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**Inter-Religious Dialogue to Improve
Brazilian Education**

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Introduction

Brazil, with its continental dimensions, is the largest country in South America. According to 2007 official statistics (IBGE Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística) it has a population of 184 million, 81.25% concentrated in urban regions.

The country possesses considerable amounts of natural riches such as minerals and petroleum, among others. It has a strong and diversified industry producing and processing a large variety of goods from foods to automobiles and electronics, making it the 10th largest economy in the world. Nevertheless, the majority of the population does not have access to such results, because of the great concentration of income in a small part of the population.

Economic and social data show a large disequilibrium between the 5 regions of the country. The North and Northeast regions having the worst indicators and the South and Southeast the best.

These economic and social differences even appear in the richest cities where in the suburban areas it is possible to find pockets of poverty.

In recent years, compensatory policies have been implemented with success, reducing significantly the poverty in the whole country. Yet, in spite of these policies there is still a long way to go.

The Educational Environment

The educational environment in Brazil reflects the situation previously mentioned, and indicates 3 main problems to solve: access, academic achievement and attainment. In the Basic Education (which encompasses early childhood education to high school). There are 55.9 million students enrolled, of which 48.5 million are studying in 168,400 public schools.

The majority of these students face a big challenge progressing in a normal academic sequence from early childhood education until university. It is clearer when we compare the data from the National Basic Education Census and the results of the National Basic Education Evaluation System SAEB.

Tests in Portuguese and Mathematics applied every two years in the final grades of primary, elementary and high school show that a number of students are not able to deal with the contents required in their academic levels. It is not surprising, then, that Brazil was ranked among the last 3 countries on the international exam called PISA.

This can be attributed to a set of factors such as teacher training and qualification, school management, school infrastructure, low competence of educational systems, student's social and economic backgrounds and family-school involvement. These issues, however, will not be discussed in this paper. It is important, although, to highlight the last one - family-school involvement, which is the focus of the Mobilization Plan of Christian Churches for Education.

One consequence of low quality education and academic achievement is the high failure rates in all grade levels, especially in primary education (average of 27% in 2005). When a student repeats many times, he ends up abandoning school before concluding his studies, because of frustration or because he has to work to help support his family.

The following table compares two rates in each educational grade from 1995 to 2006;

Gross attendance rate – total enrollment in the grade divided by the total of the population in the age group in the theoretical age to be studying in that grade.

Net attendance rate – total enrollment of students in the theoretical age studying in the grade divided by the total of population in that age group.

Gross and Net Attendance rates - Brasil 1995/2006

Year	Early Childhood education (4 - 6 years old)		Elementary School (7-14 years old)		High School years (15-17 old)		Higher Education (18 -24 year old)	
	Gross	Net	Gross	Net	Gross	Net	Gross	Net
1995	30.8	25.1	109.3	85.4	47.0	22.1	9.4	5.8
2000	46.4	38.7	149.7	90.3	73.0	34.4	12.3	7.3
2001	63.9	57.1	121.3	93.1	73.9	36.9	15.1	8.9
2002	64.9	58.4	120.8	93.7	75.9	40.0	16.6	9.8
2003	66.6	59.9	119.3	93.8	81.1	43.1	18.6	10.6
2004	67.1	60.8	117.6	93.8	81.4	44.4	18.6	10.5
2005	68.6	62.9	117.1	94.4	80.7	45.3	19.9	11.2
2006	70.2	64.8	116.2	94.8	82.2	47.1	22.6	12.6

Source: IBGE - Pnad's 1995, 2001 a 2006; Elaborated by MEC/Inep/DTDIE.

Note: Exclusive rural population: RO, AC, AM, RR, PA and AP - 1995 and 2001-2003.

Let us take as an example Elementary School. It is expected that the students who are studying in that grade are in the age group of 7-14 years old. The gross attendance rate compares the total enrollment in Elementary School with the total population in that age group. The net attendance rate shows the enrollment of students in the age group 7-14 years old divided by the total population in the age group 7-14 years old.

Comparing the two rates it is possible to see the age group distortion – the rate of students which are progressing in a normal school flow and the students who are repeating. This table also shows that Brazil has been progressing throughout the years (comparing the period 1995-2006), but strong efforts are still needed to correct the school flow, combat repetition, avoid evasion and promote students to conclude their academic trajectory, with a high level quality of education.

As a consequence of the situation shown above, the average years studied by the Brazilian population was 7.2 years in 2006, even considering that 8 years of Elementary School is compulsory by law. The next table shows that the number of years studied are lesser among poorer people, formed by black, mulatos and indigenous.

Average of Years Studied - 2005			
Colour/race	15-29 years old	30-49 years old	50 years old or more
Asiatic	10.9	11.5	8.2
White	9.2	8.3	5.6
Indigenous	7.4	6.3	3.4
Mulato	7.5	6.0	3.2
Black	7.8	6.5	3.5
SEX			
Female	8.6	7.5	4.5
Male	8.0	7.0	4.8

Source: IBGE – Pnad 2005; Elaborated by MEC/Inep/DTDIE.

