

The Trust Crisis

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These days, the greatest worldwide challenge that we have to overcome is fear. It makes no difference whether this fear is of terrorism, war, violent political clashes, unemployment, social and drug related crimes or domestic violence. It seems that everyone around the globe has a good measure of well founded fear in their lives that needs to be dealt with.

Living in a suburb of Rio de Janeiro, for example, brings a great deal of daily insecurity, especially related to the ongoing and out-of-control disputes involving drug traffickers. On many occasions slum dwelling residents are not able to return to their homes because of the armed battles taking place. Some intellectuals affirm that what is happening in Rio de Janeiro and other parts of Brazil should be classified as civil war, even though it is not based on an ideological or political dispute. As in terrorist attacks, many innocents are being killed or wounded while it is becoming obvious that the police force is simply not trained or prepared to take control in the situation.

The tremendous social gap between the rich and the poor in developing countries is shocking. In Brazil, for example, ten per cent of the population is extremely wealthy and control fifty per cent of the national wealth. It is interesting to note that in order to be fall within the category of 'one of the 10% richer Brazilians', one only needs to achieve the relatively miserable income of R\$ 571,00 (about US \$215,00) per month. The poorer half of the country's population make less than R\$131,67 (\$50,00).¹ According to a research published by the United Nations, 33% of Brazilians live with less than \$2,00 a day. It is this economic inequality that encourages urban tension.

Brazil is not a poor country, but our economic and natural resources are distributed very unequally among the population. Many people speculate and profit enormously from high interest rates, or else they receive their income through suspicious agreements with the government. At the same time, the needy are exploited and struggle for survival every day.

¹ Data from IBGE - 1999

Since it is common for the different social classes to live in close proximity, the obvious social disparities become mercilessly apparent. That contributes to increasing frustration and tension. Opportunities are unequal, often leaving young people with few options other than becoming 'drug traffic' soldiers.

Another challenge lies on the economic sphere. Despite the constant international compliments about Brazil's foreign policy, local unemployment remains extremely high. Domestic markets struggle as unemployment rises and personal income diminishes. Workers' rights are ignored and the fear of being unemployed leads people to submit themselves to horrible workplace conditions. This observation is as valid for illiterates as it is for the scholarly, with too many people chasing too few job vacancies.

Investment in education is not given a high enough priority, since if it was, many of these problems would be eased. Only 4,3 % of the national GDP is allocated to Education. The public school system in Brazil, from elementary to university levels, is in a state of advanced decay. Research is being hindered, thus damaging any potential we might have for technological and economical sovereignty.

Brazil is a great country, with enough resources to be economically independent, but for some reason, since the arrival of Pedro Álvarez Cabral in 1500, the country has been forced itself into submission and obedience to the entrenched world order. We have a unique opportunity for promoting national success through developing innovative alternatives that are more suitable to our tropical and continental reality. Through a lack of care and attention, we are squandering this opportunity.

My point is to demonstrate how these issues are grounded in deep feeling of low self-esteem, personal fear in everyday life, and a lack of confidence in our institutions and discredited government policy, and acute social alienation among members of Brazil's society. In other words there is a general lack of trust self trust as well as distrust of others and in our society, which leads to a corresponding lack of responsibility, solidarity and, worst of all, the inability to project long term collective goals for our communities, the nation and ultimately, for humanity.

1. Institutions in Discredit

In many places, but especially in Brazil, there is a deep-seated and well founded skepticism towards government and regulation institutions. Unfortunately, corruption in Brazil is more likely to be the rule than an exception, and it is as old as Brazil itself. Corruption is intrinsically bonded to our perception and behavior, and unfortunately, this behavior has spread towards other levels of social life. Our tendency is to live with and try to take advantage of situations as much as possible instead of trying to remedy them. This is, if not illegal, immoral.

The most obvious example can be found with our politicians. We cannot, of course, assert they are all corrupt, nor can we name the obviously corrupt ones, but considering the amount of money collected through taxation (about 30% of the citizens' income), it would seem that public services could be much better organized. It is unquestionable that, if our politicians cannot be accused of corruption, they should be charged with incompetence. Moreover, the damage caused is in the order of billions of dollars, money that were supposed to be used for alleviating poverty, furthering technology and controlling violence.

