

Mobilizing against hunger and poverty: capacity and change in a Brazilian social solidarity network

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SUMMARY

This article examines the sixteen-year history of a Brazilian social mobilization network through the lenses of organizational change, capacity development, and network management. Created by an inspirational leader and his group of friends at a favorable political juncture, COEP has survived and thrived because it managed to mobilize a wide array of public, private and third-sector organizations under the common banner of social justice and solidarity. It has succeeded by adopting a non-hierarchical, yet structured, organizational configuration that leaves room for members’ initiative, while at the same time maintains internal consistency and integrity. COEP illustrates well the importance of the intangible elements of capacity, such as legitimized and inspirational leadership and the ability for strategic thinking, for anticipating and reacting to change while maintaining the core mission and values of the network. COEP’s capacity is the result of the fortuitous confluence of institutional and personal, material and intangible qualities of the people and organizations that constitute it.

Keywords: cross-sectoral networks, capacity, Brazil.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, cross-sectoral networks have emerged as a powerful force for mobilizing actors from the public, private and voluntary sectors to address social issues (Jones et al., 1997). Many perceive them as the organizational form best suited to deal with “wicked” problems, i.e. problems with a high degree of uncertainty, complexity and persistence, which require solutions that cut across sectors, jurisdictions, policy areas and group interests (Weber, 2008). This not only because they can draw on the diverse resources and capacities of the participating organizations, but also because their largely non-hierarchical governance and management structure allows for more flexibility, innovation and sometimes even speed in reacting to emerging problems (Eggers and Goldsmith, 2004), while their voluntary nature encourages and rewards commitment and motivation.

This paper examines the sixteen-year history of a Brazilian social mobilization network, COEP – *Comitê de Entidades no Combate à Fome e pela Vida*¹ – through the lenses of organizational change, capacity development, and network management. COEP is committed to building a just and inclusive society for all Brazilians, one without hunger and poverty. It is a network of networks, including networks at the national level, in all of Brazil’s 26 states, in the Federal District, and in 20 municipalities. Its members represent government agencies, parastatals, private sector firms and civil society organizations.

By looking at COEP’s origins, growth, and performance this paper seeks to identify the key factors that contributed to COEP’s survival and success, thus improving our understanding of how capacity emerges in a cross-sectoral network. It builds on research conducted in 2003-04 for the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM) and updated in 2008, comprising interviews, as well as reviews of primary documents and secondary literature. The paper starts with a short review of the literature on network management and capacity and continues with an analysis of COEP’s origins, evolution and achievements over its 16 years of existence. It concludes by highlighting how COEP’s experiences illustrate key propositions from the literature.

NETWORK MANAGEMENT, CAPACITY AND CHANGE

Networks can be broadly defined as “Groups of individuals and/or organizations with a shared concern or interest, who voluntarily contribute knowledge, experience and/or resources for shared learning and/or joint action, and who rely on the network to support their own objectives” (Taschereau and Bolger, 2007, 2)². This broad definition encompasses a wide range of network structures, from loose and informal connections between like-minded organizations to those based on contractual relationships and geared towards producing a specific set of services (Ibid.). In between are networks with different degrees of formalization, institutionalization and collective identity. Networks also differ depending on the type of initiating organization and the membership of the network – public or private/ voluntary - and the type of goals and activities they pursue. Based on the latter, networks can be purely informational, or they can aim to increase their capability

through the exchanges within the network (developmental), seek to identify new programming opportunities for the organizations involved (outreach), and even make joint decisions and take joint action (Agranoff, 2007). Similarly, Milward and Provan (2006) differentiate among service implementation networks, information diffusion networks aimed at anticipating and preparing for “high uncertainty” problems, problem solving networks addressing an immediate problem, and community capacity-building networks, aimed at building social capital to enable a given community to deal with existing or emerging problems.

