

A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH FOR WORKING WITH FAMILIES IN SUAS: A CRITICAL READING THROUGH THE LENS OF CITIZENSHIP

UMA ABORDAGEM METODOLÓGICA PARA TRABALHAR COM FAMÍLIAS NO SUAS: UMA LEITURA CRÍTICA ATRAVÉS DAS LENTES DA CIDADANIA

Maria Lucia Miranda Afonso

UNA University Center, Belo Horizonte, Brazil

Charles B. Hennon, Tina L. Carico and Gary W. Peterson

Miami University, Oxford/Ohio, United States of America

ABSTRACT

The paper reviews the current National Policy of Social Welfare in Brazil and the work developed with families within the Brazilian social protection approach. It describes the Unified System of Social Welfare and explores the relationship of the Basic Social Protection to the Bolsa Família Program, the Brazilian program of conditional cash transfer to vulnerable families. It discusses the principles of the methodology for working with vulnerable families in the Unified System of Social Welfare and analyzes examples of social interventions. It argues that the work developed with families must be based on participatory and dialogical approaches, including follow-up methods, group dynamics, action-research, and other interventions. The paper concludes with questions regarding the use of a socio-educational methodology as a component of policies for vulnerability reduction, social development and the promotion of citizenship.

Keywords: methodological approach for social action; psychosocial action; family life education; public policies; families.

RESUMO

O documento analisa a atual Política Nacional de Assistência Social no Brasil e o trabalho desenvolvido com as famílias dentro da abordagem brasileira de proteção social. Descreve o Sistema Único de Assistência Social e explora a relação da Proteção Social Básica para o Programa Bolsa Família, o programa brasileiro de transferência condicional de renda para famílias vulneráveis. Ele discute os princípios da metodologia de trabalho com famílias vulneráveis do Sistema Único de Assistência Social e analisa exemplos de intervenções sociais. Argumenta-se que o trabalho desenvolvido com as famílias deve ser baseado em abordagens participativas e dialógicas, incluindo os métodos de acompanhamento, dinâmicas de grupo, pesquisa-ação e outras intervenções. O artigo conclui com perguntas sobre o uso de uma metodologia sócio-educativa como um componente de políticas de redução da vulnerabilidade, desenvolvimento social e da promoção da cidadania.

Palavras-chave: abordagem metodológica para a ação social; ação psicossocial; educação para a vida familiar; políticas públicas; famílias.

Introduction

In this paper, we review the current National Policy of Social Welfare (Política Nacional de Assistência Social – PNAS) in Brazil as well as the importance of the work developed with families within the Brazilian social protection approach. We highlight the relationship between the Basic Social Protection (Proteção Social Básica - PSB), level of the Unified System of Social Welfare (Sistema Único da Assistência Social – SUAS) and the Bolsa Família

Program (PBF), which is the Brazilian program of conditional cash transfer for vulnerable families. The methodology for working with families in SUAS is discussed. The Brazilian model claims to be based on access to rights and services, social support, and socio-educative actions. For the purpose of this paper, we name it the Citizenship, Social Inclusion and Socio-educative Action approach (in Portuguese: Cidadania, Inclusão Social e Ação Socioeducativa – CISAS). We try to understand the CISAS proposals through the lens of the promotion of citizenship in the context of the Brazilian social welfare system.

In 1988, after a set of political changes that took place in Brazil, a new Constitution established a broad range of rights that affected social policies over the following decades. Social protection became a mechanism for granting rights and promoting social development. The new System of the Guarantee of Rights is divided into three articulated dimensions: promotion, social control, and the defense of rights. Promotion relates to public policies and institutions responsible for direct assistance, such as schools and social welfare services. Social control includes the civil society and legal entities that control public policies and the use of public resources, such as the councils of rights (in the areas of Education, Health, and others). Defense allies to legal institutions in charge of intervening in the cases of violation of rights, such as the Public Ministry.

The new social policies seem to have brought some changes to the Brazilian society, especially those related to the access to citizenship rights. For example, the percentage of Brazilians living below the poverty line decreased from 31.6% in 1997 to 22.9% in 2009, after the implementation of public policies against poverty (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2010). Nonetheless, social inequality continues to be an obstacle on the path to democracy and the country has yet to overcome a large set of social vulnerabilities.

