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Tri-sector partnerships in social entrepreneurship: discourse and practice of the actors from the circles of action and reflection

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RESUMO

Parcerias tri-setoriais no empreendedorismo social: discurso e prática dos atores a partir de círculos de ação e reflexão

No artigo, discute-se a construção das chamadas Parcerias Tri-Setoriais em três projetos, desenvolvidos no Brasil, de diferentes áreas temáticas de intervenção em políticas públicas (acesso a água, educação básica e atuação de conselhos de direitos da criança e do adolescente). Articulações colaborativas envolvendo simultaneamente atores dos chamados três setores (Estado, sociedade civil e mercado) são práticas pouco estudadas no contexto brasileiro e mesmo internacional, visto que parcerias de caráter tri-setorial são pouco frequentes, apesar da proliferação de discursos de apoio às alianças entre governos e sociedade civil ou entre Organizações Não Governamentais (ONGs) e empresas na gestão de políticas públicas. Como estratégia de investigação, recorreu-se na pesquisa ao *Cooperative Inquiry*, método que pressupõe a ruptura de fronteiras entre sujeitos e objetos de análise, frequentemente constituídos por outros sujeitos vinculados à ação. Além do avanço na compreensão dos desafios da construção de parcerias tri-setoriais na realidade brasileira, busca-se também demonstrar a relevância para os estudos em gestão social de métodos investigativos assentados no protagonismo dos sujeitos pesquisados, como forma de se caminhar na compreensão de práticas, discursos e dilemas vinculados à ação social em programas sociais.

Palavras-chave: parcerias tri-setoriais, políticas públicas, círculos de ação e reflexão, Organizações Não Governamentais.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The discussion of cross-sector efforts is challenging. They are a design that is undergoing broad and rapid dissemination, appropriate for discussion by managers and academics, though in a different way. Still, exactly what cross-sector means and what characterizes this concept is not entirely clear, and the dimensions for its analysis are equally unclear. Nonetheless, there is reasonable consensus in the literature that this notion is connected with a set of innovations in the area of public administration, in a context in which specialized technical systems and strongly hierarchical and vertical structures are facing new goals and political and social demands, along with novel issues and problems of new population segments. All of this indicates the need to redesign old organizational structures and to provide new answers, cross-sector arrangements being simply one of the possible alternatives.

In this context, tri-sector arrangements refer to the interaction among different policy sectors of government. However, the literature recognizes that a notion very close to this is also strongly present in the discussions of public policies: the cross-sector arrangements. However, cross-sector processes refer to a further set of questions, related to partnerships between distinct sectors – the government, the market and civil society. In this regard, the view of tri-sector arrangements is analyzed from the perspective of governance, which points to an interaction between the various sectors (public, private and third sector) in a relational and multilevel view of government.

The subject of this article is tri-sectorial partnerships, between government actors, the private sector and civil society organizations in social projects in Brazil. This article is the result of a survey carried out in 2007 and 2008, in conjunction with an American university and in partnership with a foundation that operates on several social and environment policy fronts in eleven South American countries.

Three cases were studied in Brazil using a methodology that promotes not only the systematization of knowledge, but also the training of the participants and the generation of effective solutions to the challenges of trying to coordinate different sectors. The research project was divided into two distinct and complementary parts: one investigation that consisted of case studies, and another that was based on the **Cooperative Inquiry** perspective, an idea that was translated [into Portuguese] as Circles of Action and Reflection or even as Collaborative Research. The project's two fronts aimed to identify and analyze the dynamics of tri-sector collaboration, seeking a better understanding in the social sector. Specifically, the collaborative research established the following research question:

- How can one achieve and maintain greater commitment/involvement and synergy among the partners and allies to achieve/ensure effective results?

In order to answer the question and in keeping with the **Cooperative Inquiry** methodology, four meetings were held

with representatives from the three sectors (government, Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and private sector) that set up and/or lead programs developed in various regions in the country^(*).

2. POSSIBILITIES AND RISKS OF TRI-SECTOR PARTNERSHIPS IN THE SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Though much of the literature celebrates the substantial possibilities of modernizing the provision of social policies through tri-sector partnerships, several studies also point out the risks and traps that may arise from the encounter between actors from civil society, the State and the market. Vernis *et al.* (2007) point out the problems non-legitimate associations while Meirelles (2005) indicates that there are stumbling blocks derived from power asymmetry in the relationships established. Many elements listed as indicative of progress in the management of social policies and projects through tri-sector partnerships can represent, simultaneously and paradoxically, barriers against this modernization. One example of this is mentioned by Najam (1996), who analyzed efforts to increase social control over government and non-government organs and discussed implications resulting from **accountability** practices, which can become increasingly referenced by the **ethos** of public bureaucracy or by the technicalities of the Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), resulting in a disengagement between the community organizations and the people served by social projects and policies.

The possibility of constructing new relationship forms that are less conflictive (or more cooperative as most of the literature prefers to emphasize) between the State, the market and civil society organizations, leading to more advanced forms of building citizenship and interaction with the communities targeted by projects, are seen as one of the great advances resulting from Tri-Sector Partnerships in Social Entrepreneurship initiatives (TORO, 2005). Other analyses about tri-sector partnerships also indicate gains from the summation and complementation of resources and competencies (PREFONTAINE *et al.*, 2000; SELSKY and PARKER, 2005), effectiveness and increasing impact of interventions in social problems (PREFONTAINE *et al.*, 2000; VERNIS *et al.*, 2007), co-responsibility for social transformation (DOWBOR, 2008), greater information and predictability related to social risks (SELSKY and PARKER, 2005; VERNIS *et al.*, 2007) and shared learning (NAJAM,

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2000; FISCHER, FEDATO, and BELASCO, 2005). These are all relevant factors that justify the expansion of tri-sector collaboration.

However, Selsky and Parker (2005) identify several studies that **indicate mixed** and even counterproductive outcomes of tri-sector partnerships, mainly when considering the impact of expanding citizenship and democratic pluralism. Vernis *et al.* (2007) recognize that pragmatic, economic, ideological, commercial and populist motivations can be covered up by tri-sectorial discourse. These risks seem to underlie one of the biggest problems of the materialization of partnerships in social projects: reciprocal distrust, which reinforces prejudices, rejections and defensive postures among the actors (FISCHER, FEDATO, and BELASCO, 2005; MEIRELLES, 2005).

We realize that some of the difficulties encountered by tri-sector partnerships in attempting to fulfill their promises, both in terms providing better social services and of building more advanced dynamics in a democratic and citizen-oriented coexistence in society, are due to problems of operating and managing these collaborative practices. A substantial part of the literature on alliances and collaborations in social projects is dedicated to overcoming problems of low transparency, of the implicit interests and goals that are at stake, of reduced otherness or unawareness of the other party, of the lack of pre-set rules for the resolution of conflicts, and of instability for monitoring and evaluating social interventions (MEIRELLES, 2005).