Regardless of the type and composition of the network, its capacity emerges and manifests itself in ways not dissimilar to other organizational forms, i.e. as a “combination of individual competencies and collective capabilities that enables a human system to create value” (Baser and Morgan, 2008: 34). The key contrast to “traditional” organizations is that the increased complexity and looser organizational structure of networks puts additional demands on leadership, management, governance structure and ultimately, on the participating organizations themselves. For voluntary, non-hierarchical networks to function effectively there has to be a significant amount of trust among the participating organizations, as well as a shared mission and vision, which can be mobilized to facilitate collaboration and joint action (Mandell, 1999; Agranoff and McGuire, 1999). Thus, “soft” factors or “intangible” capabilities, such as the organization’s understanding of the world, confidence and responsibility, vision and strategy, become particularly important for network survival and success (CDRA, 1998). In terms of leadership capacity, this requires skills such as negotiation, interpersonal communication, persuasion and strategic thinking (Agranoff and McGuire, 1999; Eggers and Goldsmith, 2004). Network managers need to engage in a different set of activities from those pursued by managers in “traditional” – unitary and hierarchical – organizations. McGuire (2002) characterizes that set as: identify and bring in the people, organizations and resources needed (“activation”); generate agreement on network structure, operating rules, principles and values (“framing”); induce and maintain commitment to the network (“mobilizing”); and facilitate relationships among participants and create an environment conducive to productive interaction (“synthesizing”).

There is a close link between the governance structure and the managerial approach required. For example, Milward and Provan (2006) differentiate between self-governing networks with highly decentralized decision-making, networks with a lead organization that centralizes decision-making, and those with a separate network administrative organization and that combine centralized and decentralized decision-making. This reflects well Herranz’s (2008) passive-to-active continuum of managerial behavior, going from reactive facilitation, present in largely self-governing networks, to contingent coordination, based on specific issues, to active coordination, which includes more strategic, long-term planning and more elaborate and established procedural mechanisms, to hierarchical-based directive administration with a strong lead agency.

Which structure is optimal depends to a large degree on the characteristics of the environment, the goals and activities of the network, and the number and capacities of the agencies involved, among others. As Bryson et al. (2006, 52) point out, the key challenge

in cross-sectoral networks is that of “aligning initial conditions, processes, structures, governance, contingencies and constraints, outcomes and accountabilities such that good things happen in a sustained manner over time”. In other words, network management is a dynamic task that requires constant adaptation to emerging opportunities and threats in order to achieve network survival and success. The next sections illustrate how this can be achieved, following the evolution of COEP during its 16 years of existence so far and highlighting the key factors that contributed to its prolonged survival, expansion and achievements.

COEP’S EVOLUTION

Beginnings: seizing the moment

The end of the military dictatorship and the restoration of electoral politics in 1984/85 in Brazil were prompted by, and in turn unleashed, extraordinary popular energy (see, for example Fleury et al., 2002; Miranda, 1994). The then president, Itamar Franco, created political space by recognizing the popular mobilization against hunger. A new generation of democratic leaders used that space creatively, helping Brazilians define *cidadania* (active citizenship) as an essential part of the new era. Among them was the sociologist Herbert de Souza, (known as Betinho), the “prime mover” and inspirational leader of COEP, whose integrity and humanity evoked admiration and affection from people in all walks of life and earned him widespread public legitimacy, which was instrumental in mobilizing organizations to join COEP.

Betinho and his friends, a small group of activist intellectuals, saw in Brazil’s public entities both opportunity and challenge: to harness their huge organizational and material resources to the popular campaign against hunger, and to give new content to the idea of a socially oriented public enterprise, one serving the interests of all Brazilians. They invited the presidents of major publicly-owned corporate entities of different kinds - banks, utilities, foundations, research bodies, parastatals - to discuss their integration into the movement against hunger. In May 1993, a meeting of 33 presidents established the *Comitê das Empresas Públicas no Combate à Fome e pela Vida - COEP*. Representing sectors such as banking, energy, telecommunications, health, agriculture and education, they acknowledged the “absolute priority” of the campaign against hunger and the power of a nationwide citizens’ movement. The president of Furnas, Brazil’s largest electricity utility, made the proposal for a mobilizing committee. Furnas then absorbed COEP’s secretariat function, and committed a senior manager to that role.

