Bridging Social Divides: The Role of the Third Sector

Institute for Policy Studies
Baltimore, Maryland USA
Enormous differences exist among peoples throughout the world. These differences reflect to an important degree the underlying pluralism and diversity of peoples and societies. As such, they enrich human existence and add variety to human life.

But differences can also harden into divides. This happens when people are excluded from the exercise of rights or from opportunities available to others. When this occurs, healthy pluralism gives way to painful exclusion, and enormous emotional, psychological, social, and economic harm can result.

The present statement examines the role that third sector organizations can play in overcoming such exclusion. The statement emerged from the work of the participants in the Fifteenth Annual Johns Hopkins International Fellows in Philanthropy Conference held in Sao Paulo, Brazil, in July 2003. Over 200 third sector activists and experts from Brazil gathered by SENAC, a major Brazilian training organization, and ABDL, a capacity building and networking organization in the field of sustainable development, joined with Fellows and associates of the Johns Hopkins International Fellows in Philanthropy Program from 30 other countries to consider the role of third sector institutions in “Bridging Social Divides” in Brazil and throughout the world. Of particular concern in this conference were four types of exclusion: (1) economic exclusion, (2) ethnic exclusion, (3) generational exclusion, and (4) exclusion of disabled persons. The present Statement grew out of the conference deliberations but considers the issue of exclusion and the role of the third sector in overcoming it more generally.
I. THE NATURE OF EXCLUSION

Exclusion is a complex phenomenon with numerous dimensions—emotional, psychological, physical, and economic—to name just a few. Exclusion is not just about poverty, though poverty is often one of its most dramatic manifestations. Exclusion is also about rights, about access, and about opportunity. When the poor lack access to job opportunities, education, health care, or credit, they are excluded. When indigenous peoples or racial and ethnic groups are treated with disrespect or subjected to discrimination in hiring or public services, they are excluded. When children and youth are deprived of intellectual stimulation or proper nutrition, they are excluded. When the elderly are left out of social interactions and cut off from their economic role, they are excluded.

Exclusion is a dynamic process. It changes over time as economic and social conditions change. Attention to overcoming exclusion and promoting inclusion must therefore be a constant preoccupation.

Exclusion is a matter of concern not only for what it does to the excluded. Rather, it affects us all. It robs society of the full human potential of those who are excluded, and it weakens the moral fabric of society. “Everything that exists co-exists,” Brazilian philosopher Frei Betto has observed. Our own well-being is therefore tied up with the well-being of others, and social divides diminish us all.

II. THE ROLE OF THE THIRD SECTOR IN COMBATING EXCLUSION

Third sector organizations can play an enormous role in overcoming exclusion and promoting inclusion. Indeed, few social institutions are better positioned to perform this role. This is so because third sector organizations are often in close touch with excluded communities and can thus ensure that missing voices are heard and excluded groups mobilized to claim rights that are theirs as citizens.

More specifically, third sector organizations can promote inclusion in at least ten different ways:
1. Consciousness-raising
In the first place, third sector organizations can play a crucial role in changing the attitudes and perceptions that often lie at the base of exclusion. This includes the attitudes of those doing the excluding as well as those experiencing it. The former need to be instructed in tolerance and appreciation of diversity, and the latter in building self-confidence and overcoming attitudes of inferiority and superiority. Third sector organizations can also conduct and disseminate research that documents the nature and extent of exclusion and shows the consequences it has. Bridging divides begins with self-awareness, and third sector organizations are well-positioned to encourage it.

2. Empowerment
Consciousness-raising is itself but a first step toward creating a sense of community among those who are excluded, and toward building the concrete connections that can give this sense of community tangible expression. Third sector organizations provide vehicles of participation and association among similarly situated people, making it possible for them to act in concert on matters of common concern. In the process, they help foster leadership, which itself is crucial to promoting inclusion.

3. Opening public space
Where inclusion requires political, and not just economic or social action, as it often does, third sector organizations can also be important in opening a space for such action. This can take many different forms: creating an enabling legal environment for community-based groups, opening channels of communication with government officials, guaranteeing the right of expression and assembly, and promoting effective political participation by excluded groups.

4. Advocacy
Once the space for political involvement is open, third sector organizations can also help those excluded defend their rights and push for supportive public policies. This can include anti-discrimination laws as well as changes in tax and other policies that foster inclusion and open access and opportunities.
5. Monitoring

Third sector organizations can be important not only in changing laws but also in ensuring their enforcement. This can take the form of monitoring implementation, publicizing enforcement lapses, and initiating legal action where necessary to ensure that laws are effectively applied. Third sector organizations can also monitor the performance of private sector organizations and publicize instances of discrimination or exploitation.

