ABSTRACT. This article presents the process of creation and expansion of the Fundação Abrinq pelos Direitos da Criança et do Adolescente (Abrinq Foundation for Rights of Children and Adolescents). Established in 1990 by a group of entrepreneurs from the Brazilian Toy Manufacturers’ Association (ABRINQ), the Fundação Abrinq has been successful at raising the issue of children in Brazilian society by bridging business and several other sectors of society. This article more particularly examines (1) the societal challenges related to the situation of children in Brazil; (2) the creation and development of the Abrinq Foundation; and (3) the achievements of this innovative bridging organization over 15 years.

KEY WORDS: children, Brazil, Grajew, social entrepreneurship

Introduction: Brazil and its children: A sad reality

On July 23, 1993, a little after midnight, about fifty boys and girls were sleeping under the porticos of Candelária Church in downtown Rio de Janeiro, one of the most densely populated cities in Brazil. A car pulled up carrying “a gang of hooded men,” who got out and opened fire on the sleeping children. “Seven children and one young adult were killed. Four boys died instantly, a fifth was killed as he ran away. Three others were abducted in a car and two of them shot dead in the nearby Aterro do Flamengo gardens. One young adult died of his wounds four days later. Another young adult, Wagner dos Santos, who had been left for dead in the Aterro do Flamengo, survived a shooting in the face” (Amnesty International, 2003). This shocking event came to illustrate the desperate lives of poor children and youth in Brazil in the early 1990s, victims of violence and society’s indifference.

The social exclusion of poor children is still one of the darkest truths in Brazil, a country of rampant contradictions and inequalities. In 1991, with a population of more than 146 million distributed across 26 states, Brazil’s was the leading Latin American economy. This first, world-class Brazil could be represented by the states of São Paulo and Rio Grande do Sul, which, “if they stood alone, would be numbered among the richest 45 nations on earth.... The state of São Paulo has a gross national product (GNP) larger than Argentina’s, and São Paulo City is a megalopolis with a ... vibrant cultural, financial and business life” (Maxwell, 2000). The other Brazil is a nation estimated at more than 40 million people living on less than US$50 a month, deprived of the most basic services, including sewers and potable water. “The most impoverished 20% of the population receive 2% of the nation’s wealth, while the richest 20% receive 60%” (ibid.), appalling numbers that qualify the country as having one of the worst income distributions in the world (Clements, 1997). In this poor Brazil, “festering shantytowns surround the large urban areas and Rio’s favelas are notorious for crime and violence” (Maxwell, 2000). It is in this other Brazil that millions and millions of children are completely excluded from society.

The social exclusion of children in Brazil is not a recent phenomenon, and has been a persistent problem throughout the 20th century. However, according to some scholars, the Brazilian economic
recession in the 1980s brought an alarming increase in the numbers of boys and girls begging on the streets of major metropolitan areas. Despite laws that put Brazil in the vanguard of child rights protection – the 1988 Federal Constitution anticipated the basic principles of the 1989 International Convention on the Rights of the Child; and the 1990 Children and Young Persons Statute granted full, universal protection to all Brazilian children – Brazil’s day-to-day reality is much more somber. Reports of that reality, with numbers such as 4 children murdered every day in Brazilian cities (MNMMR, 1990), began to raise international awareness. In 1991, a Commission of Enquiry (CPI) of the Brazilian National Congress estimated that between 1988 and 1990, 4661 young people under the age of 17 had been murdered (Pinheiro, 2004). In February 1992, charges were filed against more than 100 people in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, mostly off-duty police and security agents hired by private companies to “clean up” the cities.

At the heart of the issue of homeless children in Brazil are “highly vulnerable families and communities, many struggling to come to terms with economic liberalization and growing inequality” (Volpi, 2002, p. 1). Beyond these inequalities per se, according to Elena Volpi in a report for the World Bank, “the problem can also be traced to a lack of communication in the family and the weakening of social capital. Street children are an alarm signaling the dire need for social development and poverty reduction policies to improve the situation in the community at large” (ibid.).

In its 1989 annual report, The State of the World's Children, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) drew a stark portrait of the situation in Brazil. Of 41 million children in that country aged 17 and younger, 25 million had no access to play, education, regular meals, housing or adequate hygiene, and were subject to every kind of violence; 350,000 children aged 5 and younger died every year. Estimates for 1990 by the Movimento Nacional dos Meninos e Meninas de Rua (MNMMR), the National Movement for Street Children, put at 18 million the number of children aged 7–17 who were illiterate and the World Health Organization estimates for 1993 put at 10 million the number of children living on Brazilian streets (Bejzman, 1998; MNMMR, 1990).

Child labor was another disquieting topic, also beginning to attract international attention. In 1989, 4 million Brazilians under 14 were working (IBGE, 1991), making Brazil, in absolute numbers, a leader in child labor in Latin America – only Haiti and Guatemala had more children in the labor force (Hilbig, 2001). Working conditions were also hazardous. In the agricultural sector, for example, children worked long hours, receiving no pay or payment in kind, handling sharp tools and toxic chemicals, and carrying heavy loads. In the industrial sector, the situation was equally serious, with children being widely exploited in small family businesses. The shoe industry, for instance, was identified as an employer of numerous children, who worked handling toxic glue.

**Limited and inadequate government action**

Government action to address the problems of Brazilian children was, in general, ineffective, and in many instances simply contributed to making a bad situation worse. One infamous example was the Foundation for the Well-being of Minors (FEBEM), created in 1976. In October 1999, an international expert on prison conditions, invited to accompany an Amnesty International delegation to Brazil, wrote in his report: “I should say as clearly as possible that I have never seen children kept in such appalling conditions. In my view the place should be closed down” (Amnesty International, 2000, p. 3). Designed initially as a rehabilitation center for young offenders (children aged 12–17 who had committed a criminal act), FEBEM units had reverted to an outdated, violent, and repressive model of juvenile detention. Amnesty International received reports of torture, ill treatment, and cruelty directed against hundreds of children and adolescents at FEBEM. In 2000, Amnesty described the situation in the following terms:

In the absence of adequate training and support for FEBEM staff, there is a culture of torture, ill-treatment and arbitrary punishments by monitors in juvenile detention centers. Chronically understaffed FEBEM employees and security staff under contract to FEBEM receive no training when put in charge of vastly disproportionate numbers of adolescents. There are no