COEP’s statutes, signed in 1994, established its basic organizational architecture (COEP, 1994):

- COEP would be a non-profit and voluntary association of organizations. It would aim to link its member entities and encourage joint action, in concert with other public and private bodies, in support of the Campaign against Hunger and Misery. It would advance the objectives of the Republic “to build a free, just and solidary society”, and “to eradicate poverty and reduce social and regional inequalities”.
- Organs of governance and management included a Deliberative Council (the board) to decide on strategy and operating guidelines, comprising the President of COEP and

chief executives of member entities. An Executive Committee, consisting of technical representatives, with a voluntary Executive Secretary was responsible for management. These representatives, which remain employees of the entities, work as agents to reshape the culture of their own institutions, encouraging the allocation of resources for social projects and joint programs in communities. The Executive Secretariat plans and coordinates these actions. COEP would operate on the basis of consensus management, with the main activities captured in the annual plan consolidated by the Deliberative Council.

- Members' commitment was voluntary, but formalized. All signed a protocol affirming their "active and complete participation" in the campaign against hunger. They also agreed to allow their staff to perform COEP duties on company time - a major in-kind subsidy to the network.
- COEP's role would be that of a catalyst, encouraging its affiliates and publicizing their actions and its own. Members would be autonomous, choosing how to participate in COEP.

The choice of a network, with its non-hierarchical structure and relatively loose connections among members, reflected the founders' intent to encourage both organizational flexibility and members' participation and creativity. Betinho's colleagues pay tribute to his influence on COEP's design, particularly his belief that an open and voluntary organizational form would enable people to use their imagination to change themselves and society.

COEP's aim was to foster responsible citizenship both within the participating organizations themselves and within communities. It challenged public entities to break with narrowly sectoral and competitive logic, to cooperate with each other and with other organizations, and to become truly public bodies by grappling with paramount social issues. This involved working with and for marginalized communities, both through humanitarian interventions in emergency situations and through "structural" or community development projects, aimed at dealing directly with the underlying causes of poverty and exclusion. The entities were encouraged to use existing resources in new ways, allowing fish farms in the reservoirs of hydroelectric dams, for example, or community gardens on their landholdings. Banks were encouraged to establish branches in poor communities, and credit and management schemes for street vendors. Agricultural development organizations were encouraged to work with small farmers. COEP's message to its members' employees was similar: you can contribute by volunteering and adapting your expertise to new circumstances.

Sixteen years of growth

COEP's history is marked by continuity in substance and change in form. The main impetus behind these changes has been the desire to mobilize an increasing number of individuals and organizations in the fight against hunger, expand and diversify the set of activities COEP can support and bring the network closer to the communities themselves.

The network grew and decentralized during the 1990s. In 1995 COEP amended its statutes to provide for autonomous state networks (*estaduais*), governed by the same

principles and structures as the national body. In 2001, COEP expanded its Deliberative Council and Executive Committee to include representatives of state networks, deftly accommodating a radically increased membership without adding another layer of hierarchy to its governance and operating structures (COEP, 2001).

While decentralized growth was slow at first, by 2001 there were networks in all 26 states and in the Federal District (COEP, 2002). In 2003, COEP created its first municipal networks, and by mid-2008 there were 20 of these, with the same form and function as their national and state counterparts. This expansion shifted COEP's capacity to engage with communities from the national to the state and municipal networks and brought it closer to the local realities of poverty in Brazil, thus allowing it to support community development initiatives with local presence, knowledge, and credibility³.

Decentralization has also brought about diversity as well as growth. In 2000 COEP renamed itself the "Committee of Entities", dropping the adjective "public" to reflect a growing membership from the private sector and civil society. In August 2003, out of a membership of 762 organizations, 256 (about one-third) were non-governmental. Of the latter, 100 were private firms, and the remainder civil society organizations – NGOs, professional and business associations, religious bodies, non-profit educational institutions, cooperative associations, and labor unions. From its founding group of 30 state entities COEP expanded to include more than 1100 organizations by January 2009.

COEP has also created and encouraged mobilizing structures beyond its own initial boundaries. In 2003 it registered *Rede Mobiliza* (Mobilization Network), an NGO whose purpose is to support the work of COEP by negotiating external donations, grants and contracts. COEP has also reached out to individual Brazilians. The *Rede de Pessoas-Mobilizadores* (Network of Mobilisers), created in 2004 to enable people to support COEP's work in an individual capacity and not just as representatives of their organizations, now includes some 6000 participants in 435 municipalities.

