

The role of the third sector in promoting citizenship and tackling social inequalities in the Brazilian context

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ABSTRACT: This work aims to understand the role of the Third Sector in promoting citizenship and addressing social inequality in the Brazilian context. To this end, the terms "Third Sector in the promotion of citizenship" and "social inequality" were addressed from the perspective of the authors listed. The methodology used to prepare this work was a bibliographic review, based on research in books, scientific articles, dissertations, theses, and specialized websites. Based on the research used, it became clear that the Third Sector encompasses a set of private, non-profit institutions dedicated to social welfare. It was established that the sector plays a fundamental role in promoting citizenship and reducing social inequality since the colonial period. Furthermore, it was noted that civil society organizations act in a complementary manner to the State's actions. The Third Sector not only promotes citizenship but also encourages citizen participation, cultivating solidarity and fighting for social justice. It was revealed that the Third Sector faces several challenges in its pursuit of promoting citizenship and combating social inequality in Brazil. To overcome these challenges, it is crucial not only for these organizations to act, but also for the State and society to change their relationship with the sector, recognizing it as a legitimate participant in building a more just society.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Brazil's contemporary context, characterized by significant social inequalities and a lack of public policies in various areas, the Third Sector emerges as a key player in promoting citizenship and reducing social inequalities.

This sector, comprised of non-profit civil society entities such as associations, foundations, NGOs, and institutes, has played an important role in mediating between the State and society, helping to guarantee fundamental rights and inclusion.

of historically marginalized groups.

According to Cunha and Dias (2012), these organizations have the capacity to mobilize financial, human and social resources in a creative and adaptable way, allowing them to carry out effective actions for development. local development and promotion of active citizenship.

Expanding social participation in the public sphere was established as a fundamental principle by the 1988 Federal Constitution, which promoted the leading role of civil society in the creation and implementation of actions aimed at the common good. In this context, the Third Sector began to be seen as a legitimate sphere of citizen participation, emphasizing that creating a more just and equitable society requires collaboration between the government and organized society.

The main objective of this study is to understand the role of the Third Sector in promoting citizenship and addressing social inequality in Brazil. To this end, two specific objectives were established: to identify the contributions of the Third Sector in promoting citizenship and addressing social inequality in Brazil; and to assess the benefits of the Third Sector in promoting citizenship and addressing social inequality in Brazil. Based on these guidelines, we seek to consider the importance of the actions carried out by these institutions, the challenges they face, and the effects they have on communities.

assisted.

By the end of this study, we hope to have a clearer understanding of how the Third Sector promotes citizenship through its initiatives aimed at serving vulnerable populations and addressing social inequality in Brazil. Furthermore, this study is justified by the fact that Third Sector organizations play a fundamental role in implementing public policies that complement the State.

This article is structured in four chapters. Initially, it presents the introduction, creating the contextualization of the theme, research problem, objectives and justification.

The theoretical framework, available in Chapter 2, encompassed sections aimed at supporting the research, presenting the Third Sector in the Brazilian context, the Third Sector in promoting citizenship, the Third Sector in confronting social inequality, and the challenges of the Third Sector in promoting citizenship and confronting social inequality. The methodology highlights the study's methodological procedures.

Chapter 4 highlights the results and discussions, aiming to address the objectives outlined in this study. The final considerations present a summary of the main findings, as well as the limitations of the study and suggestions for future research.

Therefore, the analysis of the role of the Third Sector goes beyond its ability to fill the gaps left by the State; it also takes into account its transformative function and its potential to encourage active citizenship, promoting social empowerment and the democratization of access to fundamental rights.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Next, the views of the authors surveyed on the topic of this work will be presented. In this sense, section 2.1 situates the Third Sector in the Brazilian context; meanwhile, section 2.1 presents the Third Sector in the promotion of citizenship; on the other hand, section 2.2 presents the Third Sector in confronting social inequality; and, finally, section 2.4 sets out the challenges of the Third Sector in promoting citizenship and in confronting social inequality.