The Brazilian people feel impotent in this very awkward situation. The voters simply do not feel represented by their elected candidates and this is a basic threat to democracy. The approach known as the 'Brazilian way' of doing things simply institutionalizes disorder. The Brazilian journalist and historian Sérgio Buarque de Hollanda developed a study, '*Raízes do Brasil*', in which he describes what he call the 'cordial man', the citizen that, in order to keep things 'friendly', gradually lets go of many of his rights, and tries to solve problems in an informal manner, with no guarantee of success. His reasoning goes like this: "If the government wastes my tax money, I won't pay taxes." or "If you pretend you have not noticed this, I will not notice that" and so on. Eventually, it gets to the point where it is very hard for anyone to believe in, respect or work toward established law and order.

There is no easy way to change institutionalized behavior patterns, although international organizations, such as the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the United Nations, could assist the situation by pressuring government into declaring that corruption will no longer be tolerated. Further, they could advise on methods for developing appropriate policies and punitive measures for infractions. Campaigns could be run to advice the population to vote consciously, alerting them of the danger of electing candidates with questionable reputations.

2. Police Force and Crime

Another significant issue is that citizens often do not trust the police force that is supposed to be protecting them. For example, the military police in Rio de Janeiro have been accused of arbitrary arrests, blackmailing, torture and even murder. In 2003 alone, 1195 civilians were killed by the police². The justification for their actions is often that they are very badly paid, that they live with constant personal threats and that often, they even have to hide from their community that they are police officers.

Of course, there are many honest police officers. However, the effectiveness (or ineffectiveness) of the police is connected to social and racial issues. Of the recorded police force 'victims', 70% are black or of mixed race and half of them had no criminal records³. The vast majority of the imprisoned are black and poor, while it is very hard to put middle-class delinquents in prison, even for the most heinous crimes. Middle class drug users or traffic violators commonly pay bribes instead of fines. Jails are overcrowded and have no medical care facilities. Many prisoners finish serving their prison sentences but are still locked up because of a lack of effective prison and legal procedures and institutions that could assist them to re-integrate into society.

The only state institution that is active in the slums is the police force, usually to threaten, accuse, invade homes, and beat up the local population. In addition, the 'law of silence' prevails. People cannot inform police about criminal activities for fear of being killed themselves. In many circumstances, policeman act and talk like gangsters to try inspire fear and/or respect.

Government should remember the slums when proposing cultural and educational policies, when building new schools, sanitation facilities and undertaking health works and campaigns. Only in that way will the poor feel included and be encouraged to share their experiences for the betterment of society.

² Data from Centro de Justiça Global - 2003

³ Data from ISER - 2003

3. Overcoming differences to conquer a secure world

Social, ethnic, racial and sexual differences are challenges for a safer world and most people from all genders and places want a world of peace. The key to achieving this lies with agreeing on and working toward common goals. Independent of whether we are men or women, Jewish or Islamic, Serbian or Croatians, American or Iraqi; everyone wants a safe place for himself or herself and their children. What is required to achieve this dream is a collective effort.

Brazil demonstrates the potential for peaceful, multi-ethnic coexistence. Despite all of our problems, we have no terrorist attacks, there is no declared civil war or rebel held areas within our boundaries, and in many circumstances, even our social differences are set aside for a greater ideal or cause.

The Carnival Parade is one example of this positive inter-cultural cooperation. This great and long-enduring popular event, which Brazilians and tourists enjoy together, is world famous. During these four days every year, there is greater tolerance for homosexuals, children and the elderly play together, singing and dancing and everyone is overwhelmed by the feeling that we can be happy.

Nevertheless, Carnival is not just a daydream. A lot of hard work goes into making it happen and this is when our social and cultural differences become less apparent. Rio de Janeiro's Carnival Parade, which is probably the best known Carnival event, takes the whole year to prepare. The process gathers university students, fine artists, historians, musicians, singers, dressmakers, dancers and many other professionals. Most of the people that work for the Samba Schools are volunteers from the adjacent poor communities. This cultural mixing creates an excellent environment for the long-term exchange of knowledge, affection and skills. Local community members have the chance to share theoretical knowledge that would only otherwise be available from Universities and academic centers that are very foreign to their reality. At the same time, many middle class students and professionals from different areas have the opportunity for unique experiences. Everyone involved is responsible for the outcome of the spectacle and despite all the differences, the aim of each individual is to accomplish a successful parade and championship for their school. Individual expertise and experience is harnessed for the collective benefit. The question remains as to how we can translate the Samba School experience into collective community effort in our government and public services.