PDE - Plan for the Development of Education

To face these challenges and reverse the situation, an Education Development Plan – PDE – was launched in 2007.

Containing more than 40 programs covering all levels of education – from early childhood to graduate education – it aims to change the quality of Brazilian education by 2022 (the goal determined by the Ministry of Education).

The Plan for the Development of Education, which aims at developing the autonomy of the self, that is, developing skills that make individuals capable of adopting a critical and creative attitude to the world. Formal public education is the State's responsibility in this broader social effort that does not only unfold at public schools, but has its place in the family, in the community and in all forms of interaction in which individuals participate.

Furthermore, the objective of the national educational policy must be in accordance with the fundamental objectives of the Republic itself, as per the Federal Constitution of 1988: to build a free and fair society bound by ties of solidarity; to ensure national development; to eradicate poverty and marginalization, to reduce social and regional inequalities and to promote the well-being of all, without prejudice of origin, race, sex, color, age and any other forms of discrimination. A free and just society, based on solidarity, cannot be built without an education based on democratic and egalitarian principles, shaped by the building of individual autonomy, through inclusion and respect for diversity. The only possible way to ensure national development is to upgrade education to the level of structural axis of State action so as to maximize its effectiveness. Reducing social and regional inequality means equalization of the opportunity to gain access to quality education. Moreover, it requires us to think about the stages, categories and educational levels not only in its unity, but also from the perspective of the necessary links between education and the ordinance of the territory and economic and social development. This is the only way to guarantee to each and all the right to learn according to one's capabilities and willingness.

As the challenge was launched, it was necessary to answer some fundamental questions, in order to set up a social mobilization project, and to guarantee that the population would support

it:

How a plan or program could be understood and supported by society?

How to mobilize and commit leaders to the goals proposed by the plan?

How to articulate public administration concerns needs with society concerns?

It was clear that education had been gaining importance among leaders in most society segments. Media frequently reflects the opinion and statements of those leaders stressing that Brazilian education quality had to be improved urgently.

So, the point was to select and prioritize some sectors of civil society and ask for their support to carry out the message that a quality education is a crucial aspect in guaranteeing human rights as a passport to build a more democratic, supportive and equal country.

To motivate and invite them to participate in the mobilization, the Ministry of Education has been establishing a dialog with a number of civil society leaders.

Families which have children studying in public school are the priority aim.

Families as the main public to mobilize

There are many studies pointing the positive impact in a student's academic achievement when families are involved. A research from Harvard Graduate School of Education (2006) showed the importance of parents' involvement in their child's education, especially in:

- Attitudes, values and practices related to their child's education.
- Family-School involvement – family relationship formal and informal connections between family, the school team and the school environment (communication, events, meetings etc.).
- Co-Responsibility for their children academic achievement

Some results of family-school involvement were: the improvement in students' reading and language capabilities, increased motivation, and the development of pro-social behaviors, among others abilities.

Unfortunately, there are few examples in Brazil of parents' involvement in their child's education, especially among students of public schools.

Their behavior concerning school and teachers can be described as distant. Many times they even do not know their child's teachers. There are many reasons to explain the low family-school involvement in Brazil. Many adults have to work long hours and, normally live far from their jobs, they spend 10-12 hours per day away from home. At the end of the day, they are tired and are often not open to talk with their children about school, to ask them about the home activities demanded by the teachers, nor to ask them to develop extra activities.

Beyond that, many parents have never studied or concluded their studies. Many times, when asked why they do not participate in their child's education, they complain that they are called to go to school to receive bad news about their child's performance or behavior. Rarely are there the opportunities to establish a dialog with the teachers about their doubts, demands and expectations.

Perhaps the most important aspect in explaining the low involvement between family and school, especially among the poorest families, is that they do not see their child's education as a right but as a privilege. They do not discuss the quality of academic achievement their child is receiving.

In such context the Minister of Education considered as a duty of public administration and civil society leaders to transmit to these families the message that the Government (Federal, State and Municipality) has to provide high quality education for all Brazilians. And that everybody has a claim to this right.

To complete this mission, the Ministry of Education is looking for the support and participation of society in a national social mobilization program to raise the quality of education. The first segment invited to participate were the Christian Churches, recognizing the important role they can perform in this project.

First, because human rights defense such as rights to shelter, health, education, information, and leisure is so present in the Christian churches' social message and in the religious field where there is a strong commitment to justice and equality. Second, Christian Churches have a recognized authority and acceptance among the people.

The Brazilian religious field is comprised of a number of denominations. Around 70% of the population declare themselves catholic. Among the remaining 30%, 8% declare themselves non-religious, the rest are divided into various subgroups, the largest being evangelicals at around 15%, divided between pentecostals and neo-pentecostals and only 4% making up the traditional protestant groups.