By 1997, COEP's growth threatened to overwhelm its management capacity. The Executive Secretary recommended establishing a secretariat with an operating budget and staff to support a growing volume of meetings and electronic interactions, and monitor an expanding portfolio of development projects. Despite some fears that introducing money into a solidarity committee would destroy it, in 1998 *Oficina Social* (Social Workshop) was set up within the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, financed through subventions by 18 national public agencies, and since 2003 housed in office space provided by Furnas. *Oficina* disseminates information on successful projects through a variety of media (project database, occasional papers, video series), serves as an incubator for innovative projects and offers training to the member organizations. It has been a highly visible part of COEP, organizing and financing the meetings and teleconferences that have been integral to the network's internal communications.

The main challenge in managing the ever-expanding network was maintaining its core principles of governance and management, such as its open, voluntary, non-hierarchical structure and emphasis on solidarity and citizenship, even as its structures were becoming more elaborate and formalized. Thus, COEP has delineated and codified more sharply its fundamental principles and core values in its statutes, by writing down the rights and

responsibilities of COEP members, ways of participating in COEP, rules for the creation of state- and municipal-level COEPs and the structure of the Executive Committee. An Administrative Council now ensures compliance with the statutes, and a code of conduct complements them by establishing norms for its operational workings.

The link between extensive participation and maintenance of core principles and values has been also facilitated by the spread of the Internet since the mid-1990s, resulting in a fortuitous symbiosis of structural and technological change. The decision to decentralize COEP's structure via state networks occurred precisely as the members' national reach was intensified by electronic technology. Once the hardware, software and training were in place, COEP had a rapid, inexpensive and pervasive communications infrastructure that allowed it to pursue a broader range of activities and projects while maintaining internal coherence and consistency.

Performance: what has COEP accomplished?

The survival of COEP and its growth in membership and national reach are no small achievements. Considering that all participation in COEP represents volunteer work⁴, the high number of organizational and individual membership by itself illustrates COEP's significant mobilization capacity. Thus, ***COEP has encouraged, supported and participated in hundreds of development initiatives undertaken by its affiliates***. By June 2008, COEP's members had committed resources to more than a thousand projects, both for emergency relief and longer-term community development. Many of these are small-scale, localized projects, but there are also cases of substantial financial efforts. For example, one member, an electrical utility, estimated its 2003 expenditures on COEP projects at R\$10.5 million (US\$5.8 million). While COEP has not usually played an operational role in these projects, interviewees reported that the network has nonetheless significantly improved them.⁵ It has done so by actively promoting learning, communication and coordination among its members, both through the activities of the *Oficina Social* and through its discussion forums, seminars, conferences and annual meetings.

Through its role as a facilitator of inter-organizational cooperation, COEP has been instrumental in promoting scaling-up and replication of successful community-level projects. An early example is the experience with Cootram - Cooperative of Self-Employed Workers in the Manguinhos Complex, a poor favela in the north of the city of Rio de Janeiro. Using COEP as a forum for communication and articulation, Fiocruz, a public health institution under the Ministry of Health, mobilized a number of organizations to develop a pilot project for supporting the creation of a popular cooperative. Each organization contributed according to its specific capabilities: Coppe (the Graduate School of Research and Engineering from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) provided professors and students for trainings, Finep (the Brazilian Innovation Agency) and the Foundation of the Bank of Brazil offered financial support, and the Bank of Brazil itself contributed its experience with supporting cooperatives.

The project was replicated through another six universities⁶ throughout the country, resulting in the creation of PRONINC, the National Program of Popular Cooperative Incubators. PRONINC has been one of COEP's most visible achievements, being taken up

as government policy through the *Programa Comunidade Solidária* and resulting in 38 “cooperative incubators” around the country (COEP, 2008). While in this instance COEP has played mainly the role of a facilitator and forum for communication, the positive experience with PRONINC, reinforced by the increased capacity of COEP to act as a project incubator through the creation of the *Oficina Social*, have led it to play a more active role itself in setting up community-development projects in subsequent years. The best example for this is the cotton-grower project and the resulting Program in the Semi-Arid region, presented in Box 1.

