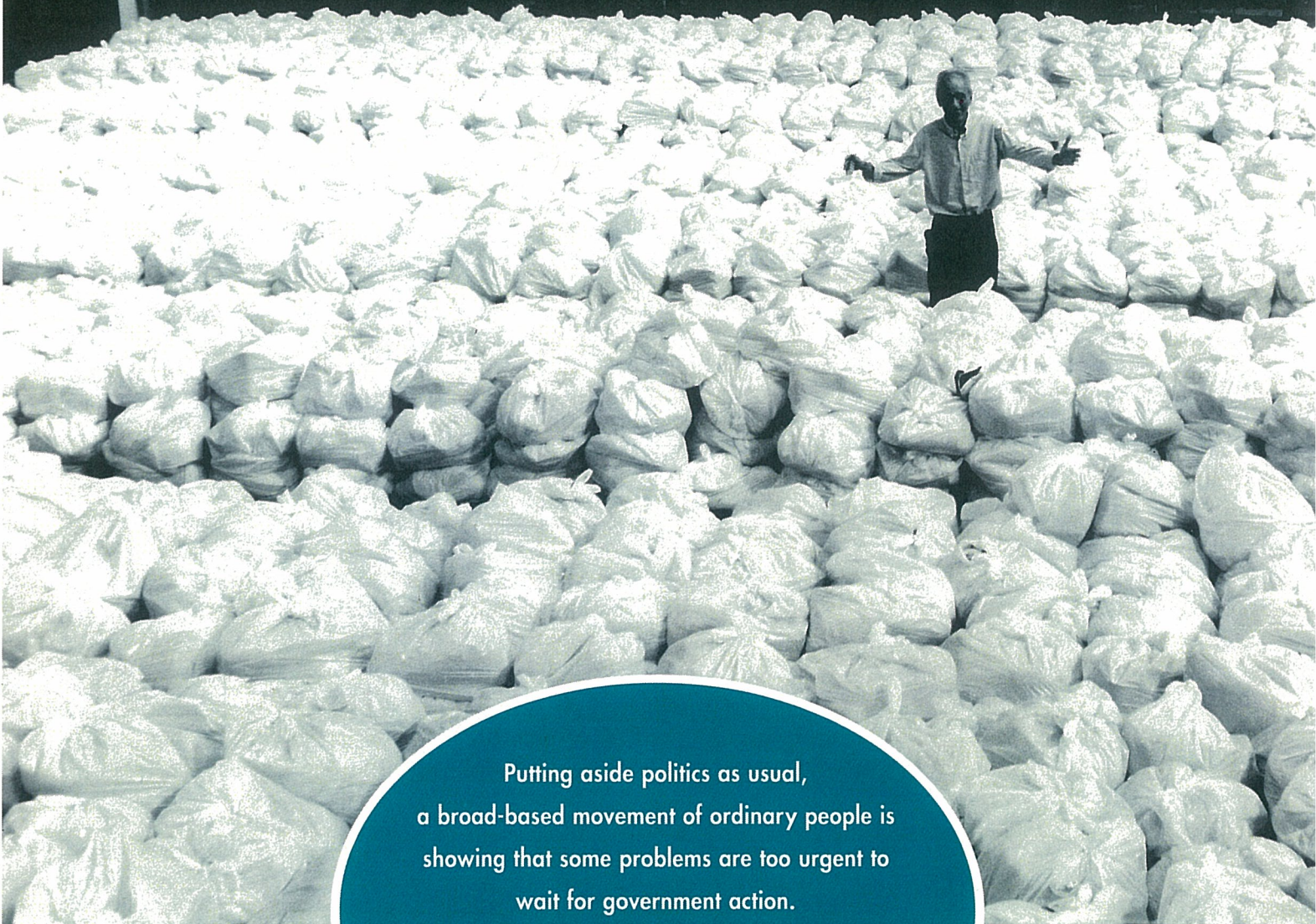


HARVESTING THE BOUNTY OF CITIZENSHIP:

The Fight Against Hunger and Poverty in Brazil



Putting aside politics as usual,
a broad-based movement of ordinary people is
showing that some problems are too urgent to
wait for government action.