6. Promoting innovation

Thanks to their generally small scale and flexibility and their engagement of grass-roots voices, third sector organizations are often in a position to identify and experiment with novel approaches. They can also serve as clearinghouses for promising ideas and vehicles for diffusing the resulting innovations.

7. Resource mobilization

Third sector organizations can mobilize a broad range of special resources in the battle for inclusion. They can energize volunteers, foster contributions of time and money, gain access to facilities and equipment, and influence the policies of private and public donors. All of this can add significantly to the pool of resources available for community problem-solving.

8. Tailoring services to community needs

Rooted as they often are in the communities affected by exclusion, third sector organizations are in a position to know community needs. They can therefore tailor responses to the needs of excluded groups and ensure more sensitive responses to their needs.

9. Mediation and conflict resolution

Third sector organizations can also help promote inclusion by serving as a bridge among sectors and communities, avoiding or resolving conflicts, and offering channels of communication that may not be available otherwise. They can reach across social and economic divides and bring together people of good will interested in resolving apparent conflicts and forging new alliances.
10. Economic influence

Third sector organizations and their allies in the business community are also economic actors with considerable economic clout. They can thus promote inclusion by practicing non-discrimination in their own employment policies. They can also work to improve the flow of credit to disadvantaged groups and bring pressure to bear through their investment and other policies to encourage societal practices that reduce exclusion.

III. OBSTACLES TO CIVIL SOCIETY’S SUCCESS IN BRIDGING DIVIDES

While third sector organizations possess important advantages in bridging societal divides, they also face a number of obstacles. For one thing, the third sector’s own reputation as an agent of inclusion is far from perfect. Functioning as vehicles through which people can band together to secure benefits they cannot secure from the market or the state, third sector organizations have sometimes served as agents of privilege rather than inclusion. Elite schools, expensive health care institutions, and sophisticated cultural institutions are examples of third sector institutions that have sometimes functioned in this way. Even those third sector institutions firmly committed to promoting inclusion face considerable difficulties, however. Foremost among these are the following:

1. Lack of knowledge and visibility

A perennial problem facing third sector organizations is lack of knowledge and visibility. This takes a variety of different forms:

- Lack of knowledge on the part of the general public and key policymakers about the third sector, the role it plays in promoting inclusion, and the results it achieves. This can limit the influence the sector can bring to bear;

- Lack of knowledge on the part of third sector organizations about the communities they wish to serve. Third sector organizations face a perennial challenge in trying to “hear” communities and be responsive to their wishes;
• Lack of knowledge on the part of third sector organizations about government decision-making processes and how to influence them;

• Lack of managerial training and capacity on the part of third sector organizations, which can limit the effectiveness with which they go about their work;

• Lack of a sufficient culture of participation within third sector organizations, which can make it difficult for them to mobilize excluded communities to fight for their rights.

2. Lack of resources

Third sector organizations often lack both the financial and human resources they need to carry out their work most effectively. What is more, competition for funding creates suspicions and rivalries among third sector organizations, complicating the task of forging alliances. Where government funding is available, other problems can arise because of political sensitivities to third-sector criticisms of government policies.

3. Limited power and influence

Third sector organizations can often find themselves marginalized by more powerful social actors in business and government. Quite often the political space for third sector involvement is limited and public recognition of the role these organizations play quite constrained. Complicating things further, the media are often ill-informed about the third sector and the problems it seeks to address. These problems are naturally magnified in situations where lack of law and order and domestic conflict make third sector activities even more difficult to sustain.

4. Difficulties of collaboration

While these limitations can be overcome in important part through collaborations and partnerships, such cooperation is itself difficult to organize and sustain. Partnerships require continuous negotiation and considerable skill, and third sector organizations often lack the skills and the managerial resources needed to make complex partnerships work. What is more, the incentives for forging part-
partnerships are more than offset by the competitive pressures against them, leading to territorialism and limited exchange of information.

5. Indifference or prejudice
The tasks facing third sector organizations are further complicated by the indifference and lack of sensitivity that often exists toward excluded people, and hence toward the organizations seeking to help them. Prejudices confront third sector organizations at every turn as they seek to undo the causes and consequences of exclusion.