However, more important than the problems inherent to the proper **oiling** of the operation of collaborative practices – many of which are common to bi- and intra-sector partnerships, which, for their improvement, depend on the actors involved volunteering and developing management tools – are the challenges related to the structural dynamics of cooperative relationships. This dimension refers to the dilemma faced by the actors in relation to games of cooperation and confrontation, characterized by relationships of power and domination in the social action, revealing realities that are not overcome but that make themselves constituent and structural parts of the partnership processes.

Several authors indicate cooptation is one of the great risks of tri-sector partnerships. Najam (2000), analyzing the relationships between NGOs and governments, presented four possibilities of interaction, which he named “the four Cs”: cooperation, cooptation, complementation and confrontation. This model crosses the actors’ goals with preferential action strategies. According to this author, confrontational practices tend to arise when there are substantial differences in these two dimensions. Relationships characterized by complementarity arise when goals are similar but action strategies are different. Cooperation happens when strategies and goals are convergent. Finally, cooptation is constructed when significant differences in terms of goals co-exist with convergence regarding the forms of action.

For Najam (2000, p.389), cooptation is essentially a power function that can be derived from factors of a “financial, po-

litical, coercive, even epistemic”. Cooptation situations are generally transient and unstable, though not insignificant for the dynamic interaction among the actors. On the contrary, not only this author, but a number of others, such as Landim (2002), Fischer, Fedato, and Belasco (2005), and Meirelles (2005), indicate the risks of cooptation in social project partnerships. It is important also to be aware that manipulation works like a two-way street, or, thinking about Tri-Sector Partnerships, in fluxes and refluxes among the actors of the three sectors involved, as Najam (2000) pointed out.

One of the essential questions in this discussion concerns the very nature of forming processes of cooptation and cooperation. For Selznick (1948), leadership dynamics, whose basis consists of obtaining cooperation from the social actors, also implies cooptation. It is like the two sides of the same coin, since processes, especially of an implicit nature, with involvement and collaborative engaging of the actors, imply cooptative changes and concessions for their support.

This indicates that it is necessary to see cooptation as a mechanism of accommodation of conflicts, and equalization of the collaboration challenges in social action as alternatives that can also involve comfort zones for the actors, including the co-opted and dominated ones in the Tri-Sector Partnerships. This kind of perspective is akin to the notions of Foucault’s *Microphysics of Power* (FOUCAULT, 1979) and of Pagès *et al.’s* *Control and Domination* (PAGÈS *et al.*, 1987), moving beyond the simplistic visions of the dominated and the dominant in social project collaborations.

Najam (2000) recognizes the limits of his proposal, especially for establishing tight and different situations among four possible types of interaction. It is important for the analysis of Tri-Sector Partnerships to understand, through the recurrence of this analytical construction, that situations of cooperation, confrontation, complementarity and cooptation can manifest themselves in the interaction dynamics among the actors of State, Civil society and market. From this perspective, dimensions that, rather than revealing a broad and coherent cooperation, may mask confrontation and/or cooptation games within the same social action dynamics that the actors recognize as a social action partnership, can be incorporated to the analysis of these partnerships.

Ospina and Saz-Carranza (2005) identified, in their analysis of interactions between NGOs and government agencies in the United States, dynamics in which the same individuals and institutions sometimes provide coalition actions and reciprocal support in the dispute for setting public policies agendas, and at other times explicitly indicate their divergences and antagonism in various fronts of these policies. According to Najam (2000), the Four Cs analytical model does not assume, as a prerequisite for cooperation, the existence of power symmetry among the actors that are intertwined in a partnership, but it may help one to understand a series of situations in which nongovernmental actors, whether CSOs or companies, present

themselves as relevant interaction actors vis-a-vis the State. The confrontation situations tend to arise both in realities in which nongovernmental actors resist and/or are opposed to certain public policies and in the cases in which coercive State control is manifest. However, as the author points out, confrontation dynamics “need not necessarily be hostile” (NAJAM, 2000, p.386), which leaves room to recognize conflicts that are less obvious and conflicting forms of interaction that are not necessarily explicit and declared in these relationships.

Coston (1998) identifies seven interaction situations between the government and NGOs, the analytical variables here being the degree of acceptance of institutional pluralism, the level of formalization between relations, and power symmetry among the actors. In contexts with strong power asymmetry and resistance to plurality of organizations and institutions, the interactions are characterized by repression, rivalry and competition and the first two can be formal or informal in nature, whereas competitive dynamics takes on an informal character. In realities marked by a greater acceptance of institutional pluralism and less power asymmetry, formalized relationships among contracting and third parties appear, which tend to be informal in cooperation but again more formalized in complementarity and collaboration.

In this theoretical construct, commonly used expressions found with multiple meanings and references in the literature appear with very accurate definitions. In repressive situations, the government refuses to provide any support for NGOs, whereas in rivalry positions, government policy develops regulations that are unfavorable for NGO operations, aiming at their direct control. On the other hand, when it comes to competition, it may arise in the form of political struggles for the support of society and/or of communities or in connection with economic issues, with disputes for international funds and/or community contributions. When hiring, there is a division of labor based on comparative advantages, leading to the disappearance of boundaries between sectors, while in the relations of the third party sort, the discretionary power of State over the NGOs rises, through a division of work based also in comparative advantages that now manifest themselves through different and more precise mechanisms of regulation of the activities of NGOs.

According to Coston (1998), either being a contracting or a third party can have potentially negative consequences for NGOs, mainly linked to the distortion of their goals and values and the loss of legitimacy in society. In the sphere of greater acceptance of institutional pluralism, what appears is cooperation marked by low interaction among the actors and by sharing of non-formalized information; complementarity, in which there is greater sharing of knowledge and resources of a different nature, opening up possibilities for NGOs’ participation in the planning of public policies; and, finally, collaboration, characterized by a high degree of interaction among the actors, with formalized procedures for the com-

mon use of information and other resources and with NGOs participating in the stages of construction, implementation and evaluation of public policies.

Although the Coston (1998) model discusses bi-sectorial interactions (State and NGOs), we may analyze partnerships involving actors in the three sectors through the categories indicated by the author. As Selsky and Parker (2005) point out, various dynamics and characteristics revealed in the partnerships between State and companies, CSOs and public organs and companies and civil society organizations also arise in the Tri-Sector Partnerships. This is due not only to the distinctive characteristics of the collaborations that involve actors from these three sectors, but also to positive and negative aspects, possibilities and traps, sense of trust (**trust**) and risk, optimistic and pessimistic visions, desire for collaboration and resistance and openness to new learning and prejudices. All are brought by the actors to the tri-sector interactions as a result of their previous experiences in **one-on-one** articulations. The dynamics that have marked the actions of the State, civil society organizations and market vis-a-vis actors from other sectors will be discussed and problematized at greater length in the subsequent chapters.