JOHN W. GARRISON II AND LEILAH LANDIM



SEVERINO SILVA

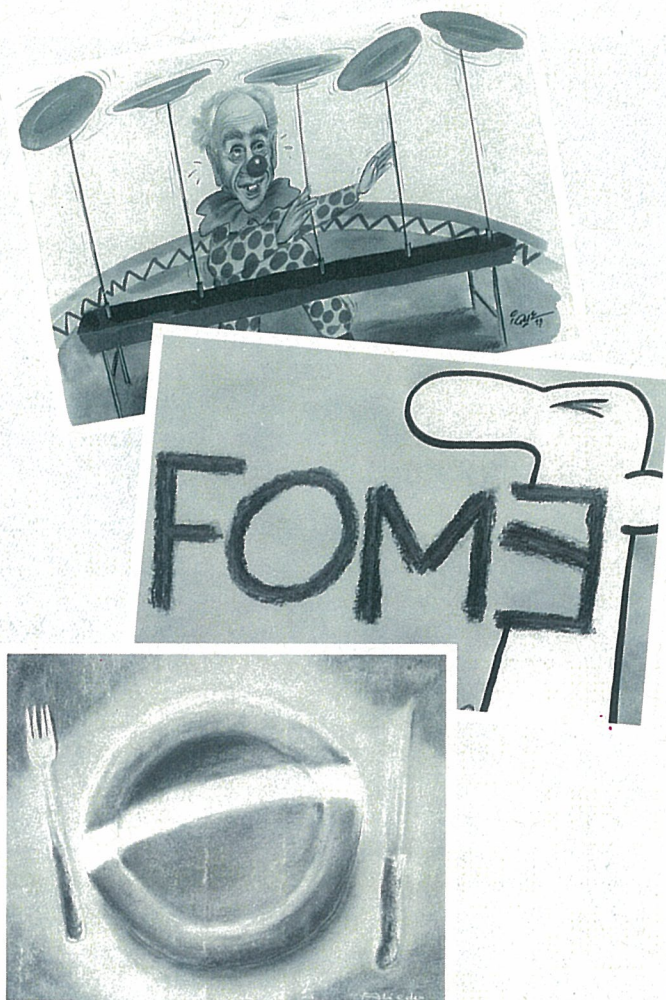
A light flashes red at a downtown intersection, bringing traffic to a halt. The camera zooms in on a man sitting impatiently behind the wheel of his late-model car. From his coat and tie, the way the muscles of his face tense and relax, you can tell that for him time is precious. His mind is full of a thousand thoughts, racing ahead on business, making plans for a dinner party that evening. So why does he seem distracted, as though a stranger's voice is breaking through? What does he see out of the corner of his eye that makes him look down, then anxiously begin rolling up his window?

You begin to see why he is uneasy. The way the sunlight strikes the rising glass turns it into a mirror. As the man, the inside of his car, slowly disappear, a boy in a tattered shirt materializes in the window. His face is smooth but smudged, his clothes look slept in, his eyes stare expectantly. Then his lips tighten and the light in his eyes dims. He braces for the customary, hostile show of indifference. Then he is gone, like a bad dream.

But in his place a silvered moon is tumbling through the air, like a hubcap after a collision, until you see it is an empty tin plate and hear the final clatter of its landing. The letter O falls into place to spell out the word fome, while a voice in the background asks what you will do to end hunger.

The whole thing is over in 30 seconds, a small swell in the sea of images broadcast on Brazilian TV. But the ad is not drowned out; it resonates in people's imaginations, perhaps because it is so novel. The networks rarely run public service spots; leading Rio de Janeiro advertising agencies rarely offer their skills pro bono. Encounters with street children are unavoidable in Rio, São Paulo, Recife, and other cities, yet they, and the poor in general, seldom register in the world of television. But what is truly unusual about the ad is the disquieting question, which is addressed not to the government but to ordinary citizens from all walks of life.

In 1993 and 1994, more than three million volunteers responded to appeals like this one and joined the Ação da Cidadania Contra a Fome, Miséria e Pela Vida, the Citizens' Campaign Against Hunger and Poverty and For Life. They organized local committees to distribute tons of food baskets, supported gardening and water projects, provided basic health care, created jobs, assisted street children, and prodded local and state governments to improve social services to the poor. The breadth and scale of this grassroots Campaign were unprecedented for Brazil, and it was led by civic-minded non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offering a new vision of how the country could solve its intractable social and economic problems. This article outlines the origins of the Citizens' Campaign, looks at its methods, and explores some of the lessons it may hold for the future.



Page 38 and 39: At a warehouse in Rio de Janeiro, Betinho, the leading spokesperson for the Brazilian Citizens' Campaign Against Hunger and Poverty and For Life, wades through thousands of bags of donated food. Above: A sampling of some of the postcards created by leading Brazilian artists for the Citizens' Campaign. (The one in the middle spells out hunger.)

DEMOCRACY AND THE POLITICS OF ETHICS

Many of the NGOs in the Citizens' Campaign were also at the forefront of the struggle to rebuild Brazilian democracy during the 1980s after decades of military rule. They helped mobilize public opinion in the writing of a new national Constitution, and they worked hard to defend and consolidate the integrity of the electoral process. When the first popularly elected president in nearly 30 years, Fernando Collor de Mello, became implicated in a widening scandal of political corruption in 1992, some 900 NGOs, professional associations of lawyers and journalists, student associations, church agencies, and community groups joined to form the Movimento Pela Ética na Política, the Movement for Ethics in Politics. The Movimento petitioned Congress to investigate Collor, spawned local committees in towns throughout Brazil to monitor the impeachment process, and organized colorful street demonstrations to keep the pressure on.