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2.1 Third Sector in the Brazilian context

Civil society organizations, better known as the Third Sector, a term used to refer to institutions that do not belong to the State or the market, are legal entities under private law that do not have a profit motive, and, furthermore, act in activities of social interest, such as in demands



humanitarian activities, provision of philanthropic services, and activities that promote citizenship and social inclusion.

Non-profit organizations in the Brazilian context have emerged since colonization and continue to the present day (Landim, 1993, cited by Calegare & Silva Junior, 2009). From this, it can be seen that the Third Sector has been developing philanthropic activities for many years, contributing to Brazilian society in the most diverse areas of activity.

Philanthropic institutions were the first to emerge in Brazil, as the Catholic Church exerted significant influence over social activities at the time. Furthermore, Catholic associations emerged through popular initiative; however, these associations required church authorization to operate (Oliveira, 2005).

Despite criticism directed at the church, it was through the church that social action developed in the health and education sectors emerged in Brazil, such as the work carried out by the Brotherhood of Mercy and the Order of the Society of Jesus.

The Brotherhood of Mercy, also known as Santa Casa de Misericórdia, emerged in the city of São Paulo around 1543, and this philanthropic institution established the first hospitals in the country (Ivamoto, 2004). On the other hand, the Order of the Society of Jesus is considered the first institution to create schools in Brazil, and the State only began to establish schools at the end of the 18th century (Oliveira, 2005).

In addition to the Catholic Church's contribution to the development of the Third Sector, other non-Catholic churches also contributed to the Third Sector. The Presbyterian Church, established in Brazil in 1859, excelled in education and healthcare. Equally noteworthy is the Methodist Church, operating in Brazil since 1835, which also fostered the creation of educational and healthcare institutions. Finally, the Baptist Church, present in Brazil since 1882, is responsible for establishing charitable and educational institutions (Silva, 2024).

Freemasonry also played an important role in promoting philanthropy in Brazil. Through its philosophy, the institution engaged in social initiatives, with a focus on philanthropic and progressive aspects (Irmão, 1994, cited by Oliveira, 2005).

Within the Brazilian state, from 1931 until the 1988 Constitution, philanthropy began to be progressively integrated into government policies. Initially, the state sought to encourage public policies targeting the most vulnerable, incorporating civil society actions into public administration and converting them into parastatal entities. During the Military Regime (1964–1985), this connection was strengthened by a centralizing and controlling perspective, through the formation of broad bureaucratic structures designed to reduce poverty and regional disparities, while maintaining philanthropic action under state oversight.

The enactment of the 1988 Federal Constitution solidified the fundamental principle of increasing public participation in the public sphere, legally recognizing that the State and society share the responsibility to promote the common good. This legal framework enabled the organization and official recognition of the Third Sector in Brazil, enabling its growth in a more structured manner.

and institutionalized.

3

Regarding the legal aspect, the Third Sector had some guidelines for its adequate development.

The first was the State Apparatus Reform Program, which resulted in Law No. 9,637/1998, which regulated Social Organizations (Mendes, 2009). The second, more significant, resulted from the Sixth Round of Political Dialogue organized by the Solidarity Community Council. This led to the enactment of Law No. 9,790/1999, which established Public Interest Civil Society Organizations.

2.2 Third Sector in promoting citizenship

The promotion of citizenship in Brazil has been substantially encouraged as a result of initiatives Third Sector, which encompasses a group of private, non-profit institutions dedicated to social welfare. These organizations—including associations, foundations, social institutions, and civil society entities of public interest—operate in a complementary manner to the State, primarily in the sectors of education, health, social assistance, culture, and community development.

The 1988 Federal Constitution represented a significant milestone in this process, recognizing the importance of civil society in the creation and protection of civil, political, and social rights. Fernandes (1994) emphasizes that Brazil's redemocratization enabled the emergence of a non-state public space, where the Third Sector began to establish itself as a strategic agent in promoting the common good.

The Third Sector acts as an agent of social change, filling the gaps left by the State and fostering the inclusion of groups that have been historically marginalized. According to Cunha and Dias (2012), these organizations have the ability to mobilize financial, human, and social resources in a creative and adaptable manner, which enables them to carry out efficient actions for local development and promotion of active citizenship.