Although the Coston (1998) model reproduces the same problem of linear evolution found in the discussions of Najam (2000), due to the continuum between different interaction situations among the actors, this analytical construction has as a backdrop a greater or lesser adherence to institutional pluralism. This perspective enables one to consider variables linked to the socio-political pathway of societies and its implications for the deployment of the Tri-Sector Partnerships over “intangible and indirect outcomes” (SELSKY and PARKER, 2005, p.863), i.e. it enables a discussion of practical issues for managing social projects, mainly in regard to the expansion of citizenship, the construction of rights and the plural and democratic interaction between actors in the public sphere, which are the core objects of this investigation.

3. COOPERATIVE INQUIRY

Cooperative Inquiry (CI) is a research methodology that allows the articulation of researchers and **practitioners** and the collective production of knowledge via circles of action and reflection.

CI assumes that the boundaries between subject and object of investigation are broken through regular and sequential meetings involving the actors who construct social practices (TRAYLEN, 1994; REASON and HENRON, 1995; HENRON and REASON, 2001; OSPINA *et al.*, 2006). At these meetings, the participants define, with the support of a team of researchers that act as facilitators of the debates (HENRON, 1999; OSPINA *et al.*, 2006), questions linked to their experiences of social action for which they would like to have an answer. At the end of each meeting, the participants return to their daily activities committed to trying to implement some of the

guidelines discussed and agreed upon in the CI meetings and to think over the new practices. These attempts to change reality are the object of discussion and questioning in subsequent meetings up until the last meeting. The ultimate goal of these meetings is to produce a form of systematized knowledge, generally a written document, collectively authored, expressing the experiences and especially the guidelines for helping other individuals involved and/or interested in the social action conducted. In this investigation, the participants chose to write a document on their experience and their knowledge of building Tri-Sector Partnerships.

This research method is based on certain specific epistemological assumptions. The first is appreciating knowledge that results from practice, from the concrete experience of participants. The raw material of the research process is based on a tacit agreement, on practical knowledge, on the experience and the experiencing of the research participants. It is from these records, through dialogue and reflection on practice, that knowledge is produced. The CI methodology, according to its main formulators, consists of “extended epistemology” (REASON and HENRON, 1995).

Second, and as a result of the first point, the research participants are co-authors; they are the subject of knowledge. This is a disjunctive approach relative to more canonical scientific models that consider them, in general, research objects. In this type of research everyone learns together. This methodological perspective is based on respect for the practitioners as people who can reflect on and research their own experience. The necessary knowledge comes from practice and aims to improve said practice. In the field of methodological studies, it is participative research, based on and structured from the input supplied by **practitioners**, the agents who are actually operating the projects, programs and various interventions.

Third, the research is developed from a question defined by the group as the issue to be investigated, one that is useful and mobilizing in practical terms. There is no right question; what defines it as a good question is being significant for the group, something that touches everybody, belongs to the group and relates to each and every group member. The best questions are those that mobilize the group’s energy, that can be answered and that can be useful for the group and its institutions. To be worth the effort, the answer and the knowledge produced should contribute both to the understanding of the phenomenon studied (cross-sector partnerships) and to the practice of the programs considered. The research experience, therefore, has a dual purpose: to advance both knowledge and action.

The question is the core of the research and it is around the reflection on it that the study is conducted, from alternate circles of reflection and action. In these meetings, the participants talk about the question in a structured manner. From the question, actions are established to be developed between the meetings; these function metaphorically as hypotheses to be tested, to enable an approach related to the research question.

Fourth point: CI research uses simple but powerful methods and tools. The research technologies are soft, fluid and flexible. Certain resources and visual techniques were used to integrate the group, facilitate openings for dialogue and search for new forms of signification other than just words: collages, figures, mental maps and corporality.

The research process was structured from the dialogues, the conversations established among the participants and the cumulative systematization of what was produced collectively by the group over the meetings. The focus of the group was a question that made sense to their practice.

With this methodology as a basis, the study enabled a learning process about its actors’ practices while also advancing knowledge about tri-sector partnerships. Indeed, the main merit of this methodology is enabling articulation between the field of knowledge and the field of action.

4. THE EXPERIENCES ANALYZED

The basic group in this research study comprised participants from three projects, related to issues of elementary education, control of public funds and access to water. In the field of elementary education, the participant initiative was the Beyond Letters Network (*Rede Além das Letras*), centered on education up to the fourth grade of elementary school, and on improving reading and writing capabilities, by training public education staff. The Beyond Letters Network is a project of the Warning Institute (*Instituto Avisa Lá*), in partnership with the Social Reason Institute (*Instituto Razão Social*), with funding from the Gerdau Group. The Social Reason Institute focuses on developing Information Technology and Distance Education and participates in this project by enabling the technological basis for the distance training provided by the Beyond Letters Network and bringing funds for financing the project. The project centers on training activities; the technical teams of education departments of municipalities are its direct audience and it aims to strengthen the reading and writing skills of students. In 2008, it reached 49 municipalities throughout Brazil, covering 1,080 schools, 1,958 headmasters and/or educational coordinators, 6,561 teachers and 182 thousand students. The partnership with the Social Reason Institute is based on the production of a technological basis for distance training in collaboration with IBM. The Gerdau Group has so far been the project’s sole source of financing. The Beyond Letters Network also enjoys the institutional collaboration of Avina, Ashoka, Unicef, Undime and UNESCO.

In the field of transparency and public control, the New Alliances Project (*Projeto Novas Alianças*) aims to build capabilities in public administration boards, to monitor and evaluate the government budget and to construct alliances in the legislative branch and in the media for the effective implementation of the Statute of Children and Adolescents principles in the municipalities covered by the project. The project began between

the years 2006 and 2007, but its origin dates back to 2003, to mobilization by the representative along with organized movements for discussing the multi-annual plan of the State of Minas Gerais. The Board for the Defense of Children's and Adolescents' Rights (*Frente de Defesa dos Direitos da Criança e do Adolescente*) responded to this invitation and began to mobilize other actors as well. The project's working methodology covers three areas: training, mobilization and communication. The gateway for the New Alliances Project in municipalities is the mobilization and training of social actors – especially public administration counselors – regarding the availability and control of the public budget, with emphasis on participation in the decision-making processes of the budget cycle, the monitoring of budget execution, and the establishment of an alliance with the legislative branch and with the social media.

