CHAPTER 7

Framing, Fighting and Coalitional Building: The Learnings and Teachings of the Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education

INTRODUCTION

The Campanha Brasileira pelo Direito à Educação\(^{17}\) (CBDE) was created in 1999 as one of the first national coalitions of the Global Campaign for Education (GCE). Today, the CBDE is a recognized political actor and the principal civil society reference for educational funding in Brazil. Furthermore, the coalition occupies an important role as representative of the Latin American continent in the GCE board. The CBDE is the most plural network of its kind in Brazil, uniting more than 200 non-governmental organizations, social movements, teachers unions, education councils and international agencies around the common goal to guarantee free public education of high quality for all Brazilian citizens.

Since the year 2000, primary school enrolment numbers are almost universal in Brazil. However, lack of educational quality leads to high levels of grade repetition and drop-outs, and low learning achievements. The political and economic conditions to improve this situation are, at least formally, established in Brazil. The country is one of the biggest economies in the world. Brazil’s head of state, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2010), is a former steel worker turned trade-union leader who went on to become the country’s first left-wing president. He belongs to the Partido dos Trabalhadores\(^{18}\) (PT), which has its roots in the social movements, and is Latin America’s largest leftist party. However, the government agenda is quite different from the program that many expected after two decades in opposition. In fact, rather than overturn the neo-liberal models for growth of his predecessor, Fernando Henrique Cardoso, Lula instead opted to strengthen them; and further, despite his professed belief in participative democracy, civil society’s involvement in Brazil’s political decision-making processes remains limited.

The case study assesses the impact of the CBDE in this political context and analyzes factors that account for its success. Primary data consists of twenty in depth semi-structured interviews with key coalition members, affiliates, government officials, academics and journalists, conducted during a fieldwork period from July until September 2008 in the Brazilian cities Rio de Janeiro, São

\(^{17}\) Brazilian Campaign for the Right to Education.

\(^{18}\) Workers' Party.
Paulo and Brasília. Secondary data includes a wide range of coalition, government, and media publications.

The chapter is divided into five sections. The first one analyses the political opportunity structures of the CBDE with an emphasis on the relationship between state and civil society in Brazil, followed by an assessment of the role education plays in the political programs of presidents Cardoso and Lula. The second section depicts the origin, composition, and goals of the CBDE, and explores the benefits and challenges of ‘coalitioning’ on national and supra-national scales. In the third section, the strategic development of the coalition is analyzed on the basis of its five major campaigns. The fourth section puts in perspective the political, procedural and symbolic impact of the CBDE, and discusses how this impact is related to processes of critical reflection. The final section draws the main conclusions regarding the success of the CBDE, closing with a list of lessons learned and recommendations.

COUNTRY CONTEXT

Brazil is a federal republic that extends over almost half of the South American continent. After 21 years of military dictatorship, Brazil was declared a legal democracy in 1985. Since then, the country developed into one of the biggest economies in the world, based on rich natural resources, a strong industrial sector and vast agriculture. The more than 190 Million Brazilian citizens are spread over 26 states, one federal district and almost 6,000 municipalities, with regional, ethnic and social differences so severe that some live under conditions comparable to those of sub-Saharan Africa, while others benefit from Western European living standards.

Inequalities in Brazil increased with the election of President Cardoso (1994-2002), who introduced an economic growth model inspired by the Washington Consensus. His successor, Lula (2003-2010), was elected with the promise to bring profound changes to neo-liberal politics. However, the new government surprised many observers not only by keeping the pillars of Cardoso’s political model intact, but even deepening some aspects:

“The monetary authorities appointed by President Lula, as those appointed by former President Cardoso, seem to believe inflation stabilization is the only goal of macroeconomic policy. From the fiscal side, all that matters is building credibility with financial agents, leaving out full employment, stable prices, long-term economic growth and social development” (Arestis et al: 2007).

For this reason, and as I will go on to show, education holds a marginalized position in the government’s agenda.