In this scenario, citizenship goes beyond the traditional concept of simply possessing rights, also encompassing social engagement, political participation, and fair access to opportunities. According to Sawaia (2009), practicing citizenship involves not only securing rights but also fighting for human dignity and social justice—aspects that are often present in Third Sector activities.

Furthermore, the Regulatory Framework for Civil Society Organizations (Law No. 13,019/2014) legally consolidated the role of these entities as partners of the State, by establishing rules for entering into partnerships with public authorities and reinforcing mechanisms of social control and transparency (Brazil, 2014). For Mendes (1999), cooperation between the State and the Third Sector constitutes a new model of public governance, based on co-responsibility in the implementation of social policies.

Another relevant point concerns citizenship education. According to Gohn (2011), several third-sector organizations function as informal education spaces, fostering political awareness, training community leaders, and reinforcing democratic values. These actions help strengthen a culture of participation and promote social empowerment.

Overall, the Third Sector has played a significant role in promoting citizenship in Brazil, not only through the provision of social services and initiatives, but also by encouraging citizen participation, fostering solidarity, and pursuing social justice. This sector, while not replacing the role of the State, operates strategically in improving public policies and creating a more democratic and just society.

Social inequality represents one of the main historical obstacles facing Brazil. Characterized by economic disparities, unequal access to public services, and the exclusion of vulnerable communities, this situation demands effective collaboration between the government, the private sector, and civil society.

In this context, the Third Sector has become a fundamental actor in promoting citizenship and reducing



social inequalities, through the work of Third Sector organizations.

According to Fernandes (1994), the Third Sector emerged as a response to the state's inability to fully guarantee fundamental social rights to the population, especially the poorest. With the enactment of the 1988 Federal Constitution, which recognizes society's involvement in the administration of public policies, social organizations received a significant institutional boost, beginning to operate in a more organized manner and with legal support.

According to Tenório (2002), the Third Sector constitutes a democratic and participatory option in combating social exclusion, as it fosters the integration of knowledge and practices aimed at local development and the empowerment of vulnerable communities. The author also emphasizes that these organizations generally create innovative methodologies that are more aligned with the reality of their beneficiaries, reaching areas where state presence is limited.

The Third Sector combats inequality primarily through social initiatives and projects that promote the inclusion of historically marginalized groups. A significant example is the work carried out by institutions such as the Abrinq Foundation and the Pastoral da Criança, which are dedicated to protecting the rights of vulnerable children and adolescents, providing assistance in the areas of health, nutrition, and education. These measures help build social and human capital, essential for breaking the cycle of poverty (IPEA, 2010).

The Third Sector's role should be understood as a complement to government action, not a substitute. According to Silva (2001), it is essential that CSOs' actions be aligned with structural public policies to avoid the fragmentation of social initiatives and ensure lasting impacts. The author emphasizes that the success of these organizations is linked to their ability to mobilize society, create collaborative networks, and politically influence the development of public policies.

The Third Sector plays a fundamental role in the fight against social inequality in Brazil. Its ability to mobilize, connect with communities, and adaptability in implementing initiatives enables it to reach populations and areas beyond the reach of public services. However, to fully harness this potential, it is essential to strengthen the sector's institutions, value public participation, and establish lasting partnerships with the government and the private sector. In this way, the Third Sector helps promote citizenship and social justice in the country.

2.4 Challenges of the Third Sector in promoting citizenship and tackling social inequality

The Third Sector, as noted in the preceding paragraphs, has acted proactively in implementing policies that benefit the less privileged in society. However, the sector faces several challenges that compromise its performance, especially regarding aspects of sustainability, effectiveness and potential influence.

According to Salamon (1999), civil society organizations in Brazil face financial challenges, depend on government funding, and deal with institutional instability. Many of them are not professionalized and lack adequate accountability mechanisms, which undermines the transparency and effectiveness of their actions. However, a gradual process of strengthening and institutionalization of these organizations is evident, in part due to the new legal framework for civil society organizations (Law No. 13,019/2014), which establishes rules for partnerships between the government and CSOs.