In the field of access to water, the One Million Cisterns Program (*Programa 1 Milhão de Cisternas*) was born during a federal government transition, when the Lula administration was starting and the Zero Hunger Program (*Programa Fome Zero*) reached the national priority agenda. The One Million Cisterns Program consists of a social technology developed by NGOs that ensures a one-year supply of water for homes by having tanks (cisterns) built to capture rain water for cooking and for the use of the household. The basic principle is that management of the project must be provided by civil society. The chief guideline is that within the community there is energy – human and social capital – that can be mobilized. There is no company to build the cisterns; their production is conducted by the families themselves, who are trained to build and to manage the cisterns. Between 2003 and 2007, some two thousand cisterns were built in one thousand municipalities throughout Brazil, using local labor. Each cistern is a one-family tank and is not for community use. The Program is coordinated by the Articulation Program for the Semi-Arid Region (*Articulação do Semi-Árido – ASA*), which brings together 62 NGOs that work in the municipalities of the region and that are responsible for selecting the sites and for implementing the program locally. The Esquel Foundation (*Fundação Esquel*), which is a member of ASA, formulated the project and the main elements of its articulation. *Federação Brasileira de Bancos* (Febraban) is also involved in the project, basically, in its co-financing. The program is co-funded by the federal Ministry of Development. The funding breakdown is as follows: Ministry, 70%; Febraban, 10%; and families, 20%.

5. COOPERATIVE INQUIRY IN ACTION

Questions that were formulated prior to determining the central inquiry of the research carried implicitly the set of dimensions that were later constructed by the group as an answer to it. One set of questions concerned the diversity of interests, values, rationalities and causes: Is it possible to work together despite different interests? How may one work while maintaining the independence and identity of the actor? Another set of

questions pointed to the structures and processes that enable, support, and strengthen projects and alliances: How can one create the conditions or opportunities for the establishment of a common cause to guide the joint work? How can one advance toward the collective construction of action? How can one broaden the dialogue between the actors involved in the process? How can one achieve greater and more lasting involvement of various initiative partners? How can one foster more synergy among partners to ensure effective results and sustainability? How can one solidify partnerships? How can one create commitment among partners? What strengthens, anchors and enables projects and alliances to last? What gives sustainability to cross-sector alliances? How can one get directors and controlling shareholders of companies to become involved and motivated to act? What gives sustainability to cross-sector alliances in the initiatives' internal and external environments? These were the preliminary questions of the research, as defined by the group. They later took the form of the question that guided the entire investigation:

- How can one attain and maintain greater commitment/involvement and synergy among partners and allies to reach effective results?

Thus, the end question points to two moments in time, the training or emergence of partnerships and alliances, and their maintenance/sustainability. These time aspects involve different strategies from the point of view of governance and management of tri-sector partnerships.

The first meeting was entirely dedicated to formulating the research question. Between this and the meeting that followed, the participants sought to raise hypotheses to answer it. Shared interests, clearness of roles and responsibilities, joint management and efficient communication among the partners were some of the hypotheses raised by the participants and they were dealt with collectively in the second meeting. Again, between the meetings, an action plan was determined that would allow the group to assess the relevance of the hypotheses raised up to that point.

In the third meeting, the hypotheses were re-worked and re-grouped. One can say that there a “debugging” process occurred, with four main elements having been identified as a result: recognition, governance, management and anchor theme. These were considered to be the pillars for forming synergies and for establishing commitment to collaboration among partners.

Between the third and the fourth meeting, the group went into the meaning and implications of the elements of each of the main elements in greater detail, seeking improved understanding, clearness and conceptual accuracy in the outlining of each one of the fields seen as relevant for providing answers to the research question. The participants produced texts based on the four main elements to present to the group at the last meeting, aiming to systematize the answers to the research question. The outcome of the research process, as explained below, was

based on the actual participation of the entire group, which, in fact, defined this study as collaborative research, in which all the participants were authors and producers of knowledge based on practice.

6. FINDINGS FROM THE SUBJECTS THEMSELVES

First, it is worth noting that the research process itself was “a social experiment” in the construction of a tri-sector effort:

“The methodology, applied to the collective effort and overcoming the sectorial specificities of the participants (seeking an understanding of the tri-sectorial experiences of various projects) led us to experience ‘in a laboratory situation’ the same main elements that we identified in our answer. In short, we started with several very different stories (in content, nature and operation) that converged toward a tri-sectorial effort (anchor theme): throughout the process, we had to develop **respect and recognition (amongst ourselves)**; with the support of the facilitators and researchers, we managed to define a governance model for the ‘investigation’ (for knowledge construction and the deliberative mechanisms of the group) and a management model for these processes, which was crucial for the success of the whole. This was the first finding from this investigation process. Regardless of other particular or specific results, this itself contributed to reset and to expand strategies and the results of the participants (and of their projects)” (Participant 1).

The group identified, throughout the process, four main elements in the answer to the investigation question. These elements were present in a dispersed way from the very first meeting and most of the work carried out was to deepen and fine-tune the meaning, potential and limits of each of the following four elements to answer the research question:

- Anchor theme under ongoing construction – a condition for the emergence and sustainability of an initiative;
- Recognition, respect, otherness – identifying differences and connection possibilities;
- Governance, new areas of decision-making and joint planning of action and convergence;
- Management of the partnership, operation of partnerships and concrete aspects of management.

From the first meeting, the following emerged as a structuring factor of partnership or of collaboration:

“How can one create conditions or opportunities for the establishment of a common cause that guides the joint work?”

In the last meeting, the group crystallized their insights on the importance of a unifying purpose with the expression “Anchor Theme”. The idea of anchor refers to something that ties and holds something in its place. Less formally stated, it is what binds the partners. Although considered by everyone as a structuring element of an alliance, the group worked relatively little on this, perhaps because of its obviousness: people and institutions **come together** because they have shared causes and interests. The higher the degree of adherence of the actors/authors to the **cause** and the greater the ability of mobilization or agglutination of the theme within society in general, the greater the chances of success. According to the synthesis formulated by the group, the

“Anchor Theme is the central element, the great driver, the determinant of the collaboration. It is the purpose, the original reason for establishing the alliance, and it is based on recognizing an actual problem. The identification of the Anchor Theme precedes the alliance, but can be strengthened by the governance processes.”

The important aspect to be considered regarding this point is the necessary interaction between desire and need. With this formulation, the group identified that the theme must be sufficiently motivating to trigger desire and need in people, in their hearts and minds. Thus, the theme must move people in both professional and personal terms. The degree of personal and professional interest in the Anchor Theme is a strong conditioning factor of alliance effectiveness. When something makes sense to the individuals, things happen. In the words of one of the participants,

“It means that this central element is a great motivator and determinant of collaboration and mutual help; in other words, of the need for and existence of the partnership” (Participant 2).

What was stated by the group is that the original theme (which motivated the “construction” of a tri-sector proposal) is and continues to be one of the central elements of partnership success and empowerment. According to the group, this view of the anchor theme is a great motivator and determinant of mutual help, i.e., of the need for and existence of the partnership. The cause, the theme of the struggle, mobilizes, generates partnership and, in certain conditions, maintains it. Thanks to an Anchor Theme, different actors with different thinking can be brought together. The Anchor Theme fulfills the fundamental role of being the glue that binds the various actors of the initiative over time. However, this convergence around an “Anchor Theme” is not a rule and is not shared to the same extent and in the same direction among all the partners involved. This is the case because, as the group pointed out, although it is necessary

or even central for establishing partnership, the theme may not be fully formed at the inception of the alliance. It may, perhaps, only materialize during the course of the process, when each partner comes up with meanings that had not been identified previously.