IV. STEPS NEEDED TO EQUIP THIRD SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS TO BRIDGE DIVIDES
To overcome these obstacles to more effective third sector engagement in promoting inclusion, five crucial steps seem most urgently needed. These include the following:

1. Increasing public awareness
Significant effort is needed to raise awareness about the third sector, the problems it is addressing, and the success it is having. This can take a variety of forms:

• Media campaigns to increase public awareness of the nature and extent of exclusion and of the role of third sector organizations in combating it;

• Dissemination of best practices developed by third sector organizations to promote inclusion;

• Education of the media itself so that it understands this sector and the role it plays;

• Increased research to improve the knowledge base regarding the third sector and its role in promoting inclusion in order to root these public awareness campaigns in more solid and reliable information;

• Broader inculcation of a culture of participation and tolerance through programs in schools and elsewhere.
2. Increasing third sector organizational capacity

For third sector organizations to gain traction on important issues of exclusion, they must themselves be effective organizations equipped to operate in the multiple environments that affect the persistence of exclusion. Third sector organizations must therefore be able to listen to their communities, engage these communities actively in their operations, operate effective programs, demonstrate this effectiveness, interact with potential partners in government and the business community, and maintain their fiscal health. All of this requires trained personnel who understand how to operate effectively without sacrificing the core of their mission. Expanding the opportunities for management training targeted on the special needs and characteristics of third sector organizations is thus a high priority. What is more, such training needs to be continuous in view of the dynamic character of modern technology and the changing nature of third sector operations.

3. Networking and partnerships

In a time of limited resources, third sector organizations must improve their ability and enhance their willingness to forge partnerships, both within the third sector and with other sectors. Existing networks must be strengthened and new ones formed. Third sector organizations need to forge links with business and government to overcome problems of exclusion. This will require training and research on the nature of networks and partnerships and instruction about how to make partnerships work. Opportunities also exist to make use of new technologies to share information more widely and foster exchange of information. A new “network” paradigm is opening for third sector operations, as it is for the operation of business and government, and third sector organizations must learn to adapt to this paradigm and make it work for them.

4. Improved legal environment

Despite significant improvements around the world, important challenges remain in the legal environment facing third sector organizations in many parts of the world. Changes are therefore needed to (1) remove unwarranted barriers to the formation of
third sector organizations; (2) provide incentives for charitable donations by individuals and corporations; and (3) ensure meaningful access by third sector organizations to the policy process either through formal consultative relationships or more informal solicitations of third sector views buttressed by access to a supportive media.

5. Transparency and monitoring

If third sector organizations wish to promote openness on the part of government and the business sector, they must take care to ensure that their own house is in order. This will require greater transparency for third sector organizations, a greater commitment to performance measurement, and more thorough monitoring of third sector operations.

CONCLUSION

Overcoming exclusion is not the task of any single sector or set of people. Exclusion is a social phenomenon and as such can only be overcome through collective action. Everyone therefore has a role to play.

The third sector is unusually well-positioned to perform a leadership role in this process. To do so, however, it must continue to muster the leadership, the energy, the resources, the partners, and the skills that are required. This will not be an easy task, but we are convinced it is one that can and will be addressed. Exclusion robs us all of talents and energies we can ill afford to waste. The third sector can lead the way to helping us create the inclusive society we need.
Agreed to this 10th day of July 2003, Sao Paulo, Brazil

SIGNATORIES

The following individuals took part in the deliberations that led to the development of this Statement and generally concur with its observations and conclusions. They do so in their individual capacities and not as the representatives of any organizations with which they may be associated or that may have supported their work:

Australia
James Dyer, Latrobe University, Melbourne
Genevieve Timmons,
   Genevieve Timmons & Associates

