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