Two important aspects should be highlighted in connection with the Anchor Theme: one refers to the centrality of the Anchor Theme for the actors involved in the partnership and the other, to the extremely dynamic character of the collaboration, which somehow relativizes the importance of the Anchor Theme in the face of imperatives of a logical, political, ideological or other nature that may arise during the process.

Thus, the place of the theme on the agenda of each partner can be different, conditioned by the nature and development path of the organizations. As the participants thought about their experiences, they observed that under certain circumstances partners (of each one of the sectors: government, entities, companies) can assess and reassess the relevance or their ownership of the initiative, in order to continue pursuing it (and in what form or condition). Thus, government policy changes can privilege one aspect or another of the same theme (at one point in time, the most central issue is access to water, but at another, it is popular mobilization and organization, in the case of the One Million Cisterns effort). Likewise, companies tend **naturally** to associate with initiatives that are closer to their **core business**; finally, civil society organizations can also modify their ways or their views of their alliances.

The reflection process regarding this point identified that the theme is an extremely important element to encourage the partnerships and alliances, but it is not enough to ensure their permanence. In some cases, one must build the public agenda, endorsing the legitimacy of the project theme. Often, in the field of public policies, the issue is not pre-existing or required by the population. The theme of public control, for instance, is something new on the horizon of citizenship rights and duties and including this theme in the public agenda means to construct it as a legitimate field of social intervention. In the case of the New Alliances Project, the subject of public budget brings to the scene a lot of tension and dissent about the budget content and form, being different from a theme in which there has been consensus production, such as cisterns or literacy. Furthermore, the budget and its control are subjects that involve substantial political exposure, which means greater risks for those that get involved with this in the context of an authoritarian political culture. Because of this factor and of the challenges related to understanding the technical and political languages, it is harder to achieve adherence to the theme. However, it is a politically relevant theme, with clear and objective implications for public policies. For the Vale Foundation (*Fundação Vale*), it is articulated with the possibility of greater impact on public policies, the core theme of its agenda. The New Alliances Project agenda consists mainly of deepening democracy and the possibility of partnership arises from this convergence.

The second important Anchor Theme that is noteworthy, besides the differences in the centrality of the theme in the agenda of the institutions involved, is the dynamic character of the partnerships and the role that of convergence in relation to the Anchor Theme. Throughout the research process, substantial changes occurred in the projects: withdrawal of partners; admission of others with other priorities, goals, pathways; different speeds; changes in corporate strategies; changes in political and legal practices; etc. The arena is full of changes, sometimes substantial ones.

Observing the experiences, the group found that not only the **partnerships** are constantly **forming** but that they are constructions that require daily attention. Additionally, the very partners are also, individually, constructing and consolidating themselves, reconstructing identities and roles in the public arena. In the words of one of the participants,

“The companies are not homogeneous or cohesive blocks, in which views and interests always converge. There is no clearness of roles, but instability of the actors themselves, and new identities for the government, the market and NGOs” (Participant 3).

The actors approach and depart at certain times because of specific circumstances and structures, and of the internal processes of each actor as well. This means that convergence around the Anchor Theme, which requires the establishment of a partnership, may be insufficient for maintaining it. However, it is important to emphasize that it is possible and necessary to sensitize the actors continuously and systematically about the Anchor Theme, which can facilitate ongoing collaboration. A consistent dialogue on the motivating theme (anchor, cause) is, itself, the cause and the effect of the partnership. Parties become partners because of the anchor theme and, by treating it within the scope of action (like a challenging and **educational** activity for all the parties involved), the partners consolidate their alliances. This point links the issue of the anchor theme to the governance element, since the existence of spaces and processes of participation and communication can strengthen, bring together, and articulate the actors around the identification and explanation of common interests.

In the words of the Participant 1, we have a synthesis of a fundamental finding about the anchor theme: cross-sector partnerships, for multiple reasons, happen in situations of dynamic and unstable **equilibriums**.

“Many scholars and to some extent large segments of the third sector seem to look upon these alliances as if they were formed or constituted in a structure like **fire and sword**, stable, **perfect**, enduring and predictable. We could draw from our experiences that show that things don’t happen in this way. Recognizing these dynamics and a scene of turbul-

ence and uncertainty shows that links are necessary between the sectors, which constantly flow toward and away from each other.”

Equilibrium, in these circumstances, will always be dynamic and must be achieved every time by volunteers and a different composition of input of the partners. It is also unstable, because any given partner is **repositioning** himself all the time within his sector and the community at large. An important finding is that the partners are not absolute entities, but mutable beings; they are constantly changing and the forms of being present also vary. It is not a consolidated process, but one with rules and identities that construct themselves all the time. This statement does not deny the existence of a **stable core** that is anchored to the cause (hence the notion of an anchor theme) and to the other elements examined and it even assumes this. However, attention to this point of the dynamic equilibrium qualifies tri-sectorial efforts.

Participant 2 synthesizes this point:

“This convergence toward the anchor theme is not a rule and isn’t shared to the same extent and direction by all the partners involved. But this doesn’t seem to be an impediment for the establishment of possible partnerships. The conjugation and incorporation of the theme can be constructed in the development of the project itself, in other words, in performing the task that one or more institutions or organizations propose to carry out. The cause or common goal may not be the initial trigger, but it can suffer changes in how it is seen by one party so as to seduce or arouse enough interest to become the essential mobilizing element of the action of all.”

A second point present since the first meeting and one that took form during the research process as one of the structuring elements of the answer concerns the recognition, respect, and otherness categories. The first dimension of recognition refers to knowledge of each partner, which often means to overcome pre-notions and pre-concepts and to seek to understand (and accept) the specificities of each actor. Recognition is the primary element for creating alliances and means considering the uniqueness of each partner, their logical rationalities, timing and specific characteristics. It is a pre-condition for dialogue and it is based on mutual respect and on willingness to build something together. Recognition also presupposes a pragmatic dimension, i.e., identifying the interests of each partner, to establish the links of each one with the alliance project. Without this care, the partnership will exist only to fulfill a schedule but will neither use the full potential of all partners, nor create synergy and transformation.

It is obvious and necessary to know (recognize and respect) stories, pathways, dreams, visions, and the values of the com-

munities and of the various actors and authors involved in the initiatives and undertakings. To be successful, the alliance and partnership must be based on what the other party knows, on the other parties’ desire, on the recognition of the legitimacy of the others’ interests. It is not **to win over** the other parties, but to see beyond.

The group stressed that not only recognizing what binds the partners is important, but also what separates them. In the words of participant 1,

“In the construction of a tri-sector effort, respect cannot be understood as a subservient attitude or approach to situations, fatalistic conditionalities, or academic activity (which requires withdrawal). It is mainly an occasion to establish new pacts, alliances, understandings and reassurance and to consolidate commitments and create new initiatives.”