Financial dependence is one of the biggest obstacles faced by the Third Sector. Most institutions are maintained through private donations, government partnerships, or financing.



international. The lack of stable resources compromises the continuity of projects and hinders long-term strategic planning. According to Fernandes (1994), many organizations are unable to operate sustainably, making them susceptible to interruptions in their activities and a loss of credibility in society. The lack of consistent funding sources forces many organizations to adjust their agendas to the interests of funders, which can divert them from their original mission.

Another challenge concerns the professionalization of management. Many organizations still lack adequate administrative structures, financial planning, results assessment, and transparency in internal processes. Gohn (2011) points out that, despite the growth in the number and visibility of the Third Sector, a considerable portion of organizations operate informally or in an amateur manner, which complicates access to resources and collaboration. The lack of technical training and competent professionals directly impacts the effectiveness of implemented initiatives.

Furthermore, government bureaucracy poses a significant obstacle to the Third Sector's operations. Establishing partnerships with the government is hampered by excessive legal requirements and slow formalization and accountability processes. Despite the progress brought about by Law No. 13,019/2014, which established the Regulatory Framework for Civil Society Organizations, challenges persist in effectively implementing its instruments. According to IPEA (2019), several organizations face difficulties in meeting legal requirements, which restricts their ability to establish agreements and obtain public funds.

Another obstacle is related to social legitimacy and public trust. Although recognized by several organizations, the Third Sector still faces skepticism from segments of society and the media, especially in situations of mismanagement or misuse of purpose. According to Salamon et al. (1999), the sector's image is impacted by isolated incidents that receive widespread negative coverage, damaging the reputation of serious and committed organizations. Therefore, establishing a culture of transparency and accountability is essential to ensure the sector's legitimacy.

Another significant gap is the lack of monitoring and impact evaluation. Many institutions still lack efficient methodologies to evaluate the results of their initiatives, which hinders both continuous improvement and transparency toward society and funders. Tenório (1998) emphasizes that, without concrete information on the impacts of its actions, the Third Sector weakens its ability to influence and create more effective public policies.

Furthermore, the sector faces the challenge of political and institutional coordination. In many situations, institutions operate in isolation, without establishing networks, partnerships, or cooperation mechanisms that amplify their impact. Social mobilization is hampered, and the political pressure exerted by these entities is reduced due to fragmentation. Gohn (2011) points out that the ability to act collectively is fundamental to addressing the structural problems of Brazilian society, such as inequality and poverty. and social exclusion.

The lack of institutional recognition of the Third Sector as a strategic agent in public policy is another critical aspect. The State often views these organizations solely as service providers, disregarding their critical, proactive, and innovative role. Santos (2002) argues that the Third Sector should be seen not only as an executor but also as a political actor that contributes knowledge, experience, and proposals to the creation of new social paradigms.

Ultimately, the Third Sector must address the challenges presented by the country's political and economic climate. During crises, resources allocated to the social sector are reduced, while demand for services increases. Furthermore, changes in public policies and regulatory frameworks can lead to a lack of legal certainty and institutional instability for organizations in the sector.

In this context, it is essential that the Third Sector invest in its internal organization, clarity, innovation, and strengthening of collaboration networks. To overcome these obstacles, it is necessary not only for organizations to act, but also for the State and society to change their relationship with the sector, recognizing it as a legitimate actor in building a more just and democratic society.

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

According to Silva and Menezes (2001), research is conceived according to its nature, approach to the problem, objectives, and technical procedures. In terms of nature, it is basic research, as it aims to expand knowledge in a specific field of study. Regarding the approach to the problem, it is a qualitative study. According to Triviños (1987), the qualitative approach deals with data in search of its meaning, based on the perception of the phenomenon in its context.

Regarding its objectives, it is classified as exploratory research, aiming to provide greater familiarity with a given problem. Gil (1999) states that this approach allows for a more in-depth investigation of issues related to the phenomenon under study and its relationships, maximizing direct contact with the situation under analysis. The goal is to seek common ground while remaining open to individuality and diverse meanings.

Regarding technical procedures, it is a bibliographical research. Therefore, sources such as books, scientific articles, dissertations, theses, and specialized websites are essential in identifying relevant aspects for the construction of this work. For Lakatos and Marconi, bibliographical research, covers all bibliography already made public in relation to the topic studied, from individual publications, bulletins, newspapers, magazines, books, research, monographs, theses, cartographic materials, etc. [...] and its purpose is to put the researcher in direct contact with everything that has been written, said or filmed on a given subject [...] (LAKATOS; MARCONI, 2010, p.183).