Brazil
Claudio Alarcon, Servico Social do Comercio
Lourdes Alves de Souza, SENAC—Serv. Nacional de Aprendizagem Comercial
Juliana Amaral Toledo, Tozzini Freire Teixeira e Silva Advogados
Daniella Ambrogi, SENAC, Sao Paulo
Celina Andrade Pereira
Vera Lucia Anselmi Melis Paulillo, Fundacao Orsa
Claudio Antonio Barreiros, SENAC—Serv. Nacional de Aprendizagem Comercial
Irati Antonio, Instituto Ayrton Senna
Vilma Aparecida de Marchi
Miguel Arantes Normanha Filho
Mia Athayde, Concebe Cons. Responsabilidade Social e Comunicacao
Mariana Barboza Albano,
   Cia. Suzano de Papel e Celulose
Marly Batista Reis, SENAC—Serv. Nacional de Aprendizagem Comercial
Maria Helena Berlink Martins, Assoc. de Apoio ao Programa Capacitacao Solidaria
Alfredo Birman
Virginia Lucia Bittancout Moura, Humanizarte
Leticia Cristina Bizarro Barbosa
Lenir Borges Camimura
Ana Mirla Braun Guerra
Sonia Bruck Carneiro Pereira
Ruth Buarque de Freitas Guimaraes, Cumunitas:
   Parcerias para o Desenvolvimento Solidario
Andrea Bueno Buoro, ILANUD—SP
Maria Lucia Bueno de Oliveira
Roberta Capazzuto Ferreira da Silva, Instituto Alana
Sueli Carneiro
Maria Adir Chadalakian,
Organizaçao Salva Vidas Mirim S/C
Virginíia da Costa Liebort Moura
Jorge Luis da Silva Hais, CDHU—Cia. de Desenv.
Hab. e Urbano do Est. de Sao Paulo
Ivo Dall’Acqua Junior, Sindicato do Comercio
Varejista de Araraquara
Angela Cristina Dannemann, Instituto Multiplicar
Helena Maria de Jesus Cravo Roxo
Clodoaldo de Lima Leite
Elizabeth de Melo Rico
Sergio de Oliveira e Silva, SENAC—Serv. Nacional de Aprendizagem Comercial
Marcos Clayton de Oliveira, SEAPE—Soc. Ester Assumpçao de Pesq, e Assist.
Sandra Maria de Sa Brito Maciel, Companhia de Transmissao de Energia Eletrica Pauli
Jair de Souza Moreira Junior,
Servico Social do Comercio
Audrey Debei, Transglobal Servicos Comercio Exterior S/C Ltda.
Maria Claudia do Nascimento
Flavio Henrique dos Santos Foguel
Marilda dos Santos Lima da Silva,
Centro Social Nossa Senhora do Bom Parto
Patricia Maria Elena Trincanata Benedetto
Jorge Elsboltz
Andrea Regina Ferreira da Silva,
Elisabeth Silva Advogadas Associadas
Daniel Ferreira Julio,
Fundacao de Rotarianos de Sao Paulo
Leona S. Forman, Brazil Foundation
Henrique Formigoni,
Instituto Presbiteriano Mackenzie
Maria Gabriela Franceschini Vaz de Almeida, Fund.
Nossa Senhora Auxiliadora do Ipiranga
Nidia Maria Furiati
Teresa Furtado, SEBRAE—SP Serv. Bras. De Apoio as Micros e Pequenas Empresas
Jose Luiz Gaeta Paixao
Alan Guedes,
Comunitas: Parcerias para o Desenv. Solidario
Claudia Guimaraes Rodrigues, SENAC—Serv. Nacional de Aprendizagem Comercial
Lusimar Guimaraes, SENAC—Serv. Nacional de Aprendizagem Comercial
Carla Hagemann,
   Instituto de Cidadania Empresarial
Katia Hale dos Santos
Rebeca Isabel Aragones Durand, ADEVA—Associacao de Deficientes Visuais e Amigos
Alice Ishikawa Lariu,
   Consulado Geral dos Estados unidos da America
Ana Lucia Jansen de Mello de Santana,
   Universidade Federal do Parana
Evelyn Katz
Maria Cristina Kiszka
Beatriz Labeila
Anne Louette,
   Federacao das Industrias do Estado de Sao Paulo
Howard M. da Silva
Luciana Maia de Souza
Simone Malina
Neusa Maria Goys,
   Instituto Presbiteriano Mackenzie
Maria Jose Marini Delfim
Maria de Lourdes Mckenzie,
   Associacao Saude Crianca Renascer
Regina Maria Meireles da Fonseca
Alejandra Meraz Velasco,
   Fundacao Abrinq pelos Direitos da Crianca
Renata Monteiro Pereira
Diva Moreira, Researcher and Anti-Racism Activist
Isabel Moroletto Ferreira, Natura Cosmeticos S.A.
Jose Carlos Moura
Claudio Cesar Noranha,
   Centro Educacional Olimpus
Hiloko Ogihara Marins
Maria Jose Oliveira e Silva Jackson Costa,
   Fundacao de Amparo e Desenv. da Pesquisa
Stella Maria Oliveira Tetreault
Andres Pablo Falconer, Associacao Brasileira para o Desenvolvimento de Liderancas (ABDL)
Eduardo Sergio Pace,
   Instituto Presbiteriano Mackenzie
Solange Parada
Ana Beatriz Patricio
Liliane Pelegrine, Instituto Presbiteriano Mackenzie
Ana Mari Peres Silva,
   Centro Social Nossa Senhora do Bom Parto
Sandra Pinheiro Mendonca, CDHU—Cia. de Desenv.
Hab. e Urbano do Est. de São Paulo
Melissa Porto Pimentel
Marcia Quintino Escobar,
Fundação Abrinq pelos Direitos da Criança
Marilda Rabal, SENAC—Serv. Nacional de
Aprendizagem Comercial
Marcia Raymundo
Renato Ribeiro dos Santos, SENAC—Serv. Nacional
de Aprendizagem Comercial
Ilda Ribeiro Peliz, ABRANCE—Assoc. Bras. de Ass.
as Famílias P. Câncer
Maria Aparecida Ribeiro,
Associação Saúde da Família
Eduardo Rodrigues da Costa
Luciane Sakata
Romualdo Salcines Bear, SENAC—Serv. Nacional de
Aprendizagem Comercial
Ada Sarti Sanches
Miryan Schuckar, Universidade do Sagrado Coração
Juliano Seabra Santiago de Oliveira Silva
Maria Claudia Setti de Gouvea Franco,
Gouvea Franco Advogados
Guacy Sibille Leite
Andreia Silva Gago Santos,
Vadam Internacional Brasil Ltda.
Jorge Carlos Silveira Duarte, Senac São Paulo
Jose Marcos Silveira Gonçalves
Helena Stilene de Biase
Aclely Strutz Barroso
Emi Tanaka
Sandra Regina Teixeira Fiordoliva,
Empresa Brasileira de Correios e Telégrafos
Erico Teixeira Vital Brasil, Associação Thalamus
Letícia Maria Telo de Faria
Ana Cristina Valente Borges,
Instituto Telemig Celular
Marcia Vasconcellos Saab
Joana D’Arc Vieira Botini, SENAC—Serv. Nacional
de Aprendizagem Comercial
Mauro Vieira da Silva
Rose Marie Vieira Motta Linck,
Fundação Projeto Pescar
Ana Lucia Villela, Instituto Alana
Raquel Wolfenberg Sacom Martins,
Associação Brasileira de Esclerose Multipla
Maria Yamasaki