However, one cannot assume that this recognition process is conducted naturally and with no arguing. Here, as a core point, we have the ideological barriers and blocking that appeared clearly in two of the analyzed programs. The entities are not neutral; they are situated in different social fields and carry the undeniable weight of their ideological positions.

One condition to recognize and respect the other party is self-recognition of the subjects themselves regarding their own particularities, which involves certain basic tensions.

Another point pertaining to the recognition theme and that was present throughout the discussions is the tension between scale and depth, which polarizes government and companies, on one hand, and NGOs, on the other. The government has scale to deal with the problem and the NGOs have the proximity and the ability to recognize the time required for in-depth work. However, government is not seen as an arena for creating social technologies, this being the domain of NGOs. The State is seen as rigid, whereas flexibility is attributed to private-sector organizations. To see the world from such restricting polarities is limiting, but once these are understood as analytical categories, the flexibility vs. rigidity dichotomy helps one to think about cross-sector relationships and, especially, about the recognition issue. The group observed that often the NGOs, a private-sector space, promote the joining of different levels of government, enabling greater interaction between different points of government programs and activities. In other words, the actions of one of the private partners can be so strong in the municipalities in which it operates that it can often replace functions of the public administration, boosting planning and management strategies. This means that boundaries are often fluid, its being impossible to delimit them with a thin brush: they are like blots with overlapping zones.

The idea here is to recognize the goals and different rationalities of the several actors and to emphasize the need to constantly make requirements and principles compatible. This

is an important ongoing activity for establishing and maintaining the partnerships and alliances. The tension between the different logics and rationalities of the actors is structuring and appears in several dimensions, even in the way of measuring results. Do statements or numbers capture the changes better? Probably both, but the polarity has been widely used by the group to identify tensions in partnerships involving companies, the government and civil society.

The central aspect of this question is the fragility of the financial and political sustainability of the partnership and the project due to recognition problems or barriers. What might the challenges be? For the NGOs, it is the issue of political and financial sustainability. For the public sector, the central question is the regulatory framework of the relation between the State and civil society; and for the companies, it is the difficulty of getting involved with areas other than the company's business. This concerns the difficulty of allowing the discourse about the cause to enter the company and hold a dialogue with the business. Companies want lines of action that are mainly related to the company business. For the NGOs, it is easier to achieve greater cohesion around causes, but more difficult to turn them into projects (difficulty conducting and managing projects). The public administration suffers from dispersion, cross-sectorial work is not practiced and there are cohesion difficulties among the different spheres of power.

In this movement of opposition of different logics, the recognition of the other corroborates self-recognition and vice versa. This in itself provides favorable elements for learning the existing potentialities, limitations and needs of partnerships. It is no trivial effort to get this recognition and to render compatible the different logics, paces and processes. Some statements explain this point:

"It isn't the style of a business organization to wait for everybody, to find time to be able to solve things. No, you have targets to meet and you have deadlines" (Participant 4).

"Both private companies and the government seek to impose their logic on the NGOs and also on each other" (Participant 1).

"There are no observed correspondences between the logics, paces, expectations and interests that characterize the business sector, the public sector and the civil society organizations. Each one of these partners operates with its own characteristics and also engages in a very particular way with the project. We identify here a relation with the action dynamics of each of these partners that must be understood and taken into account, but also made compatible with the required dynamics, in order to accomplish the project properly" (Participant 5).

However, the differences can be enriching. According to Participant 2,

"This diversity is not a limiting factor; to the contrary, it is stimulating and positive because it opens spaces for collective constructions and encourages learning among the individuals involved. The benefits are collective."

The third structuring element of the answer is governance. In the reflections of the group, the term "governance" was used primarily as a form of **poetic license** and reflected a certain analogy (proximity) with the theme of "corporate governance." The group understood that the way in which "tri-sector partners" make their particular and collective decisions (respect for the agreed object) was an axial element of the process. Although related and in some aspects overlapping, the dimensions of recognition and governance can be analytically distinct; this furthers a better understanding of the elements found in each one of them. Recognition and governance are interwoven; the structures and processes of governance can enhance and strengthen recognition and respect among the actors of tri-sector collaborations. Regarding the governance dimension, one must deal with the theme and the need for ongoing pursuit of financial and political sustainability. During our work, this was a recurring theme. The governance structures are important pillars for the sustainability of projects and interventions.

In our discussions, we found that several aspects of a previous element (recognition) were repeated here (knowledge, alliances, commitment, etc.) We identified, for example, that in many of our deliberations, aspects such as confidence (gained in the course of accomplishments), transparency and respect could effectively replace the usual need for "formal decision structures" (committees, boards, etc.). Relations of trust among the partners favor interaction and enables faster and more consensual joint decision-making, as well as greater willingness to cooperate.

However, if trust is not given in advance and is not based primarily on knowledge and personal affections, the effectiveness of alliances and partnerships depends on structures, decision-making and planning, deliberations of a new kind that enable one to update pacts, produce recognition, institutionalize processes and functions, and coordinate cooperative actions among organs and between them and the community. The reason for new spaces and of the need for a form of governance refers to the pursuit of creation and expansion of the "areas" of convergence among the allies in terms of their interests, perceptions and shared goals.

The relationship between the different and highly complex partners, with different backgrounds, interests and mandates, requires new and not yet constructed governance structures:

"Through from the beginning of the partnership all the actors have been involved in the activ-

ities proposed by the coordinators and meet every six months for planning and evaluation, there are always questions leading to the belief that there was no proper ownership, of one or another partner, of the strategies and the contents used” (Participant 5).

Another point emphasized by the group regarding governance concerned the need to expand interactions among the partners. Communication plays a key role here.

“We must develop constant communication. Management is not the only concern. If you don’t communicate, if this network doesn’t communicate, the project will die. And it is gaining magnitude. We have to create a way to train people to multiply the project” (Participant 4).

The need to create and dynamize the communication and information mechanisms, which can mean the life or death of a partnership, was evident to the group.

In the collectively designed definition,

“**Governance** presupposes the construction of a cooperation system among the three sectors, based on the identification of goals and common interests. By recognizing the differences and virtues of each one of the actors involved and of the institution, and through a relationship of trust and respect, it is possible to establish pacts and to define the rights of each partner regarding decisions, responsibilities and roles, and the processes and paces of the alliance.”

The governance structures are the rules, agreements and definition of principles and conditions that govern a partnership. Again, in the case of the One Million Cisterns Program, it was pointed out that it would be difficult to run it under government rules and norms, which often kept the program from working. One emphasized issue was the difference in flexibility between using Febraban resources and government funds, the stiffness and difficulty of the public administration being a hindrance, given the “controllers’ excessive control.” The controls and audits prohibit spending resources on important activities for the project (phone bill, social security contributions, payment of staff), making it difficult to manage.