The PNAS is one of the public policies focused on granting citizenship rights and enhancing the social development. The CISAS approach has been elaborated under the influence of international agencies and national political forces that have been pushing towards a democratic society. For CISAS, the work developed with families must be based on participatory and dialogical approaches. However, it still faces the challenge of defining specific strategies for working with these families and promoting autonomy with an emancipatory perspective, in an unequal society.

From a critical standpoint, we argue that reflexive action cannot be detached from its sociological and political context. Trying to identify key elements in the work developed with families, we analyze some reports on the articulation between the PSB level of SUAS and the PBF. We present questions regarding the use of a socio-educational methodology as a component of policies that aim at vulnerability reduction and social development, and we question its coherence with the defense of an emancipatory citizenship.

The PNAS and the SUAS: a brief presentation

In 2004, Brazil approved the PNAS that, in 2005, resulted in the institutionalization of the SUAS. Social welfare has been finally recognized as a public policy in a status similar to the universal policies of health and education (Crus & Albuquerque, 2006). PNAS is expected to address the demands and rights of the citizens in the social welfare field (Sposati, 2009). As Jaccoud (2009) states, these demands go far beyond the problem of poverty reduction and are related to citizenship, which is, in turn, based on the notion of equity. There is a profound contradiction between an economic system that reproduces poverty and a political system that reaffirms social equality. Therefore, the access to rights depends on the implementation of public policies.

In the new context, PNAS was organized according to a model of non-contributive social protection extended to all those who need assistance, independently of any previous condition. The model is intended to assure basic rights closely linked to human necessities and is organized around five social securities: (a) Material support for surviving in the event of disasters or similar situations; (b) Access to income — everyone has the right to have the monetary means to provide for his/her survival; (c) Access to the conditions for developing personal and family autonomy — adults should be able to provide for themselves and their families); (d) Access to basic social rights—such as health — and basic goods—such as food; and (e) Protection of family and community bonds (Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e Combate à Fome [MDS], 2004).

SUAS is organized into Basic and Special social protection levels. Basic Social Protection (Proteção Social Básica – PSB) focuses on vulnerable families at the community level, in order to assure their access to basic rights as well as to forward them to cash transfer programs. Special Social Protection (Proteção Social Especial – PSE) focuses on individuals and families that have suffered a violation of some right which ended up weakening family ties (in cases of domestic violence, for example). It deals with a range of vulnerabilities not necessarily linked to poverty and includes actions destined to surpass these vulnerabilities, which may contribute to the emergence of violations. There is also a high complexity level of the PSE, which involves offering shelters and other services to individuals in different phases of the life cycle (MDS, 2005, 2009).

The SUAS adopted the guidelines of political-administrative decentralization, social participation, territorialization of services, democratic control (there are Organized Councils with citizen's participation aimed at controlling social policies), as well as family-centered orientation (MDS, 2005). Considering that families are essential for protecting individuals, a family-centered orientation was assumed in order to promote and facilitate the access of the citizens to their basic rights, especially those experiencing vulnerable conditions related to poverty, disabilities, and others.

The term *family* has been applied by PNAS in a broad and flexible sense, referring to a group of persons linked by blood, affection, or cooperation bonds, who bind together by mutual duties and reciprocal support for living and surviving (MDS, 2004). The PNAS recognizes that the quality of the performance of family roles is related to the life conditions of the family, as well as to its access to the network of public services and social rights. The State must therefore develop policies aimed at giving support to families, especially those living in a situation of vulnerability (MDS, 2004).

It is important to emphasize that these families are addressed because they are a key element in social protection and not because their structures or dynamics need to be corrected by the State. As Mioto (2006) warned, the perception of the family as an agent of social protection shall be counterbalanced by the recognition that families are also a territory of social contradictions and power relationships. So they may protect their members as well as reproduce social inequalities and power relationships.

As Briar-Lawson, Lawson, Hennon and Jones (2001) have proposed, families must be acknowledged as agents and beneficiaries of development and social progress. Public policies may provoke changes not only in the families' socioeconomic living conditions but also in their cultural organization and interpersonal relations. We believe that the most important aspect of the work developed with families is to understand how these processes of changes have been constructed with the individuals and the families regarding the promotion of their rights and the improvement of the quality of their lives. This is the reason why, in this paper, we argue that the work to be developed with families must be strictly oriented by the protection of rights, the promotion of participation and the defense of citizenship.