To this end, databases such as Scientific Electronic Library Online (Scie-Io), Capes Periódicos, and Google Scholar were consulted, searching for the terms "Third Sector," "promotion of citizenship," and "social inequality," among others. The authors used were Fernandes, R. C; Gohn, M. G; Ivamoto, H. S; Mendes, M; Salamon, L. M; Silva, E. V; Tenório, F. G, among others.

Regarding the data analysis technique, a content analysis was carried out. According to Chizzotti (2010), content analysis is one of the different ways of interpreting the content of a text that has been developed, adopting systematic standards to extract thematic meanings or lexical signifiers, through the simplest elements of a text.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through this research, it was clear that the Third Sector plays a fundamental role in promoting citizenship and addressing social inequality. To address the first specific objective outlined in the research, which is to identify the contributions of the Third Sector to promoting citizenship and addressing social inequality in Brazil, Table 1 summarizes these contributions.



Table 1 - Summary of contributions

Contributions	AUTHOR(S)
Strategic agent in promoting the common good	Fernandes, 1994
Local development and promotion of active citizenship	Cunha and Dias, 2012
Fight for human dignity and social justice	Sawaia, 2009
Education for citizenship	Gohn, 2011
It fully guarantees the fundamental social rights of the population	Fernandes, 1994
Combating social exclusion	Tenório, 2002
Innovative methodologies	Tenório, 2002
Combating social inequality	IPEA, 2010
Supplement to state action	Silva, 2001

Source: Prepared by the author, based on Fernandes, 1994; Cunha and Dias, 2012; Sawaia, 2009; Gohn, 2011; Tenório, 2002; IPEA, 2010; Silva, 2001.

As can be seen in Table 2, and presented in the theoretical basis of this study, the contributions from the Third Sector in the field of promoting citizenship and social inequality stand out, such as:

- **Strategic agent in the promotion of the common good:** the author asserts that with the redemocratization in Brazil, the creation of non-state public space was facilitated, and this, in a certain way, gave the Third Sector the possibility of becoming a strategic agent in the promotion of the common good (Fernandes, 2004).
- **Local development and promotion of active citizenship:** as evidenced, the Third Sector encourages the use of financial, personnel, and social resources in a more creative way, which allows for the execution of actions more efficiently (Cunha and Dias, 2012).
- **Fight for human dignity and social justice:** citizenship is not just about having rights guaranteed, but above all, to fight for human dignity (Sawaia, 2009).
- **Education for citizenship:** the Third Sector contributes proactively to the non-formal educational field, encouraging political exercise, empowering the community with democratic values, which strengthens culture and drives social empowerment (Gohn, 2011).
- **Fully ensures fundamental social rights to the population:** the State is unable to meet society's demands regarding social rights, in this sense, the Third Sector emerges in order to ensure that social rights are ensured (Fernandes, 1994).
- **Combating social exclusion:** the author argues that the Third Sector contributes substantially as a democratic and participatory alternative, in addition to socializing knowledge and practices aimed at the progress of the vulnerable population (Tenório, 2002).
- **Innovative methodologies:** the State, with its limited scope of action, is not always able to serve places where the population most needs public policies, and social organizations, with the aim of serving them, create innovative methodologies according to the needs of the communities and that are aligned with their needs (Tenório, 2002).
- **Combating social inequality:** the implementation of social projects that focus on the population living on the margins of society contributes to combating social inequality (IPEA, 2010).
- **Complement to state action:** the actions undertaken by the Third Sector are a complement to the public policies carried out by the State, and not as substitutes (Silva, 2001).

By directing efforts towards promoting citizenship and tackling social inequality, the Third The sector becomes an indispensable tool in building a more accessible and fair society, especially

in the dissemination of public policies aimed at the most vulnerable population in the Brazilian social context.