Another typical example of valuing ghetto culture can be found during popular events. Celebrities and TV actresses insist on holding privileged positions in parades in order to flaunt their status. It is, however, a near unanimous opinion that samba dancers (known as '*passistas*') from the communities are more dedicated and are much better dancers than the celebrities that only show up for the presentation and never for rehearsals. In the same way local musicians, especially percussionists are admired and recognized for their talent worldwide. Many international music groups have come to Brazil to learn from the local experience. The vast majority of local talent is self-taught, having played the drums from a very young age. Their talent is often one of the few opportunities open to them to escape the ghetto and move on to a more fulfilling life, without resorting to involvement with the drug trafficking mafia, an example of the triumph of Art over War.

There are also small and localized efforts to decrease poverty and integrate individuals into society through art and vocational training. The independent group '*Ciclo Natural*'⁴ works with children and youth in private and public schools teaching how to protect the environment through recycling. Children collect various materials and are taught how to build alternative musical instruments and play them. Workshops are filled with concepts such as equality, music appreciation, lowering consumption, understanding the needs of nature and using resources responsibly. This group, without support from government or private companies has been operating for more than four years. Increased financial support would enable them to continue their work and further develop their ideas, perhaps expanding into workshops to instruct technicians on instrument making, thus creating opportunities for many unemployed young people. Other groups such as Afro Reggae in Rio, Olodum in Salvador and the Bolshoi Ballet School in Joinville propose initiatives that aim to bring children back from risky situation through artistic expression. From this one small project, it can be seen that many small ideas and initiatives taken together can contribute to a positive future.

Another opportunity to encourage the development of natural talent from underprivileged areas is through sports. The most obvious example is soccer. Some young men are given the opportunity to leave the slums to play in big soccer teams in Brazil and overseas. Some make lots of money and secure a better future for themselves and their families.

⁴ www.ciclonatural.com.br

There are also impressive initiatives on gym, sailing, cycling, athletics, ballet, capoeira and other sports. Volunteers offer their time and knowledge in order to provide opportunities to the poor. Improvised schools are built in distant communities where nothing like this was previously seen. The schools provide the natural talents of the poor children and this is refined using the efforts and techniques imported by the volunteers. These initiatives may not make anyone rich, but it does provide a sense of opportunity, acceptance, responsibility and belonging, which will help guide these young people through their lives. Unfortunately, these initiatives are often short-lived due to a lack of financial support, the common cause of the demise of many successful projects.

4. Investment in education and technology to increase life quality and national autonomy

In many of the stated examples, it is apparent that many successful ideas and projects depend on financing for implementation and/or expansion. Often, good will or a beneficial project is not enough to guarantee success.

Neo-liberalism defends the idea that investment in culture and education should not be a responsibility of the government. If that is the case, we are then left with the question as to who should be responsible. Brazilian companies and enterprises are not yet socially conscious or responsible enough to become involved in a meaningful way. Individual initiatives would demand a great deal of money and risk. Agreements between companies and government are not always successful, and are often an open door to corruption. People should be interested in all aspects of their cultural identity, and that is only possible through massive investments in education at all levels and a strong development of educational and cultural policies to ensure that this education is relevant and to create cultural demands.

With low investment in education comes a weakening of scientific research. In Brazil, most research is performed at public universities. Due to disorganization and ineptitude, most of our research lags far behind that carried out in the developed countries of Europe and North America, thus increasing our dependence on imported technology and making us more vulnerable as a nation. Our scientists are becoming frustrated since although they are highly qualified, they are not able to progress their research. Many of them resort to work abroad and our country loses their expertise while our young people are not inspired to become scientists.

Even so, there are good examples of good Brazilian research that is are not fully being implemented even though it is specifically aimed at unraveling some of the main problems relating to life in big urban and rural centers including garbage, combustible, homelessness and hunger. One of them is the proBiomass project, which produces clean, renewable energy from organic elements through photosynthesis. Two intellectuals, Gilberto Felisberto Vasconcellos, professor, sociologist and journalist and Marcelo Guimarães, geologist⁵ are staunch defenders of the switch from fossil to organic combustible fuels, specially that based on sugar cane, cassava, forest, and the Afro-Brazilian oil palm. According to them, harnessing biomass causes much less environmental impact than nuclear, thermal or hydroelectric sources. Besides this, it is incredibly compatible with our tropical resources, since Brazil holds the greatest Biomass potential.

Many small farmers would be able to have their own mill which is an economic power source. Biomass cultivation does not preclude food production. Felisberto Vasconcellos estimate that only 5% of our rural territory (excluding the virgin amazonic forest) would be adequate for food production, leaving the remaining 95% available for renewable energy sources such as forests, sugarcane, cassava etc...