The PSB and the work developed with families in PAIF

According to the PNAS, the PSB intends to overcome vulnerabilities caused by poverty, life cycle phase, disabilities, and the weakening of community and family ties (MDS, 2004, 2009). The main facility of PSB is the Reference Center of Social Welfare (Centro de Referência da Assistência Social – CRAS); a facility placed in areas that present low Human Development Index (HDI). The professional team is mainly composed of social workers and psychologists. In September 2009, there was at least one CRAS in 78% of the Brazilian municipalities. In numbers, there were 5798 CRAS distributed through 4329 of the 5565 total Brazilian municipalities (MDS, 2011a). In July 2012, the number of CRAS in Brazil reached 7854 (MDS, 2012c).

There are between 2500 to 5000 families living in CRAS territories. The average number of families attended by the professional team per year varies from 500 to 1000, depending on the size of the territory. CRAS develops services with the goals of improving social inclusion by inserting families and individuals in the network of social services; directing individuals to participate in groups according to their age, strengthening family ties and creating socialization opportunities; addressing families, especially those enrolled in cash transfer programs or going through situations of vulnerability. These families are the target group of the Service of Protection and Integral Assistance for the Family (Serviço de Proteção e Atendimento Integral à Família – PAIF) (MDS, 2009).

The methodology proposed for working with families in PAIF can be described in the following terms: (a) A diagnostic of the life conditions in the territory covered by CRAS is made; (b) The network of available services is contacted and mobilized; (c) Vulnerable families are contacted by the professional team or present their request/demands to CRAS. The contact is oriented by information from other policies, existing data from other entities, and visits to the territory and to the families; (d) Data about families are systematized into a profile (Cadastro Único or Unified Data Form) in order to identify their vulnerabilities and needs; (e) Individuals and families are enrolled into social welfare benefits, cash transfer programs, and other available programs; (f) A process of assistance and follow up of the families begins, giving priority to those who present more pronounced vulnerabilities, in order to overcome vulnerabilities and promote autonomy, (g) the professional team develops group work and community activities in order to mobilize families

and to build a partnership with them. Individuals are encouraged to participate in public spaces, such as in the councils of rights. (h) Development of social capital in the areas of low HDI is also an issue. Community groups receive orientation as a way to strengthen social identity and promote a cultural context supportive to the rights of individuals and families. Brazil is a culturally diversified society. Thus, PAIF has to take into account the cultural characteristics of social groups in the communities (MDS, 2009, 2012d).

So far, the methodology is aimed at surpassing vulnerabilities and guarantying the access to rights in the social welfare field. However, due to the complex interrelationship of citizenship rights, the effectiveness of PSB depends on its articulation to other public policies, especially those that are somehow related to the PNAS defined as social securities. The relationship of the PSB with each of these policies is relevant material for many other works. Regarding the right to have an income, PSB is closely associated to the PBF, the national conditional cash transfer program that, in 2011, had already been assisting 13 million families — that is, the majority of the population living below the poverty line (MDS, 2012a). Therefore, we believe that any discussion on the contemporary work developed with families in the Brazilian welfare system needs to take into account its connection to the PBF.

Before approaching the partnership between PSB and PBF, it is important to clarify that PNAS is a policy executed by the National Secretariat of Social Welfare, and PBF is a program developed by the National Secretariat of Income and Citizenship. These secretariats are independent of each other and both are part of the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger (Ministério do Desenvolvimento Social e do Combate à Fome – MDS). So, one can easily see that the efforts to develop an integrated work shall begin at home.

The partnership between PBF and PAIF

Launched in October 2003, the PBF is a conditional cash transfer developed through the partnership between the Brazilian State and the World Bank (Lindert, Linder, Hobbs, & de la Brière, 2007). Poor families with children under the age of 18 receive from R\$ 32 to R\$ 306 (about US\$ 16 to US\$ 150) per month, the total value depending on their income per capita and the family's composition (MDS, 2012b). In return, families must keep their children in school and away from child labor, as well as take small children to regular vaccinations and health check-ups. Pregnant women commit to attend prenatal and puerperal care.