INSERT BOX 1 HERE [see end of text]

COEP has also organized and supported numerous campaigns to raise awareness and mobilize social action against exclusion and poverty. COEP has sought to encourage its network members to reward voluntary activities by their employees, support projects that deal directly with marginalized communities, publicize Social Balance Sheets that detail the organization’s contribution to the fight against hunger, as well as donate to a variety of initiatives, from emergency relief operations to the financing of the *Oficina Social*. COEP has also made efforts to mobilize the public at large, both through its contribution to campaigns such as Christmas for Life, and through its own efforts, such as the annual Mobilization Week to commemorate COEP’s founder and his work. In 2004 COEP participated in the creation of the National Movement for Citizenship and Solidarity to increase awareness about and help realize the Millennium Development Goals. Such campaigns include lectures, cultural events, essay competitions in schools, films, discussions and seminars all over the country aimed at stimulating reflection and debate on social inequities. They also call for in-kind donations (food, etc.) and direct involvement in social work in poor communities. The latest example of a successful public campaign is the COEP Journey for Citizenship, launched in 2007. Using web-based technology, 2295 volunteers were recruited and deployed to work with community organizations, reaching some 75 communities across the country (COEP, 2008). Interviewees asserted that such efforts have helped to keep the fight against poverty and hunger on the national agenda.

Successive governments have recognized COEPs mobilizing capacity, have drawn the network into their councils and have enlisted its participation in national social programs⁷. COEPs role in President’s Lula da Silva’s *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger) program illustrates the scale of action that it is capable of mounting. In less than a month after the meeting of COEP’s Deliberative Council, national entities and state networks developed their action plans in support of *Fome Zero*.⁸ In addition to providing the government access to COEP’s substantial experience with food security projects, many of its members also committed additional resources to support the government’s plan. For example, one member, a financial institution, provided training in financial management for small enterprises, reaching 50,000 people in 2003, and 600,000 by the end of 2006. While it is hard to assess the counterfactual – i.e., how much these organizations would have participated in *Fome Zero* without COEP – various interviewees pointed out that it is unlikely that the same scale of action would have been achieved without COEP’s experience and “call to arms”.

Partly as a result of participation in COEP, network members are now substantially more responsive and proactive on issues of social justice and their own social responsibility, than in 1993. In addition to the projects mentioned above, several organizations now have policies on social responsibility and staff units responsible for corporate social action. One agency now has 1200 volunteers available for work on social responsibility; when COEP began there was just a committee of ten or twelve people. By financing *Oficina's* budget, 18 members have invested in COEP's capacity to attract and support people, and have themselves benefited, insofar as their employees have acquired new skills, knowledge and contacts. Both members and external observers point to the widespread cooperation and partnerships among the entities as among COEP's major achievements. Gradually, the practice of working together has become a habit, and has reduced both internal bureaucratic constraints and the boundaries between organizations.

Beyond these considerable achievements, it is difficult to assess the broader, longer-term effects of COEP's work on aggregate social outcomes. While there is substantial information on individual projects, there exists no systematic analysis of the overall results of the projects and campaigns with which COEP has been associated. One reason is that the breadth and diversity of the activities would make it conceptually difficult to define the relevant parameters. Another is that COEP's role in these activities is often indirect and intermediate. It has typically been a facilitator, rather than the prime mover or operational agency, and sometimes has not even been visible to people on the ground. Nevertheless, COEP started a programme of applied research to analyse COEP's methodology and impact in the *Programa Semi-árido*.⁹ The research will encourage those involved to reflect on how they have worked together, what they have accomplished, and their options for the future.

CAPABILITIES AND CAPACITY: WHAT MAKES COEP WORK?

COEP is unique in many respects. Initiated by powerful public enterprises, it has grown to become a cross-sectoral network that integrates various sectors of the Brazilian society. Its hybrid nature plays a key part in its ability to discharge certain roles. As a truly voluntary organization, it is a part of civil society – despite the fact that a minority of its members are private firms and NGOs. At the same time, the fact that its membership is based on *entidades públicas* does shape its nature. Its proximity to the state enables it to generate ideas and models for adoption by public authorities; and, in the example of the *Semi-árido* program in the Northeast, it is highly unlikely that a more conventional civil society organization could have played such a catalyzing role in managing government agencies and public universities. At the same time, the fact that the *entidades públicas* are autonomous agencies – i.e., not directly controlled by the government or the executive branch – means that their participation in government programs such as *Fome Zero* is not automatic. This makes COEP's capacity to mobilize them in support of such programs one of its key assets.