Considering this fragmentation, the first step of the dialogue between the ministry of Education and the Christian Churches was to bring together the leaders of the entities

CONIC – National Christian Churches Council, which encompasses the Catholic Church and the traditional protestant groups, and CLAI - Latin America Churches Council, whose members are the tradicional protestant groups and a few Pentecostal entities. Both of them aim to promote the unification of the church in Brazil, through programs and initiatives to strengthen the cooperation among themselves and other ecumenic organizations.

They recognize that it is possible to deepen the dialogue among the different Christian denominations, through actions capable of breaking barriers and frontiers in order to promote dignity, human rights and duties. In this context, education is a principal issue stated by the churches to come together in a comun project to mobilize families and communities.

In order to set up the project, these entities created a taskforce which elaborated an Action Plan defining in details how, where, when and with whom to work. The aim was “a quality educaton as a right for all.”

The second step was to spread the education mobilization project to the other religious groups, which is in fact happenning. Nowadays a number of religious denominations are already participating in the project.

The realization of this plan is an example of the real possibility of establishing a permanent public campaign as an exercise of dialogue, tolerance and a way to overcome differences among Christian churches. The leaders of the mobilization project highlight that such colaboration involving government, churches and civil society working together is a unique and successful example.

The Christian Churches Mobilization Plan

The framework of the Christian Churches Mobilization Plan is a set of 28 directives which represent good practices adopted by public schools whose students have had high socres on national evaluation exams in elementary education. To establish learning as a focus; to provide literacy schooling to children of 8 years of age at the latest; to monitor each student individually in the school network; to counter failing grades with recovery studies or partial progression; to fight school dropout; to lengthen the school day; to strengthen educational inclusion for the handicapped; to promote early childhood education; to implement educational programs and plans for career, jobs and salaries for education professionals; to value the merits of education staff; to set clear rules that take into account merit and performance to appoint or dismiss school headmasters; to encourage participative management in the school network; to stimulate and support school boards are some of these directives. They were supported by empirical evidence that validated them.

For each of these directives, actions have been suggested which could be developed in the scope of the church and the communities where it works. It was also defined that, even acting alone, respecting its culture and practice, the message and the main materials (such as folders, pamphlet etc.) should have to be created togheter, in order to guarantee a unit of communication and language.

The basic orientation for this mobilization is contained in an extensive and detailed document which aims to give orientation to priests, pastors and leaders about its importance (why, when, how and where)

To talk and reflect with the people of their churches about the main issues that promote improving quality education, so they must be aware of the situation and the social commitment, and the right of everyone to a quality education.

- To emphasize the role of each one in their community, mobilizing friends, neighbors, social leaders, and community organizations, among others.

- To use the moments with the community to speak about the importance of the family in education. They need to show how a good education can influence the possibilities for a better future.
- To distribute pamphlets, folders etc. disseminating ways and examples of how families can be involved in their child's education.
- To propose to school principals, teachers and educational authorities measures and solutions to improve educational performance in the schools.
- To promote in their field of action, activities of strengthening education, such as campaigns of awareness, and voluntary work in community and schools.

Instruments of the Plan of Mobilization:

Pamphlets for the families containing hints about their responsibilities at home and with the school, instructing them about the importance of being involved in their child's education.

A manual for mobilization with information about the Brazilian educational environment and education performance data, as well as strategies to orient their work among the families and the communities.

Other documents, such as posters for outdoor signs, bus door, train door, videos, broadsides, displays, plastic bags etc., with messages reinforcing the importance of the society and the families in the national effort to improve the quality of education.

Conclusion

The Task Force – GT - became a permanent coordination and articulation in the implementation of the Christian Churches Mobilization Plan for Education. It aims, to expand the number of churches involved, as well as other agents like education councils, local educational authorities, teacher unions. Months since the launching of the project, representatives of Christian churches that are members of the three entities that initiated the mobilization have joined the task force. While the work of joint articulation deepens and barriers to the inter-religious dialogue grow, it is possible to identify a better understanding about the need to spread the movement to other religious segments and to civil society representatives. It is clear that, more important than the differences between churches is to find a common ground which allows the ability to work together for a common cause. Which is the improvement of education for all to promote citizenship and a more democratic, fair and equal society and which is a great opportunity to promote the interreligious dialog.

Actually, education is a theme which has been capable to unite the diverse denominations, exceeding the existing differences among them. The solidarity has been the tone of the joint mobilization, growing the understanding of what is necessary to seek the addition of other denominations outside the Christian sphere.

It is also important to mention the recognition of the need to invite to participate in the Mobilization Plan for Education other actors outside of the religious segment. The events programmed for the launching of the Plan of Mobilization in different states already count, in its organization, beyond the churches, with representatives from businesses, liberal professional, municipalities and state educational authorities, NGO's etc.

In the business segment, there are already examples of companies which are developing campaigns to mobilize their employees as well as the families living in the communities where they are located in support of education.