The fourth key element was management. Although recognized for its importance, management issues were dealt with less extensively. Obviously management is somehow derived from and even subject to the previous three elements. It was felt that collaboration and cooperation (joint labor) among the partners is key and that they are dependent on the aforementioned elements, but in their implementation they contribute

greatly to consolidating these elements and the constituent dimensions of governance and recognition.

As for management, which reflects governance in a practical and operational way, the group identified the importance for tri-sector efforts of **accountability** mechanisms and management accountability as alliance strengthening factors. A key factor for implementing **accountability** mechanisms is having permanent and participative monitoring and evaluation systems. In the formulation of the group,

“**Management** is the executive level of the projects or initiative and of the partnerships that are responsible for the administration of the actions foreseen in the planning. In this management model it is necessary to establish a permanent dialogue with the governance arenas and processes. This dialogue must be based on an ethical and transparent relationship, guided by public interest. To be effective and efficient, management processes must ensure communication and cooperation strategies among the various partners.”

It is important to highlight the weak presence of management in the group discussions, although all the participants recognized its importance and relevance, so much so that it was considered as a specific element of the answer to the research question.

An overall theme of the four elements is leadership. According to the group’s formulation, a fragile point – and, paradoxically, also a strong point – of partnerships is that they are focused on people. Despite all the institutionalization, people remain the most important factor for determining the directions of a partnership. There is no way to do without the people, because they actually can make a difference and make things work. In the real world, there is no bureaucracy that is so virtuous that it can do without people. The group found that leadership is fundamental for partnerships, which must be driven constantly, carried forward with zeal and dedication by the people who make it work beyond the institutions. However, although the group recognizes the role of leadership, it does not see it along the lines of caudillos, messiahs, heroes or great commanders. It is a leadership whose characteristics are more along the lines of a *puxador de samba* [leading voice in singing samba] (such as Jamelão), in the words of Participant 1, a person who promotes growth, who brings in new partners, who becomes successful when his/her presence becomes at last dispensable. Good leadership must create new leaderships and enrich them throughout the process. The challenge is that in Brazil leadership is still linked to authoritarianism and equated to charismatic leaders with populist traits. It is important to note that leadership does not merely concern focusing on the individual’s attributes; it requires examining leadership and other actors in the interactions established in the action of leadership.

One noteworthy point on leadership is that synergy and involvement only happen if it is a strategic element of the partnership, if there is someone to do exclusively or especially this, to be the “lead singer,” to dedicate him(her)self to articulating the actors and strengthening joint actions. It is a vision of solidary leadership, focused on the action and rather than on the individual. Leadership takes on the role of articulation, dialogue and persuasion of other people and institutions in favor of the cause. The role of leadership is one of articulating people and institutions for a cause.

For all the parties involved, it was clear that the establishment of alliances and partnerships is complex and difficult, requiring ongoing persuasion, articulation, tolerance and time. The themes of power, disputes, tensions and conflicts found in any partnership were also discussed. These issues permeate the entire process, from the establishment to the maintenance of partnerships and they have different strengths during the course of the process, depending on the context and the nature or type of action that is the object of the partnership and on the structures and governance processes that are available.

One aspect that brings up the theme is the constant risk of the project being appropriated by other agendas, because of interests and priorities of the other sectors directly involved (or not) in the partnership. On the other hand, the emergence of initiatives, i.e., the founding moment of the partnerships and collaborations, is a major dimension for understanding the tri-sectorial practices. At that moment, the personal dimension and the roles of the individuals who have undertaken the task of forming and starting the collaborative action have a relevant weight.

We see that tri-sector partnerships remain, even for the experienced individuals with broad experience of social management investigated in this study, a highly complex effort, permeated with challenges, risks and dilemmas in the Brazilian sociopolitical reality. This finding indicates not only that new studies about different tri-sector articulations must advance regarding the production of knowledge in social management, but also that investigative practices such as *Cooperative Inquiry* are an important resource for furthering the understanding of the complexity that involves subjects in their social management “actions and reflections.”

7. FINAL THOUGHTS

The Tri-Sector partnerships analyzed start without clear proposals of construction and implementation of the interactions between the actors; there is much more a concern with managing programs and projects in themselves and with the intervention methodologies designed to deal with social problems. The actors involved in the articulation of these initiatives developed methods extensively designed and tested for intervening in social reality, but these did not consider the development of strategies and methodologies

for Tri-Sector Partnerships. Even so, progress was made in the interaction forms, much more related to the very praxis of the articulations than to the actions deliberated and designed for this purpose, which were expressed in so far as requirements related to the management of programs and the analyzed project appeared.

What seems to carry more weight regarding the failure to schedule and develop strategies for Tri-Sector Partnerships is the acknowledgment that this phenomenon is relatively new to the agenda of the actors involved in these Social Entrepreneurship initiatives, and in the literature on the subject. Like the polysemic understanding found in the literature on partnerships and their implications for Social Management, the participants of the research have different understandings, overlapping or opposed concepts about the theme and they reinforce different dimensions of what is a collaborative relationship and especially a Tri-Sectorial Partnership in the dynamics of Social Entrepreneurship. However, these understandings, which lead to different expectations, do not keep the actors from engaging in tri-sectorial collaborative practices.

Although the collaboration strategies had not been developed previously, governance mechanisms for these interactions arose from the process as the analyzed Tri-Sectorial Partnerships developed. Instead of criticizing the lack of early planning of the partnerships, a position that is dear to technically oriented analytical views of the phenomenon, it seems to be relevant to recognize that, in the dynamics of social action, “sailing is done sailing,” i.e., partnerships are built by constructing partnerships. This does not imply ignoring the governance processes established throughout the development pathway of Tri-Sectorial Partnerships. On the contrary, these instances of relations and conflict equalization become stronger and more relevant precisely because of recurrent collaborative interactions among the actors. Furthermore, the temporal evolution of the collaborative relationships analyzed in the research indicates that not only a more precise understanding of the other actors involved in the partnership happens throughout the relationship process, as one would expect, but also that through these interactions the actors develop new insights on their own organizations, especially regarding their capacities and limitations.

Although social project partnerships appear as a research problem and are a relatively recent phenomenon in the literature and the formal strategies of organizations, their *praxis* among the actors is not as new. The background of the respondents indicates that collaborative articulations are not a novel experience for them, as they have been involved in social interventions partnerships for some time and in general have a mature career in the management of social projects. However, the actors involved in the research show resistance and reluctance to the partnerships themselves, as well as to their implications and consequences for the Social Entrepreneurship field.