As a self-described social mobilization network, COEP does not fit neatly into the network categories identified at the beginning of the paper. Although it clearly has an informational role, by collecting and disseminating information about successful projects

of its members, it goes beyond that by helping members to identify project opportunities and engage in joint programming. It does this, however, not in order to expand their clientele or help reach the immediate organizational goal of the public agencies involved, but to achieve broader social objectives at the heart of poverty and hunger. In Milword and Provan's (2006) terms, COEP can be seen as a network of community capacity-building networks, connecting institutions and communities across the country. In another sense, it can also be seen as a capacity-utilization network, by mobilizing the existing capacity in Brazil's public institutions to further broader social goals. By challenging organizations to overcome their historic patterns of working in silos it has created a synergy where entities can do things together which are greater than and different from what they can do separately. In this sense, through a combination between individual and collective capabilities, COEP has demonstrated its capacity to create public value, in line with Baser and Morgan's (2008) definition of capacity in human systems. The following sections illustrate the key factors that have allowed it to do so.

The external environment: seizing the political moment and space

COEP reflects a remarkable confluence of social forces and personal initiative. One of its founders later remarked, "Perhaps we could not have created COEP in another country, or even at another time in Brazil." COEP's survival and growth would not have been possible, however, without the continued salience of its core mission and values – the ideas of ending hunger and poverty and fostering citizenship values (*cidadania*) – in the Brazilian public discourse and government orientation. The fact that senior members of the government have encouraged COEP's work and have formally recognized its support for programs such as *Fome Zero*, illustrates this confluence well. At the same time, this support also represents a potential pitfall. COEP is consciously nonpartisan and this distancing from immediate political agendas sustains its autonomy and contributes substantially to its legitimacy. Too much closeness to the government risks potential cooptation, undermining its legitimacy and its voluntary character, and thus eliminating one of its essential factors of success. This tension illustrates well a challenge facing many civil society organizations, as well as cross-sectoral networks: how to maintain government support, while ensuring enough distance from government to preserve their independence (see Hulme and Edwards, 1997).

The intangibles of leadership: legitimacy and strategic thinking

While the public legitimacy of the small group that created COEP and the influence of Betinho's personal charisma and imagination were instrumental in its success, they did not work alone, however. COEP has benefited from a non-hierarchical structure and an open, participatory style, retaining imaginative leadership at the national level, and nurturing creative leaders among its state and municipal networks. Using McGuire's (2003) terminology, COEP has demonstrated the importance of an inspirational leader who has the capacity to "activate" key organizations and to "mobilize" their commitment by generating a strong common purpose and shared mission. The fact that COEP survived and has continued to evolve even after Betinho's death illustrates that its capacity for leadership and strategic thinking resides not just with an individual or core organization,

but has an emergent quality, with the interplay between values, network structures and participating organizations and people taking on a dynamic of its own. Several activists considered this capacity to be *the* critical asset for COEP.¹⁰

Governing and managing the network: structure enables participation

The choice of a network as an organizational form built on voluntary association by autonomous member organizations has proven an essential factor of success, by giving space, opportunity and structure for individual and organizational commitment to social justice. COEP demonstrates how two essential organizational choices in a network setting can be addressed: the balance between formalization and flexibility, and choosing the right mix of centralized and decentralized decision-making. First, COEP is not a registered public-interest body, yet its members have formally affiliated themselves. Its core values, principles, structures and procedures have clear “constitutional” expression, being codified in its statutes and reinforced by an oversight body. Next to the personal integrity of key leadership figures, and the personal commitment of individual participants, this codification has been essential to the integrity of the network as a whole. As participants noted with pride, COEP has had no major problems of misappropriation of funds or abuse of power.

Second, COEP is non-hierarchical, but highly structured, its organizational pattern is consistent across the three levels of the network. As a result, COEP has balanced the advantages of voluntary participation with the need to maintain continuity and consistency across time and space. It has created space for both ad-hoc, decentralized decision-making focused around specific projects and initiatives of its members, what Herranz (2008) calls “contingent coordination”, and for coordinated longer-term strategic planning through its annual plans and national initiatives.