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Burkina Faso
Youssoufou Congo, University of Liege

Chile
Debbie Falk
Brad Henderson, Habitat for Humanity International
Marcela Jimenez De La Jara, Ministry of Planning

Georgia
Nikolos Oakley, The Horizonti Foundation
Nino Saakashvili, The Horizonti Foundation

Ghana
Nana Okyere Bekoe II,
Akuapem South District Concil
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Israel
Ali Alasad, Lagea Community
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Ben-Gurion University

Italy
Elena De Palma,
ISTAT: Italian National Institute of Statistics

Japan
Takafumi Tanaka, Tokyo Gakugei University

Kenya
Wangui Kibe, Resource Alliance East
and Southern Africa
Faith Kisinga, Ufadhili—Centre for Philanthropy
and Social Responsibility
Philip Ndeta,
Learning and Development Kenya (LDK)
Bonfas Oduor-Owinga, Social Development Network
Richard Wamai, University of Helsinki

Lithuania
Jolanta Taruskiene, Lithuanian and US Initiatives

Philippines
Oliva Domingo, University of the Philippines

Poland
Leslaw Werpachowski,
Marshal Office of the Province of Silesia
Netherlands
Tymen van der Ploeg, Vrije Universiteit

Nigeria
Ada Okoye, University of Cape Town

Romania
Mihai Lisetchi, Agency for Information and Development of Non-governmental Organizations (AID-ONG)
Dana Nicolescu, Opportunity Associates Romania

Russia
Elena Abrosimova, International Research and Exchange Board (IREX)
Alexei Bodungen, Golubka Training Center
Oleg Kazakov, Nonprofit Sector Research Laboratory
Marina Nikitina, International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX)
Maria Tysiachniouk, Center for Independent Social Research

Turkey
Ayla Goksel, Mother Child Education Foundation

Uganda
Peace T. Kyamureku, The National Association of Women Organisations in Uganda (NAWOU)

United Kingdom
Samuel Obeng-Dokyi, Fullemploy

United States
Barbara Finberg, MEM Associates
Betsy Goldberg
Jessica Goldberg
Peter Goldberg, Families International, Inc., Alliance for Children and Families Family Foundation of North America, and Ways to Work
Joyce Moody, Johns Hopkins University
Lester Salamon, Johns Hopkins University
Howard Schoenfeld, PriceWaterhouseCoopers
Sandra Schoenfeld
Carol Wessner, Johns Hopkins University
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Johns Hopkins Institute for Policy Studies
3400 N. Charles Street/Wyman Park Building
Baltimore, MD 21218 USA
Fax: 410-516-7818
Phone: 410-516-7182; e-mail: ccss@jhu.edu
Web site: www.jhu.edu/ccss