PBF has the goal of reducing poverty and getting families to invest in their children, lessening future poverty. The program's conditions are justified by PBF as *rights*. PBF offers complementary programs related to adult education, insertion in the labor market, civil documentation, and others (Lindert et al., 2007).

The PBF maintains a centralized system that receives data from schools and health centers about the assisted families. Families can stay in the program for many years. However, those that are not fulfilling the program's conditions are subject to successive consequences that range from a written warning to the loss of the benefit — a sequence that could take up to eighteen months. From 2006 to 2009, PBF delivered 2,092,394 written warnings to families that were not fulfilling the program's conditions, but the number of families that lost the benefit was 93,231. This is less than 1% of the total number of assisted families (Tribunal de Contas da União, 2009).

Because the reasons for not fulfilling the program's conditions are mainly linked to social vulnerability, PAIF must establish a follow up procedure with these at-risk-families with the purpose of surpassing their vulnerabilities and recovering their capacity of protecting their members. It is important to emphasize that families are not obligated to accept this procedure and receive no penalty if they do not agree to be involved.

In 2006, the MDS established that families enrolled in PBF living in the area of the CRAS should take part in PAIF activities. The methodological guidelines for the articulation PBF-PAIF were defined and can be summarized as follows (MDS, 2006): (a) To enhance social services networks so that families can receive appropriate care; (b) To integrate the knowledge about the families' social and cultural reality in the planning and implementation of PAIF activities, while considering cultural diversity and the potentialities of the families; (c) To adopt participative and dialogical methodologies for working with families, groups, and communities, within an interdisciplinary approach that must also follow the rights related to ethnic, gender, and generation relationships; (d) To empower families and communities as partners capable of pursuing a reflexive process concerning their rights, needs, resources, problems, and viable solutions to promote cooperative actions among families; and (e) To define criteria and indicators to orient the processes of implementing, executing, monitoring, registering, and evaluating the work developed with families and communities.

As we stated before, socio-educative actions have to be connected to the social securities defined

by PNAS. We consider that PBF needs the association with PAIF (to follow up the enrolled families) as much as PAIF needs the association with PBF (because it is a way of addressing the right to have access to an income). However, this partnership is relatively recent and we shall think about the difficulties to implement the proposed methodology.

The welfare system has been growing since 2006. However, PBF continues to be twice as large as PAIF. Although PAIF has other responsibilities other than following up PBF families, a major part of its activities focuses on these follow-ups, especially because of the large number of PBF families that live in the CRAS area. In PSB, there is a strong interface between the social welfare policy and the cash transfer program. This association can result in contradictions, but also can contribute to the development of the paradigm related to working with families in social protection policies.

In 2009, the MDS carried out the Census CRAS, a comprehensive study that included all the CRAS in the country. The data show the expansion of the system and the improvement of the activities of the CRAS, considering its goals and methodological guidelines (MDS, 2011a). There are also difficulties, among which are the need to strengthen the articulation between the PAIF and the network of services in various municipalities. It has been easier to work with health and education than with other public policies, such as those focused on employment and income generation (MDS, 2011a).

The Census CRAS also identified the main problems that families have been presenting to CRAS. Mostly, families demand actions focused on: youngsters with high vulnerability and social risk, lack of documentation, lack of food and other essential items, children and elders neglect, and child labor. Many families have difficulties fulfilling the PBF conditions. The varied nature of the families' demands makes the articulation of the web of services even more crucial because PAIF must offer concrete answers to the families, empowering them, creating the basis for working with their social values and attitudes, increasing social capital, and strengthening family ties (MDS, 2011a).

Other conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America (e.g., Chile and Mexico) also combine monetary aid and socio-educative approaches. What is remarkable in the Brazilian experience is that it proposes to apply participative methodologies, being open to dialogical constructions, instead of teaching families predetermined ideas about family

life. Moreover, it intends to promote participation in democratic spaces, stimulating the control of the population over public policies, for example, through the participation in councils of rights. In the search for a participative methodology, PAIF recommends the use of tools such as the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire, action-research, group dynamics workshops, and community mobilization. The PAIF guidelines recommend the adaptation of these methods according to the context of a social welfare policy, based on citizenship rights (MDS, 2012d).

However, we shall remember that, among other things, this methodology requires qualified human resources as well as the support of the municipalities in which the CRAS are located. Beyond methodological conceptions, the challenge for the implementation of PAIF may be linked to elements such as the integration of local social policies and the web of services, the labor conditions for the professional team, and so forth (MDS, 2011a).

