

Enlisting the Power of Citizenship to Fight Poverty

HERBERT "BETINHO" DE SOUZA



MARCELO DE OLIVEIRA/IMAGENS DA TERRA

The Citizens' Campaign Against Hunger and Poverty and For Life is an innovative approach built by Brazilian society to combat hunger and misery. It is a social and political movement that deals with exclusion as an ethical problem for society as a whole and not as an inevitable consequence of economic development. It is a movement that was born from ethics and has invaded the whole society. It is, above all, not only a movement that builds on the solidarity that it awakens but also a new form of expressing active citizenship.

This new politics is based on three concepts: partnership, initiative, and decentralization. Partnership, because it proposes to join those who want to give with those who need to receive.

Initiative, because rather than presenting answers, it raises questions and asks for solutions. And decentralization, because instead of establishing a hierarchical model, it stimulates actions without imposing coordination—actions that respect local diversity and context.

The result is more than the promotion of concrete actions of society to combat hunger. It is the awakening of this society to be indignant about poverty, instead of considering it simply an undesirable aspect of the economic development process. It is the breaking down of the indifference that Brazilian social apartheid has produced over the years of exclusion. It is the encounter between the rich, white, well-fed world and the poor, black, hungry one.

Herbert "Betinho" de Souza, leading spokesperson for the Citizens' Campaign Against Hunger and Poverty and For Life, speaks to an audience on behalf of this national campaign.

The energy for change that the Citizens' Campaign has awakened is exemplified by the adhesion of citizens from all social classes, ages, political tendencies, religions, and professions. Congressmen, housewives, nongovernmental organization activists, artists, businessmen, mayors, students, and prisoners have joined in the ranks of local committees donating funds and volunteering their time.

The importance of the Citizens' Campaign may also be measured by the gestures, large and small, that break the chalk circle of isolation and open a fertile space for solidarity. Or by the re-invention of society that may be regarded from the awareness that it is not normal, or acceptable, or ethical, or good to live in a society that makes misery banal and accepts poverty as a natural fact, almost one of nature itself. Misery is not inevitable, poverty is not inevitable, social exclusion is not inevitable. In combatting hunger, there is the seed of a radical change in attitude that may change the course of society itself.

The Citizens' Campaign has shown that it is possible to change, and that change begins by not accepting what is seen as inevitable. It is also under the banner of ethics that the Citizens' Cam-

paign has won over broad participation from all fields. Ethics is a universal banner and does not divide the world between right and left. Old ideological barriers reminiscent of the Cold War need to be replaced by a more pragmatic search for effective solutions to pressing human problems.

The partnerships that have been formed in the Campaign's two years of existence indicate the power of ethics to break down barriers and overcome resistance. First, it was possible to discover a network of homegrown philanthropic institutions of high quality, but without the visibility or the ability to make themselves heard in society. Much work that already existed has been broadened by the partnerships mounted with the support of the Citizens' Campaign, aside from the new initiatives promoted by groups and individuals who were never involved before in social questions.

The Campaign also tapped into a well of civic generosity which no one thought existed. Millions of dollars in cash donations, foodstuffs, clothing, and educational materials were donated. During 1994, for instance, a large number of donors contacted the Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas (IBASE), contributing a total of about \$1 million in cash; and

this is only one part of what was done, given the decentralized nature of the Campaign. Contributing cash were shopping centers, multinational companies, parastatal banks, airline companies, foreign embassies, gasoline stations, overseas support groups, and recording artists. This money was directed toward job creation and income-generating projects. This is in addition to the more than 1,000 tons of food collected, including a successful campaign to collect food in seven major cities during the Christmas season. A campaign to raise funds through electric bills raised \$450,000, which was used for job-creation projects.

According to some estimates, there are 750 million people living in misery in the world today. Poverty is not just a Brazilian problem. It is a global problem, affecting rich and poor nations from the North and the South. But the know-how to do away with misery and poverty exists, and experiences in many countries prove that it is possible. Misery was done away with in the places where the political will has been mustered to do so.

Clearly it is an immense challenge that demands our active participation, but solutions are possible if we do not wait for them to come from others. Citizenship may not be delegated. Either it is exercised or it does not exist. And without citizenship, democracy is impossible.

With the Citizens' Campaign, the mobilization of society, participation of the media, influence on the political agenda, and insertion of hunger as a major national problem to be debated and addressed are our main victories. There is still much to do, but the most important has been done: Brazil is on the road to democracy through active citizenship. ■