By creating new organizational structures as the need arose – like the *Oficina Social*, the *Rede Mobiliza* and the *Rede de Pessoas-Mobilizadores* – COEP has managed to sustain its growth in membership, diversify its activities and create space for new forms of participation. Some activists see the creation of *Oficina* as the critical enabling event in COEP’s evolution. In addition to the increased capacity resulting from its full-time staff and its operational budget, the *Oficina* has allowed COEP members to meet regularly, building the interpersonal trust essential to its workings. It has also taken a huge administrative burden off the shoulders of COEP’s leaders, allowing them to devote more time to maintaining communications, resolving differences among members, and supporting the state and municipal networks. Thus, COEP transitioned from what Milword and Provan (2006) call self-governance to a “network administrative organization”, which is more adept at dealing with a larger number of network members.¹¹

Membership, participation and resources: symbiosis among the personal and the institutional, the material and the intangible

COEP’s membership is institutional, but what an affiliate does depends very much on the motivation, commitment and imagination of the person(s) representing it. For many, it is this commitment that holds the network together and makes it work. The power of

COEP is largely informal. Neither leadership nor membership can prescribe what individual affiliates should do. Members retain the prerogative of choice and have the operational capacity to carry out autonomous projects and campaigns. In practice, COEP's influence plays out as individual persuasion, collective pressure, serendipitous negotiation of diverse positions, adroit use of opportunities, personal trust and chemistry among colleagues and friends, and communication of ideas and strategies.

A positive culture of collaboration has been built on these foundations. COEP members have usually been ready to work towards consensus so that the network functions effectively. There are strong personalities in COEP, but there has been remarkably little internal conflict. This is in part due to its structure with "no bosses and no employees" and a leadership style that is non-authoritarian, accessible, ready to listen and accept diversity, ready to ensure that people have both space to voice their ideas and the autonomy to get things done, while working toward consensus and protecting the integrity of COEP's mission. But it is also due to the fact that COEP's values and mission have been a unifying reference point. The ethics of the network is what attracted many participants to COEP to begin with. The relative absence of internal conflict reflects wide agreement on its purposes and core values, reinforced by the presence of a clear code of conduct and an oversight body.

Many of the capabilities that lie at the heart of COEP's success – such as leadership, integrity, values, solidarity, commitment, legitimacy – reflect the intangible qualities presented earlier. At the same time, these come into play only through a symbiosis with decidedly tangible institutional qualities – the national reach of many member organizations, and their substantial material, financial and technical resources. It is this symbiosis that lies at the heart of COEP's capability to leverage or multiply resources, a promise offered by networks more generally (Taschereau and Bolger, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Mandell (1999: 59) has compared network structures to "a jam session with jazz musicians, where each musician does his own thing but they instinctively blend to form a musical whole". COEP illustrates this metaphor well. As a social mobilization network born under the leadership of an inspirational figure, it has survived and thrived because it managed to mobilize a wide array of public and organizations under the common banner of social justice and solidarity. It succeeded by adopting a non-hierarchical structure that leaves room for members' initiative, while at the same time maintaining internal consistency and integrity. It has grown and evolved by adapting to new circumstances, while remaining true to its original values and mission. While it cannot by itself solve the truly "wicked" problems it is trying to address, such as poverty and social injustice, it has managed to mobilize a large number of organizations in its fight, promoting learning, innovation and cooperation and among its members, influencing their culture and strengthening their capacity, while at the same time advancing the public debate on Brazil's pressing social issues and contributing to a number of public programs. Further, COEP's experience is instructive in that it illustrates how civil society actors can pursue scaling-up that achieves impact not simply by promoting organizational growth, but by

leveraging efforts through multiplication of actors and projects, decentralization, and the promotion of synergies (see Uvin et al., 2000).

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ENDNOTES

¹ Translation: the Committee of Entities in the Struggle against Hunger and for a Full Life.

² There are many more complex definitions of networks. For example, see Milward and Provan (2006).