Indeed, the Census CRAS also pointed out the need to qualify human resources and systematize methodologies for working with families (MDS, 2011a). While 95% of the total of CRAS performed activities focused on inserting families in the network of services, the percentage of CRAS that developed group work with the families was 83%, and only 48% developed groups with individuals according to their life cycle phases. A distance between theory and practice still exists in SUAS. The MDS has been providing data through quantitative (MDS, 2011a) and qualitative (Afonso, 2010)¹ researches in order to improve the knowledge about the system.

In spite of being relatively new, the Brazilian experience is already a field for analysis. It allows us to raise questions about the methodologies used for working with families and its applications in a democratic society.

The CISAS approach and the promotion of citizenship: questions and remarks

Based on the PNAS and the PAIF guidelines, one can conclude that the CISAS (Citizenship, Social Inclusion and Socio-educative Action) approach aims to promote citizenship rights, social inclusion and develop social work with families, establishing a new relationship with its public within the welfare/social protection system. In this paper, we have so far presented the characteristics of the CISAS approach. Now, we introduce some questions and remarks regarding its connection with the promotion of citizenship.

The CISAS approach sustains that the methodology for working with families ought to be participative and creative, adapted to local realities, and open to periodical reframing. The social protection involves a socio-assistential and a socio-educative dimension in the interventions provided. The socio-assistential dimension is related to the provision of material and institutional support to families and individuals in order to make it possible for them to surpass vulnerability. As for the socio-educative dimension, it is related to the orientation and the reflexive work developed with families so that they can cope with vulnerability and enhance their autonomy. Therefore, families' protective function is linked to socioeconomic situations, the family's insertion in the network of public services, its daily life organization, its social support, and its cultural values. The approach is multilevel (individual, family, community), multisectoral (e.g., welfare, education, health, judicial system), and multimethod (e.g., family life education, cash transfer, health care).

The socio-educative dimension also involves systematic, creative in-the-context processes of reflection and construction of individual and collective autonomy, such as defended in Freire's pedagogy (Freire, 1996). As defined by Maluleka (2001), the socio-educative dimension refers to education received in continuous interactions and relationships established with different people in various educational contexts. Guidance offered to the person toward effective interaction with others, across different social levels, involves the aspects of social inclusion and participation. It emphasizes information, skills, dialogical approaches, self-reflection, social support, problem solving abilities, meaning/identity, and autonomy development. Nonetheless, it is important to progress towards building bridges that connect the socio-educative and the participative actions. Reflections that cannot lead to changes in people's lives run the risk of becoming empty rhetoric discourse.

We agree that the work developed with families must be founded on participatory and dialogical approaches, including critical pedagogy, group dynamics, action-research, and so forth. Such a methodology must also combine different fields of knowledge and expertise into an interdisciplinary view inasmuch as family support will pose problems that range from income generation to organization of daily life (Briar-Lawson et al., 2001; Hennon, Peterson, Wilson, Radina, & Hildenbrand, 2009).

This process is not one of imposition of standards or regulations. Families are able to reflect on their experiences and develop new points of view

about their problems and think of possible ways to deal with them (Hennon, Peterson, Hildenbrand, & Wilson, 2008). However, there will be situations in which the socio-educative dimension of the work will result in questions to be made to the families and even to confronting these families' worldviews, in order to be coherent with the propositions of a system based on the guarantee of citizenship rights to all family members. For example, families have to agree to take their children out of the labor system and to send them to school. In fact, family life education is growing in importance regarding the promotion of rights of children and other family members (Martínez & Becedóniz, 2009).

In this sense, we understand that socio-educative actions are not expected to promote significant changes if they remain separated from socioeconomic, cultural and political strategies. The main challenge put by the CISAS model is precisely to integrate social support, social inclusion, and participation through reflexive methods and effective actions, moving towards a change that could make a difference both in the promotion of citizenship and in the struggle against poverty and social exclusion.

It seems to be a huge challenge to develop consistent and coherent participative processes in the context of a social welfare public policy. Participation is an essential principle in a democratic society and the basis for constructing citizenship. Reflexive processes must be linked to effective actions implemented towards promoting social change and in order to strengthen citizenship.