Biomass production has the potential to ultimately solve the problems of importing expensive energy, landlessness, and hunger as well as potentially providing incentive for a population reorientation as new rural living opportunities reduce our urban populations, consequently diminishing violence.

Biomass production should be based on the self-development of small rural properties operated by family units, simultaneously producing food and energy. 3 hectares would be enough to produce combustible alcohol, a by-product of which is a bagasse that can be used to feed cattle. It should be cheaper to produce fuel alcohol than to produce potable 'cachaça', and even cheaper to co-produce alcohol and milk. Agrarian reform could possibly drive extensive alcohol / biomass production combined with the increase of jobs outside the urban centers.

These days 10% of the energy used in Brazil is produced from biomass, which is our third largest energy source, after hydro and petroleum⁶. However, this is still small compared with the biomass energy potential in our tropical country. More important than

⁵ Caros Amigos magazine. Issues #61 #65 #68, April, August and November 2002.

⁶ www.bbc.co.uk / march 29th 2005

having the resource is the political will necessary to seize the opportunity, invest in appropriate research and production and distribution infrastructure. We need to expand our research capability and expertise while avoiding reliance on foreign technology and capital.

Another example of a genuine Brazilian solution is the '*Curadores da terra*'⁷ project, directed and patented by Sérgio Prado, an architect that prefers to be called an 'environmental artist'. His project aim is to help solve pollution problems related to plastic (which makes up 25% of global garbage) by converting it into energy, popular dwelling and nourishment while minimizing the environmental impact. His proposal also offers a reduced reliance on traditional construction industry material, such as wood, steel and concrete.

The project is based on building popular dwellings out of PET bottles, connected to each other through plastic nets, in order to construct walls, pavements and roofs. For the walls, the bottles would be filled with water and a drop of chlorine to reduce the risk of fire or contamination. Each bottle would be closed, with its lid on. The roof bottles could remain empty, thus reducing roof mass and avoiding collapse. For the structural frame, traditional materials such as concrete, steel or wood would be used. Another possibility would be to use beams molded from recycled plastic, which is more resistant to traction and compression although it needs to be protected from sunlight and fire hazard.

As the walls are hollow it would be easy to install electricity, water and gas systems. The ideal floor would be made out of recycled plastic compressed into blocks that do not absorb heat or humidity, unlike traditional materials. Multi-storey buildings are possible.

The most daring part of the project relates to some of the roof bottles being adapted to hydroponics, with the roots inside the bottle and a drip-feed watering system. When the plants grow, what you see is a dense vegetable wall, not a transparent plastic one, thus addressing both nutrition and privacy issues.

Rainwater is gathered and stored in a dark water tank so that it remains bacteria free and is used to feed the hydroponic drip-feed system. Gardening is greatly reduced, the work nearly being done by itself. This system can work for strawberries, eggplant, passion fruit, onions, tomatoes, beans, rice, with the only vegetables not suitable for hydroponics being the tubers such as potatoes, and beets. The plants absorb the sunlight and the heat, so the house is very fresh, which is perfect for our tropical climate. These houses are living green buildings, the project trisecting the benefits of recycling Plastic, Biomass and Hydroponics.

⁷ www.curadoresdaterra.com.br / Caros Amigos magazine Issue #77. August 2003

5. The role of each individual

In addition to external solutions, whether they are scientific, artistic or sociological, there is a lot that can and must be done by every one of us. Based on the capitalist model, expenditure should be minimized at all levels of agriculture and industry, including farmers, tradesmen and even government. Everyone needs be aware of their role in this process. If consumers stand up for their rights, we could potentially change the commercial and social relationship between people and even maybe from country to country.

We need to be aware that we implicitly approve and support the policies of companies that supply us, just as we are seen to support the actions of our government elected representatives. We should be aware of a company's environmental and social track record, supporting and praising them as appropriate but criticizing and prosecuting them as necessary.

Each person should take responsibility for their actions, encouraging a positive collective behavior in all aspects of our social, family and private life. This can be done by participating in neighborhood committees, school meetings and initiating collective lawsuits against polluting industries, corrupt politicians and dishonest companies.

We are obliged to make an effort and do our part, even if it seems worthless, because that is how one influences a modified collective behavior. This can be as simple as not paying bribes, even though everybody does it, respecting all people despite their age, gender, ethnicity or background, creating a friendly and cooperative atmosphere everywhere you go, volunteering for causes that you believe in, maintaining your immediate environment in a clean and organized manner, showing compassion and having a greater understanding of the human nature and its weaknesses.

In this way we can overcome the suspicious and awkward feelings toward ourselves, others and institutions.

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