In late 1992, President Collor was impeached, and power was peacefully transferred under the Constitution, without military intervention. Leading NGOs organized within the national association of NGOs, the Associação Brasileira de ONGs (ABONG), which had been the behind-the-scenes organizers of the Movement for Ethics in Politics, hoped to build on that success. The Instituto de Estudos Sócio-Econômicos (INESC), the Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas (IBASE), and other NGOs had worked with community groups throughout the country trying to combat poverty through grassroots projects. They had firsthand experience with the size of the problem. Brazil might have the globe's tenth-largest economy, but according to the World Bank, it also had the third-worst level of income concentration, and more than 60 percent of its people subsisted below the poverty line. A decade-long economic crisis had aggravated conditions, resulting in shrinking government funding for basic education, public health, and transportation services for the poor and the small but increasingly hard-pressed middle class.

Unwilling any longer to tolerate the spreading hunger and abject misery, the NGOs in the Ethics in Politics Movement decided to launch the Citizens' Campaign. Their founding letter made clear the connection:

"Government corruption does not constitute the only form of ethical offense within Brazilian society. Various breaches are committed daily in our country, among them the existence of millions in absolute poverty. [We] propose to Brazilian society a new stage in the struggle for ethical principles in our country, the struggle against abject impoverishment."

A leading spokesperson for the Campaign was Herbert "Betinho" de Souza, executive secretary of IBASE and a national civic leader with uncommon ethical appeal. A hemophiliac who had tested positive for the HIV virus in 1985 and who had lost two brothers to the disease, Betinho had responded to that crisis by enlisting musicians, entertainers, business people, and others to inform the public about AIDS and push for legislation to regulate private blood banks and safeguard the nation's blood supply. Now, he and other NGO leaders pointed to figures from the government research institute IPEA (1993) showing that 32 million Brazilians, or approximately 9 million families, suffered from chronic hunger and said, "We can no longer tell people going hungry to wait for a structural solution to fill their stomachs."

At about the same time, the Workers Party independently proposed an emergency hunger campaign to newly appointed President Itamar Franco. President Franco responded by declaring that Brazil was experiencing a "state of social emergency" and invited Betinho to Brasilia to brief the entire Cabinet about proposals for a nonpartisan antipoverty campaign. Afterwards, Betinho was asked to chair the government's effort and develop an operational plan. On May 13, 1993, the first anniversary of the Movement for Ethics in Politics, President Franco formally established a national food security council—the Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar (CONSEA)—to put the plan into action.

PHASE ONE: PRIVATE PHILANTHROPY AND PUBLIC POLICY

This antipoverty program was different from those launched by past governments because it proceeded on two tracks—one pri-



vate, the other public. The Citizens' Campaign began as a movement within civil society, spearheaded by NGOs, and it continued to mobilize financial, material, and human resources from the private sector. Campaign organizers also realized, however, that the success of their efforts depended on the pressure civil society could exert on the federal government, especially the executive branch, to use public resources more efficiently. Bettinho and other leaders of civil society joined CONSEA to coordinate government activities with the Campaign's, but they also relied on a vast network of private citizens' committees throughout the country to make sure that the State followed through on its promises at the local level. This section will examine each track in turn, beginning with the structure and activities of the Citizens' Campaign proper and concluding with a look at what CONSEA was able to accomplish.

From its inception, the Citizens' Campaign was decentralized and nonhierarchical in nature. As one of its early organizing manuals stated: "Anyone can create a committee, they don't need to ask anyone's permission." Nearly 4,700 autonomous committees were formed by individuals and citizen groups in all 27 states. Although large cities and most states eventually created their own coordinating committees, they were informal structures staffed by volunteers.

Minimal coordination was provided at the national level through two important organizational bases of support. First, the executive committee of the Ethics in Politics Movement, which was composed of representatives from seven national organizations, set up a Citizens' Campaign secretariat in Brasília and appointed NGO leader Maria José Jaime to head it. Salaries for staff were partially defrayed by government agencies, private firms, universities, and international donors, including the Inter-American Foundation.

Members of one of the poorest communities in Rio de Janeiro prepare pastries and hors d'oeuvres that they will sell to raise money for the Citizens' Campaign.

The secretariat was given a number of responsibilities:

- to serve as a central clearinghouse for gathering information about the Citizens' Campaign;
- to provide logistical and operational information to state committees;
- to convene national planning and organizational meetings;
- to represent the Citizens' Campaign before governmental bodies and help coordinate activities (i.e., food distribution, nutritional surveys, and land reform) with international donor and government agencies;
- to provide close operational and programmatic support to the government's food security council, CONSEA; and
- to brief the press and inform the public about the latest activities of the Citizens' Campaign.

The second pillar of organizational support for the Campaign was provided by IBASE, which ceded office space in Rio de Janeiro to a 12-member staff of food experts, journalists, and organizers. While helping formulate strategy for the movement and documenting activities nationwide, the IBASE staff also published *Primeira e Última*, the major weekly newspaper of the movement, and produced videos and spot ads for airing on network television.

The Campaign based its priorities and strategies on sound scientific research about hunger and poverty. For the first time, private research institutes and public agencies combined forces to map hunger and poverty in the nation and disseminate the results to the public. The previously cited *Mapa da Fome* conducted by IPEA (1993) not only recorded the num-