As Dagnino (2004) stresses, citizenship is based on the notion of the right to have rights. Citizenship comprehends but is not limited to the historically conquered rights. It can be expanded throughout the historical process by the means of political struggle. Citizens are active political actors fighting for rights and recognition within a historical context. Participation is linked to dialogical practices and must lead to effective social changes. To some extent, SUAS can bring changes to the families' quality of life. However, deeper changes related to social inclusion and citizenship promotion will depend on the articulation of the ensemble of social policies within the Brazilian system for the guarantee of rights.

Fadul (2012) pointed out a correlation between Dagnino's reflections and the three dimensions of citizenship proposed by Demo (1995). For Demo (1995), citizenship may be approached in three different non-static types in the historical context: the *tutelada* (tutored) citizenship (the dominant groups and the State define the type and the amount of rights of the

citizens according to their own interests); the *assistida* (assisted) citizenship (the State addresses the citizens' needs but still within a centralized non-participative system); and the *emancipatória* (emancipatory) citizenship (citizens participate in the definition of their rights and in the organization of the society). The *emancipatória* (emancipatory) citizenship combines the access to rights and critical participation of the society.

In spite of the changes introduced by the 1988 Brazilian Constitution, these three types of citizenship are still in conflict in the Brazilian society. The work developed with families must incorporate efforts to promote emancipatory citizenship. Therefore, it cannot be restricted to socio-assistential and/or socio-educative actions. It must also encourage individuals and families to participate in the organization of the society as well as in the control of social welfare policies. To be fair, we must recognize that the PNAS have already stressed the importance of the social control over public policies incorporating participation as a principle of organization.

However, the work developed with families still needs to involve participation not only as a principle, and not only restricted to small groups, but as practical orientation towards action. We suggest that reflexive actions may acquire more effectiveness in territories in which the population participates in collective actions aimed at changing their reality. But we also think that this is a challenge because it goes beyond the limits of SUAS and reaches the dimension of the relationship of the citizens with the State and with the ensemble of public policies.

In order to deepen our discussion, we will now consider examples taken from the Observatory of Good Practices of the PBF choosing experiences that point out the articulation between PBF and PAIF.

An exploratory view of the PBF good practices through the articulation PBF-PAIF

In 2007, the MDS published a set of professed good experiences that took place in the CRAS. In 2008, based on the reports of the CRAS' professional teams, the PBF organized the Observatory of Good Practices of the social work developed with families. Within a qualitative approach, these experiences expressed an institutional discourse (since they had been chosen as "good" ones) as well as the ideas of the professional teams about social work with families, at that time. So, we proceeded to an exploratory reading of these "good experiences", and selected three to be analyzed.

For the purpose of this paper, it is very important to explain the reasons why we have chosen these specific three experiences.

The majority of the experiences in the PBF Observatory of Good Practices, in the period considered, refer to courses, income generation, or cooperative associations. Only a few of them mentioned concrete actions for inserting individuals in the labor market through collaboration with other public programs or private enterprises. A smaller number of these experiences go beyond the teaching of a productive skill, offering, in addition, a structured intervention, including training focused on how to create and manage cooperative associations. In just a few cases, the training in productive and managerial skills is intertwined with discussions about family life. As far as informational and reflexive work is concerned, the majority of the actions could be described as centralized, speech-delivery based. Only a few experiences report group work with the promotion of dialogical interaction, aiming to build up group bonds.

Therefore, it is important to stress that in our qualitative, exploratory analysis, we have not chosen to report on the majority of the referred experiences. We are interested in the few significant experiences which are not regular examples of what was going on regarding the articulation PBF-PAIF. These cases that involve a comprehensive and structured social work are interesting for the purposes of the present analysis, for the reason that they point to new possible ways of working with families in the articulation between PBF and PAIF.