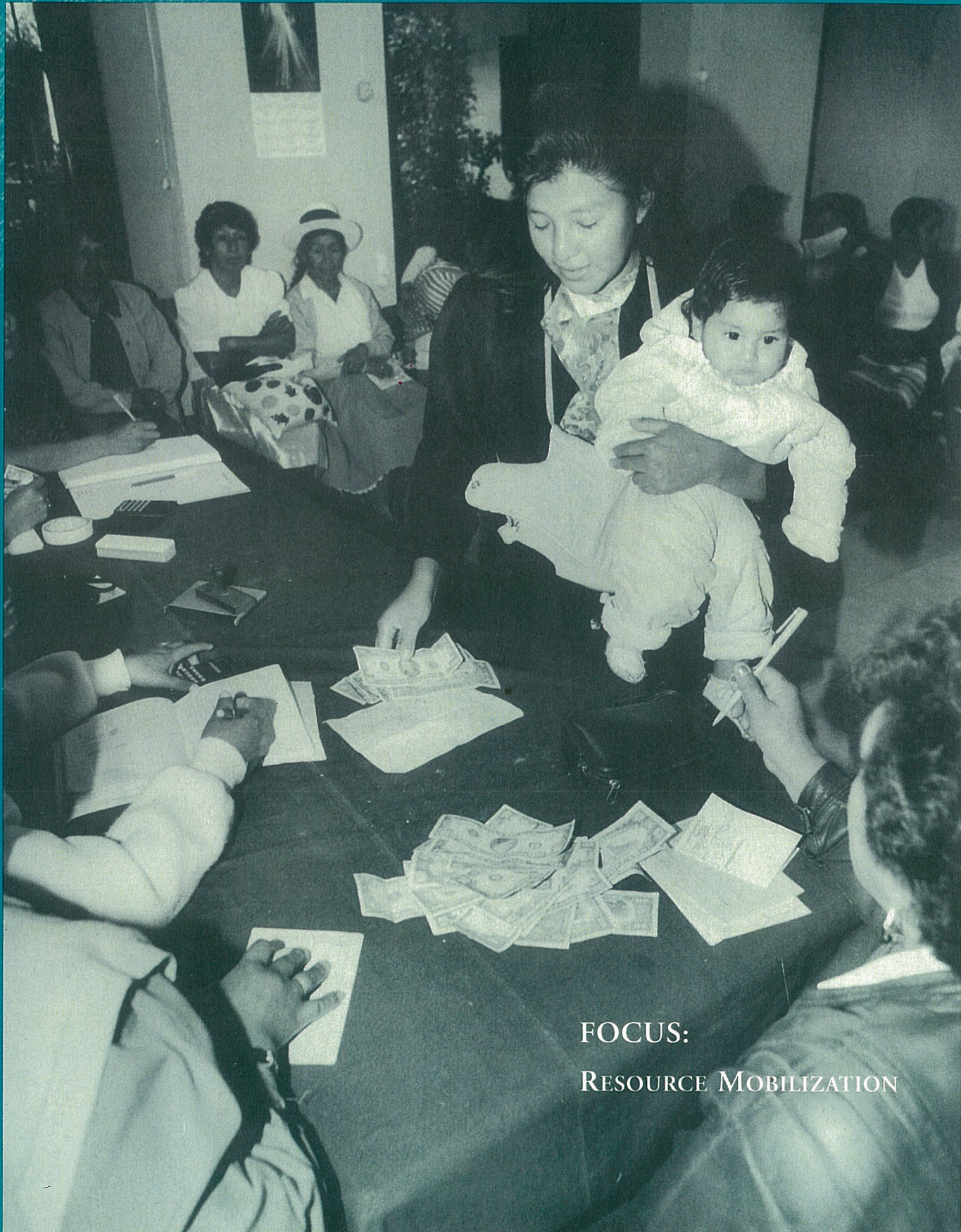
HEBERT "BETINHO" DE SOUZA is a sociologist, the executive secretary of IBASE, and the national leader for the Citizens' Campaign Against Hunger and Poverty and For Life.



Betinho discusses the Citizens' Campaign with a reporter from one of Brazil's leading television networks.

GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT

JOURNAL of the INTER-AMERICAN FOUNDATION



VOLUME 19

NUMBER 2

1 9 9 5

FOCUS:
RESOURCE MOBILIZATION

The Inter-American Foundation, which was created by the U.S. Government in 1969, provides direct financial support for self-help efforts initiated by poor people in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Foundation makes about 200 grants a year to support projects carried out in more than 25 countries. Approximately 80 percent of its funds are appropriated by Congress. The remainder comes from funds derived through the Social Progress Trust Fund.

Grassroots Development is published in English, Spanish, and Portuguese by the Office of Learning and Dissemination of the Inter-American Foundation. Its purpose is to explore how development assistance can contribute more effectively to self-help efforts. The journal reports on how the poor in Latin America and the Caribbean organize and work to improve their lives. Articles in *Grassroots Development* draw primarily on the experience of the Inter-American Foundation and the groups that it assists. However, submissions by persons outside the Foundation are encouraged. Prospective contributors should write for "Instructions to Authors."

Unless otherwise noted, printed material published in *Grassroots Development* is in the public domain and may be freely reproduced. Permission is required, however, to reproduce photographs. Source acknowledgment and a copy of any reproduction are requested.

Grassroots Development is indexed in the *Standard Periodical Directory*, the *Public Affairs Information Service Bulletin*, the *Hispanic American Periodical Index (HAPI)*, and the *Agricultural Online Access (WORLD)* database. Back issues are available on microfilm from University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106.

To receive the journal, write to:
Grassroots Development
Inter-American Foundation
901 N. Stuart Street, 10th Floor
Arlington, Virginia 22203

President George A. Evans

Dissemination Officer Rita Funaro

Editor Ron Weber*

Foreign Language Editions Leyda Appel

Assistant Editor Maria E. Barry

Publications Assistant Christina N. Anson*

Graphic Design and Production
Janin/Cliff Design, Inc.

*contractor

Cover photo: A woman from Ayacucho, Peru, pays into the savings plan of the *Fundación para la Asistencia Comunitaria del Perú*, a community banking program that encourages low-income women to establish savings and develop small-scale businesses. The 150 percent savings rate these women maintain dispels the myth that the poor cannot save. Getting the poor to obtain and administer resources to fund self-help initiatives is the first step in the IAF's resource mobilization strategy.

PHOTO BY DANIEL CIMA