In these debates, what became prominent, on one hand, was a desire to construct partnerships, many of them driven by the

need, conscious or not, explicit or not, to capture resources. On the other hand, there was fear of eventually incorporating to an excessive extent the rationality and **ethos** of the actors from other sectors involved in the collaboration, mischaracterizing their organizations' identity. Many of the arguments of the actors involved in the global articulation of the Tri-Sector Partnerships who were interviewed arose from the assumptions of the "Resource Dependent Platform", as per Selsky and Parker (2005), i.e., they point out their importance in terms of the complementarity of the actors' resources.

However, because it is a theme permeated by idealizations and by the construction of politically correct discourses, a backdrop is added to these interactions, the awareness of the actors and their commitment to action in dealing with social problems, referring to the assumptions of the "Social Issues Platform", as Selsky and Parker (2005) understood well. Thus, the research participants often referred to their commitment and history of struggles in the programmatic areas of the analyzed programs and projects, especially in the case of CSOs and the State, and to their social responsibility, among the market actors, to justify the construction of the partnerships. These references must be understood as being derived from the very integration of the actors within socially constructed realities, in which the rationality of action is permeated and intersected simultaneously by self-interest and altruism, in a non-excluding and/or dichotomic form.

Several actors believe also that the dynamics of Social Entrepreneurship should operate today using practices not based on ideological conflicts, but on consensus and collaborations, reproducing the social construction of the discourse referred to, giving to Tri-Sectorial Partnerships the status of a new dimension of relationship among the actors from the civil society, the State and the market in the public sphere. From this perspective, modernity in social policies and projects lies in the re-foundation of the public sphere on a collaborative basis, the Tri-Sectorial Partnerships being one of the pillars of this movement. Among the participants of this research study, there seems to be agreement as to the need to converge efforts for the strengthening of a democratic and plural public sphere, since it carries in itself ideas considered politically correct and proper for the modernization of the social projects, such as the expansion of popular participation in the management of social projects. However, conflicts and disputes remain in the Tri-Sector Partnerships, including those of an ideological nature, opening the possibility of reaching an understanding of the public sphere guided not only by extended collaboration and consensus, but also by notions of the convergence of actors. However, all of this arises intersected simultaneously by conflicts and dissonances.

The actors involved in the research demonstrate experience in the construction of a new field of shared collaborative management in the initiatives of Social Entrepreneurship, sometimes expressing fear and resistance to the transformation

of their own organizations and practices, sometimes expressing the desire to work with the new realities and perspectives of social intervention, seen as desirable for effective and appropriate management of social projects.

As the course of interactions among the partners and transformation of the roles are progressing, along with the conflicts between rationalities and the typical actions of civil society, State and companies begin to manifest an interest in the issue. The participants associate with Tri-Sector Partnerships not only the role of developing more efficient, effective, positive and impact generating forms of intervention for social projects and policies, but also the construction of more advanced forms of dialogue and propositional interaction, in order to further democratic socialization in the public sphere and the exercise of citizenship rights.

The literature on tri-sector partnerships, very sparse and especially produced by agencies that promote development, focuses excessively on the mechanisms of partnership construction, especially through approaches centered on interpersonal relations of cooperation among representative of the State, civil society and the market. Tri-sector Partnerships have acquired a central place in the discourse on fighting social problems in different regions of the world. In the mass media, support for this kind of partnership has taken on the aura of political correctness. However, there are differences between good intentions, and plans and concrete actions taken by effective partnerships able to generate desirable results. Understanding this mismatch is not only an important advancement toward the modernization of social management, but also a promising research agenda in the field of Social Entrepreneurship studies.

For the parties involved with the modernization of intervention in social problems to make progress in constructing tri-sectorial partnerships, it is crucial not to lose sight of the challenges that this collaborative practice brings to Social Entrepreneurship. This entire picture poses new challenges to research on social management, reinforcing the importance of research agendas on Tri-Sectorial Partnerships advancing both in Brazilian and in international scientific production. New studies, expanding the number of analyzed experiences in order to compare political and socioeconomic realities in each researched country or region, as well as considering the evolution of the concrete experiences of Tri-Sector Partnerships over time, may extend the discussion of these collaborative practices. Later studies on this perspective may overcome the inherent limitations of the research that led to this article, expanding it and generating new findings about Tri-Sectorial Partnerships in Social Entrepreneurship initiatives. We invite readers to further this research agenda, especially through the use of research strategies guided by the acknowledgment of the value of knowledge derived from Social Entrepreneurship *praxis*, such as what was learned via the presented Circles of Action and Reflection. ♦

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ABSTRACT

Tri-sector partnerships in social entrepreneurship: discourse and practice of the actors from the circles of action and reflection

This article discusses the construction of tri-sector partnerships in three projects conducted in Brazil in different fields of intervention of public policy (access to water, basic education and performance of boards of rights of children and adolescents). Collaborative articulations involving the players from three sectors (the State, civil society and the market) are practices that are little studied in the Brazilian and even in the international context, as tri-sector partnerships are rare, despite the proliferation of lines of discourse in support of alliances between governments and civil society or between companies and NGOs in the management of public policy. As a research strategy, this study resorted to cooperative inquiry, a method that involves breaking down the boundaries between the subjects and the objects of the analysis. Besides working toward a better understanding of the challenges of building tri-sector partnerships in the Brazilian context, the article also tries to show the relevance to public policy studies of investigative methods based on the subjects studied, as a means of developing an understanding of the practices, lines of discourse and dilemmas linked to social action in social programs.

Keywords: cross sector partnerships, public policy, circles of action and reflection, Non-Governmental Organizations.

RESUMEN

Alianzas trisectoriales en el emprendedurismo social: discurso y práctica de los actores a partir de círculos de acción y reflexión

En este artículo se discute la construcción de las llamadas Alianzas Trisectoriales, en tres proyectos desarrollados en Brasil, de diferentes áreas temáticas de intervención en políticas públicas (acceso al agua, educación básica y actuación de consejos de derechos del niño y del adolescente). Las articulaciones de colaboración que incluyen simultáneamente actores de los llamados tres sectores (Estado, sociedad civil y mercado) son prácticas poco estudiadas en el contexto brasileño y también en el internacional, dado que alianzas de carácter trisectorial son poco frecuentes, a pesar de la proliferación de discursos de apoyo a las alianzas entre gobiernos y sociedad civil o entre organizaciones no gubernamentales y empresas en la gestión de políticas públicas. Como estrategia de investigación, se utilizó el *Cooperative Inquiry*, método que presupone la ruptura de fronteras entre sujetos y objetos de análisis, muchas veces constituidos por otros sujetos vinculados a la acción. Además del avance en la comprensión de los desafíos de la construcción de alianzas trisectoriales en la realidad brasileña, se pretende también demostrar la relevancia, para los estudios en gestión social, de métodos investigativos fundamentados en el protagonismo de los sujetos estudiados, como una forma de avanzar hacia la comprensión de prácticas, discursos y dilemas relacionados con la acción social en programas sociales.

Palabras clave: alianzas trisectoriales, políticas públicas, círculos de acción y reflexión, organizaciones no gubernamentales.