Three reports from the PBF Observatory and its key elements for socio-educative action

In 2008, in Mauriti, a small town in the Northeast of Brazil, the CRAS initiated an activity involving 150 PBF families with a high level of illiteracy. At the time, the town had about 49,000 inhabitants and 6759 families that were beneficiaries of the PBF and that were assisted by the PAIF (almost 50% of the population). The work combined participation in groups and training for the labor market. It was developed in partnership with other public policies. In the first phase, groups were formed in rural and urban areas, aiming at providing the participants with information about PBF and PAIF as well as to invite them to participate in the work process that was to be developed. In these groups, the CRAS professional team was able to get to know the interests of the families, their beliefs, and ways of dealing with

everyday life. The families expressed their interest in art crafting. The professional team developed a study of the economic viability of creating groups to produce and sell art craft in the municipality. In a second phase, they conducted *oficinas de convivência* (*sociability workshops*) with the goals of exchanging experiences, creating bonds, providing information, and discussing issues related to family life, values, child rearing, domestic violence, and so forth (MDS, 2008).

Oficinas de convivência are organized meetings with short-term goals to be achieved with a group of families, under the orientation of the CRAS professional, aiming to promote a reflexive approach of themes linked to the families' interests and lives. It also has the purpose of strengthening families' and community's ties as well as to facilitate access to rights. (MDS, 2011b, p.25, our translation)

In the *oficinas de convivência*, the participants choose the themes. Side by side, the families participated in groups focused on manual skills, courses and training for the labor market, as well as on the development of managing skills for cooperative production. In the third phase, there were activities destined to sell the products in local and regional fairs. Meanwhile, the discussions about family life continued taking place, with an expressive participation of the families (MDS, 2008).

An experience held in Belo Horizonte, a large city located in the south center region of Brazil, was described as a very participative one (MDS, 2007). The CRAS Barreiro created an *oficina de convivência* for women living in families with multiple vulnerabilities (related to income, disabilities, illiteracy, and others); most of them (but not all) from the PBF. The group began in 2003 being, therefore, a pioneer experience. The participants have changed along the years, and the group endures until the present moment. The professional team organized the profile of the families with data referent to their life conditions (MDS, 2007, 2008).

From 2003 to 2004, the participants were engaged in a patchwork activity, and they created, together, a bedcover. In the following years, and up to now, the manual activity performed has varied, but the socialization activities have been maintained. The group meets once a week for about two hours. The women chat and promote more structured discussions around different topics according to the group's interests: women's rights, labor market and so on. They also engage in activities such as visiting public spaces (a museum, for example) and going on collective walks. In the group, the social workers could get information about the participants and insert

them in the network of public and private services, with the goal of promoting their social inclusion. The group helped the participants to build up a sense of identity and belonging, to exchange experiences, and to improve social skills related, for instance, to communication and conflict management. The main objective of this group was not generating income. The importance of the art craft activities lies on the fact that they facilitate the interaction among the members. Some of the participants became highly active in their community, and many noticed an improvement in their quality-of-life. The work was made possible by the continuous articulation of the network of services (MDS, 2007, 2008).

The experience of Santiago, a small town in the south of Brazil, is an example of how to deal with community work in a broader perspective. The CRAS began working in an extremely poor community, in which 212 of the 232 total families were enrolled in PBF. The work involved a complex articulation of different public policies, including the construction of houses and the implementation of adult literacy programs. Sports, dance, and music activities were offered to children and teenagers. The adults had access to microcredit programs and cooperative associations (MDS, 2008).

In the cited experiences, we can identify some key elements that could contribute to the CISAS approach. Briefly, we mention: (a) participation of the families in a community project and the combination of those actions with activities intending to improve social capital, (b) development of individual's and families' social skills (including labor skills), (c) strengthening of community, group and family bonds, (d) strengthening of the support of the network of public services, and (e) association to local development projects and reflexive-in-the-context group work.

Some of these aspects may be listed in the PAIF technical orientations. However, they need to be improved in its articulation with the PBF, with other social policies and with the web of services. It is essential to provide a connection between reflexive work and concrete possibilities of acting in the context. As Teixeira (2010) emphasized, the construction of families' autonomy is not to be limited to their internal resources, such as symbolic resources, but must comprehend changes undertaken through wider collective and social processes.

As for the group work, in the mentioned experiences, it is guided by a cooperative, participative approach in which professionals do not try to direct families to passively incorporate contents. They foster self-reflection and personal growth of the group

members. The leaders are instructed to “listen and learn” with the individuals’ participation in the groups. Information is to be understood in the context of the families’ lives. In fact, reflexive action cannot be detached from its sociological and political context. This methodology is inspired by the contributions made by the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1996), but also by an array of ideas from authors from different fields of social and human sciences, in an interdisciplinary approach. We think that PAIF’s actions could also be guided by a diversity of other methodologies besides Freire’s pedagogy and action-research.