Regarding the second specific objective, which is to assess the challenges of the Third Sector in promoting citizenship and tackling social inequality in Brazil, it became clear that the Sector faces several challenges that affect its performance, mainly regarding aspects of sustainability, effectiveness and potential influence.

In this sense, some of the challenges identified in the research are demonstrated, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2 – Challenges of the Third Sector

Challenges	AUTHOR(S)
Financial	Salamon, 1999
They cannot operate sustainably	Fernandes, 1994
Lack of professional management	Gohn, 2011
Government bureaucracy	IPEA, 2019
Social legitimacy and public trust	Salamon et al, 1999
Monitoring and impact evaluation	Tenorio, 1998
Political and institutional articulation	Gohn, 2011
Lack of institutional recognition Santos, 2002	

Source: Prepared by the author, based on Salamon et al, 1999; Fernandes, 1994; Gohn, 2011; IPEA, 2019; Tenório, 1998; Santos, 2002.

It was noted that several authors have mentioned the challenges of the Third Sector in the Brazilian context. Among these challenges is financial, as the research revealed, civil society organizations are dependent on public resources, making them institutionally unstable due to their dependence on the State and their lack of appropriate mechanisms for accounting for the resources received (Salamon, 1999). Otherwise, these organizations cannot operate sustainably, as financial dependence is one of the greatest obstacles these institutions face, contributing to their susceptibility to interruptions in their activities (Fernandes, 1994).

The lack of professional management is another obstacle for the Third Sector. Many organizations operate without adequate planning and often operate informally, which implies access to public resources. This lack of professionalization significantly impacts the development of implemented actions (Gohn, 2011).

Likewise, government bureaucracy represents an obstacle for Third Sector organizations, the excessive formalism required by legislation hinders the establishment of partnerships between those involved (IPEA, 2019).

Furthermore, another challenge is related to social legitimacy and public trust; the sector's image is damaged by isolated episodes that gain negative notoriety, which tarnishes the reputation of organizations (Salamon et al, 1999).

The Third Sector faces the challenge of establishing monitoring and evaluation tools in order to assess the results of its actions. Without information regarding the implementation of its actions, the Sector becomes vulnerable and weakens the influence of more effective public policies (Tenório, 1998).

Political and institutional articulation is another challenge commonly faced by civil society organizations; due to various circumstances, these institutions act in isolation, without partnership networks. This gap prevents the Third Sector from acting collectively to deal with society's essential problems, such as inequality and social exclusion (Gohn, 2011).

Finally, the critical aspect of the lack of institutional recognition was additionally identified,



in this, the State sees the Third Sector as a service provider, and not with an innovative organizational strategic role; in this perspective, the Sector must be seen not only as an operator, but, above all, as a political actor that contributes with innovative proposals of a social nature (Santos, 2002).

To overcome these challenges, it is necessary not only for organizations to act, but also for the State and society to transform their relationship with the sector, admitting it as a legitimate participant in the creation of a more just society.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Through this research, it was observed that the Third Sector plays a fundamental role in the performance of public policies aimed at promoting citizenship and tackling social inequality, from the colonial period to the present day.

It can be inferred that the Third Sector encompasses a conglomerate of non-profit private institutions dedicated to social welfare. These institutions are composed of associations, foundations, social institutions, and civil society entities of public interest, and their sectors of activity include education, health, social assistance, culture, and community development.

Furthermore, it can be inferred that the Third Sector not only plays a role in promoting citizenship but also encourages citizen participation, fostering solidarity and pursuing social justice. Furthermore, the work of Third Sector organizations should be understood as a complement to government actions, not a substitute, acting strategically to improve public policies.

It was seen that there are several challenges for the Third Sector in the search for the promotion of citizenship and in the confrontation of social inequality in Brazil, and that to overcome them it is necessary not only for the action of these organizations, but, above all, for the State and society to modify their relationship with the Sector, consenting as a legitimate participant in the conception of a more just society.

Finally, taking into account the topic discussed, it is recommended that further studies be carried out on the Third Sector in promoting citizenship and tackling social inequality, this time in the context of Latin America.

Regarding the limitations encountered during the research, the difficulty in finding more up-to-date bibliographical works by the authors who served as support for the preparation of the study stands out of this work.

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