³ In November 2008, COEP had working relationships with 112 communities across Brazil (including the 46 members of the *Programa das Comunidades do Semi-árido*), COEP's member organizations supporting development projects and programs in each, negotiated with the Community Association (www.comunidadescopep.org.br). At national meetings in 2009, COEP invited these communities to structure themselves as a network, affiliated with COEP; these conversations are continuing.

⁴ Except for the employees of the *Oficina Social*, all the members of the Deliberative Councils, Executive Committees and Administrative Councils at all levels work on a voluntary non-paid basis. This is in addition to the thousands of individual volunteers mobilized through the *Rede de Mobilizadores* and national campaigns, such as *Jornada pela Cidadania*.

⁵ From interviews conducted in 2008.

⁶ *Universidade Federal de Juiz de Fora* (UFJF), *Universidade do Estado da Bahia* (Uneb), *Universidade Federal do Ceará* (UFC), *Universidade Federal Rural de Pernambuco* (UFRPE), and *Universidade de São Paulo* (USP).

⁷ Examples include the *Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar* – PRONAF (National Program to Support Family Agriculture, 1998), the *Primeiro Emprego* program of the Ministry of Labor (First Employment, 2003), or programs to support the rights of the adolescent of the Special Secretary for Human Rights (2004).

⁸ Compiled in COEP (2003). Together, the two volumes are nearly 3 inches thick.

⁹ With support from the International Development Research Centre and the Centre for Voluntary Sector Research and Development of Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada.

¹⁰ The importance of emergence for capacity development is a key finding of the ECDPM capacity study. It refers to unplanned and uncontrollable processes through which capacity

is formed and reinforced as a function of the interactions among organizations, networks, and their stakeholders. See Baser and Morgan (2008).

¹¹ Even though the *Oficina* is housed by one of the member organizations of COEP, this is primarily as a form of in-kind contribution to the network, not because the hosting organization itself assumes the leadership role in the network.

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Box 1. Cotton growers' associations in the Northeast

In the late 1990s, communities of small farmers in the semi-arid districts of the Northeast acquired title to larger farms through Brazil's land redistribution program. One of these was the Margarida Alves Community Association, whose members formed a cooperative to grow cotton. Working with the community, COEP organized a pilot project to revitalize smallholder cotton production. It mobilized the national agricultural research corporation, EMBRAPA, to provide technical support to the farmers, and both persuaded the regional electricity utility to install a power line. COEP's national members contributed funds to finance a small factory to clean, comb and bale the raw cotton. Margarida Alves had significant success, more than doubling marketed production and income from cotton within three years. This encouraged others: in two years COEP and EMBRAPA expanded the initiative to six similar communities, securing project financing from an agency within the Ministry of Science and Technology. The communities and their associations used their newfound income, organization and confidence to secure better water, schools and health services.

COEP has gradually expanded its initiative into an extensive *Programa Semi-árido* (Program of the Semi-Arid Region) in which 46 communities with an average size of 70 people now participate. Recognizing the specific challenges of this difficult ecological region and thus the need for integrated community development, the original cotton project has diversified to support communities' capacity to live with the frequent droughts of the

semi-arid zone. Demonstration effects are becoming visible in the project areas, with the participating communities becoming a focal point for local development, both through providing access to their cotton mills and factories, and inspiring other communities to undertake similar projects.

The successes of the project communities, and COEP's lobbying, have attracted Brazil's Ministries of Communications, and Science and Technology, which have provided internet access, as well as training and support for computer-based communication. Communities are establishing *telecentros* to monitor cotton prices and stay in touch with each other. With COEP's encouragement, professors and students in six universities in the Northeast have formed a support network, assisting both the original and newer communities with diagnostics, planning and organizing, and the cultivation of management skills. Drawing on these resources, and on the experience of the communities themselves, COEP organized two capacity development forums in 2006 and 2008 to strengthen the capabilities and confidence of the communities and of the network as a whole.

Like PRONINC, this experience illustrates well COEP's capacity to mobilize people and organizations from Brazil's different regions and sectors, some of whom would not normally work together. It also illustrates another key aspect of the linkage management that COEP performs: its capacity to access high-level decision-makers within government, and to energize and connect with grass-roots initiatives at the most decentralized level, such as the 46 communities in the semi-arid regions. As COEP continues to expand, it is likely that this role will increase in importance and effectiveness.