Researching about the implementation of SUAS in Natal, a large city located in the Brazilian Northeast region, Oliveira, Solon, Amorim, and Dantas (2011) argued that socio-educative activities still need a better definition. Many professional teams apply participative methodologies from the field of social psychology within the PSB. However, the conditions for applying such methodologies are still precarious. Silva and Corgozinho (2011) also discussed the importance of the incorporation of contributions from the community psychology in SUAS. We agree with Senra and Guzzo (2012) when they argue that it is not enough to apply to the public policies any technical procedure taken from other contexts. It is important to discuss how such procedures may contribute to change people’s living conditions and to overcome vulnerabilities. We defend that participative methodologies, taken from different fields of knowledge, can be used in SUAS, the key points being their adaptation to the PNAS principles and goals and the support they might give to the processes of construction of an emancipatory citizenship.

Final considerations

A methodology for working with families that is based on an emancipatory and democratic view has to recognize the need for promoting participation. It is also necessary to strengthen and integrate the network of services in order to guarantee access to rights. In a broader view, the whole society will have to be educated towards a new culture of citizenship rights.

We must maintain a critical stance as we follow the application and development of the recent public policies for family support in Brazil. Will these policies be effective to reduce vulnerabilities and empower families? As long as family life education is concerned, do these policies really surpass the old pedagogical view of a relationship between “those who know everything and those who know nothing”?

The case of the Brazilian social policies for family support points to the importance of varied aspects, which could be summarized as: (a) The role of family life education in the search for protecting and empowering vulnerable families; (b) The necessity of integration and coherence among all the public policies involved in the work with families for social development; (c) The use of dialogical participative methodologies; (d) The articulation between socio-educative action and local development projects to promote autonomy; (e) The attention given to democratic values, human rights, and respect for families in a multicultural society; (f) The necessity to support and to construct family autonomy within specific sociocultural contexts; (g) The necessity to balance the tension between the respect for diverse family/cultural values and the desire to help families build competencies to act in a civil society where more general cultural norms and laws are to be followed; (h) The shift towards a reflexive, inclusive, and democratic society; and (i) The contribution to processes that lead to the construction of emancipatory citizenship through reflection, action and participation.

We ought to approach the issue of citizenship not only by defending civil, political, and social rights, but also by constructing a bridge that links individuals as citizens and as consumers. According to Hirschman (1983), citizenship refers to the relationship between the demanding groups and the State, basically into two distinct pathways whether it emphasizes the consumers or the citizens. Consumers use public services, restraining their interests to private life and material wellness without concern as to the universalization and expansion of rights. Citizens establish a relationship with the State in which both parties have rights and duties. They get involved in social, political, and cultural changes, while opening an ethical dimension for social life.

The conception of citizenship involves the idea of sociability, dialogical practices, and participation in the varied spheres of social life (Dagnino, 2004). Perhaps the policies of family support in Brazil may represent an attempt to promote this new citizenship while struggling against social vulnerabilities. This is an issue we shall continue to discuss not giving up a critical stance nor abandoning hope, so that family life education can be in the heart of the best possible family support programs in Brazil and worldwide.

Note

- ¹ One of the authors of the present paper conducted the above cited qualitative study. However, it is very important to emphasize that this paper is not based on Afonso (2010).

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Maria Lúcia Miranda Afonso is a Social Psychologist with master's and doctoral degree in Education. Retired professor from UFMG. Professor at the master's course in Social Management, Education and Local Development, UNA University Center, Belo Horizonte. Address: Av. Prudente de Morais 135, sala 310. Belo Horizonte/MG, Brasil. CEP 30350-093. Email: luafonso@yahoo.com

(1947-2013) *Charles B. Hennon* was Professor from the Department of Family Studies and Social Work, Miami University, Ohio, USA.

Tina L. Carico is Research Consultant, Administrative Special Projects Coordinator. Office of Enrollment Operations and Communications, Miami University, Ohio, USA. Email: caricotl@miamioh.edu

Gary W. Peterson is Chair and Professor from the Department of Family Studies and Social Work, Miami University, Ohio, USA. E-mail: petersgw@miamioh.edu

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