

FE Y ALEGRIA

Rights and Duties of Being Public as Part of Civil Society

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Fe y Alegría was founded in Caracas, Venezuela, in 1955. It is now a NGO dedicated to education in 17 countries serving more than 1,000,000 persons. Its mission is the transformation of society through quality education for the poorest.

It has been a long way to achieve the growth and clarity of purpose we have now. It has been a process signed by massive participation and the development of strong institutional identity.

When we started in 1955 in most countries the problem was access to education. Now the problem is desertion from education and quality of education. The children do not get enough education nor a type of education that may help them effectively to insert themselves in the labor market and in the modern world and culture as participative subjects. The problem is moving from coverage to quality.

Latin American governments deal with difficulties to raise public education budgets. Poor countries get small budgets. A big part of them must be used to pay the country's debt. Sometimes government social investment is less than it should be. And in the execution of the budget a great part is lost because administrative corruption or clientelistic practices.

As an answer to this situation there is a proposal of focalizing public funds for social investment in order to guarantee that the poorest will receive access to education.

In Fe y Alegría we try to start from a different approach. We start from an approach based in human duties and rights. In that order. We are used to start from rights, from individual rights. But human persons are social. We need to live with others. It is our interchange and communication with others that constitutes our identity. We are in relation to others and these relationships define who we are. We are citizens that share a land, a culture and a society with others. These relationships are the foundation of our duty to contribute to the common good. Our individual well being always happens in a community. Our rights become the duties of the others.

So the right to education comes from our human condition and should not be different because of other reasons. We do not accept today that there is a right for shorter or longer, better or worse education according to race, religion or gender, according to nationality or social class.

If this is true, the poor people, the poor countries, do not have a right to a poor education. The goal of society should be to open the access to the best education to all, with no discrimination. This is a responsibility of any society that calls itself democratic. It is a duty of society to offer the opportunities for education to all its members. That is the reason why governments, as representing societies, must assume this responsibility and create the opportunities to develop the capacities of its citizens.

Education is then primarily a right of the person and a duty of society. The basic responsibility of education is in the governments as representatives of society, therefore is not an exclusive responsibility.

We all enjoy the benefits of a good education for all. We will have better citizens, more productive persons, people better prepare for social life. Education is not only a private good own by the educated person, it is a social good that benefits the whole of society and raises from the rights of all its members. And today, when we talk of society we talk of global society. We do not only have the right of having good educational opportunities for us and our families. We have the right to live in a better educated world. Education is a common good.

These reflections lead us to a different concept of public and private. When we refer to public institutions we used to talk of governments, because they care of common good. When we talk about the private sector we mean the individual or group interests that are not common to all. If the public institutions do not work well, the private sector suffers insecurity, violence, and all kind of tensions. If the private sector deteriorates, the public sector needs to become more aggressive, authoritarian, oppressive.

The boundaries between public and private tend to change. The well being of the private sector becomes a common good. And the public sector guarantees the well being of the private sector.

In Fe y Alegría we understand ourselves as non governmental public sector. It represents the social rights and duties of the members of society (civil society). And it creates a link between public and private that helps to develop the consciousness of social responsibility and confidence in the private sector for its socially responsible investment and management and its cooperation in common good actions.

It opens governments to alliances with non governmental actors and clarifies its central but non exclusive role. Equal rights include quality education for all, and citizens duties include participation in the whole process including goals of education.

In a global world, the international community becomes somehow responsible and beneficiary of better education.

In Latin America we have Fe y Alegría working in 15 countries. We are implementing quality education for the poorest through a common effort of the public sector (governments and civil society) and the private sector, of the national and international community. We have organized a network that involves, in many different ways, millions of persons.

We benefit from scale economy through a very decentralized and efficient structure. Each country has functional autonomy but at the same time is part of a large federation coordinated with a very functional team of six persons. The annual budget of the federation for this year is US\$ 388,962.00. About US\$ 0.39 per student a year.

We gave ourselves, by a very participatory process, a second strategic plan for five years. The eleven programs of this plan are allocated in nine different cities. They create a strong

network of international services through specialized centers. They are financed by different international institutions that permit us to implement teachers and managers formation, institutional development, evaluation of the quality of our education, systematization of experiences, incorporation of computer science in the pedagogical process, elaboration of proposals for radio and technical education, research and negotiation of innovation in educational policies, etc. This plan has permitted to start making true de quality dream.

These programs represent also our main challenge. We can negotiate government funds and local sponsors at the local and national level. We even find international aid agencies and NGO willing to collaborate. But it is more difficult to finance these international programs that permitted a qualitative advance in our educational offer.

We have made partial evaluations of our results. They have shown some strengths: management, identity, value education, participation of the community, less drop outs, more group than individual advance. Next year we are going to evaluate 480 schools (almost 25%) with a methodology that we have been thinking, consulting and trying for two years.

For this presentation we are taking only the example of Fe y Alegría in Dominican Republic.

In 2004 we had 25,439 students in formal education curses. They represent near 1.5% of the public sector students. 78% of our budget was covered by State contributions, mainly salaries. 13% came from international solidarity represented by State agencies (Spain, Japan, France) or Foundations in the first world (Centro Magis-AVINA, Entreculturas, et others). 9 % came from Dominican donors (individual persons or businesses).

We are a non-profit organization with a contract with the Secretary of Education to run public schools. This contract was signed 14 years ago and has been ratified by three other governments of three different political parties. The selection of the personnel is made by

Fe y Alegría but they are employees of the Secretary of Education. Our students, as other public school students, receive free breakfast and books and our schools obtain from the State equipment, maintenance and materials. But due to the insufficient educational budget, it is never enough. Public schools lack almost everything and they must look for help somewhere else.

Frequently they ask the families of their students to pay a small quantity to cover the needs of the schools. Secretary of Education moves from absolute prohibition of this practice to allowance of it conditioned to approval and management by Parents Association. This has given place to many irregularities because of absence of control and clear rules. It results in schools poorly equipped, affecting laboratories, libraries and other learning materials.

Secretary of Education intended a program of private business partnership with schools. But the response has been insufficient. There are not proper mechanisms to offer sufficient guarantee to the donors.

Through Fe y Alegría we have been able to direct many economic and human resources to help the public schools we run. We have an organized volunteers group, we are in the process of getting partners for our schools, we have obtained important donations in cash or species, and in each school we are organizing a group call Relation-School-Community formed by students, parents, teachers and community leaders. Each school becomes the result of the common effort of government and civil society. In the process civil society becomes more conscious of its rights for good education and of its responsibility to contribute to it. And the State institutions develop a new awareness of the importance of working in alliance with civil society.

As a trustworthy international institution Fe y Alegría has been able to obtain the aid of different countries and NGO. The international action developed for this purpose is helping to create in groups of other countries the consciousness of the social responsibility towards the Third World. We are getting not only economic resources but as well voluntaries and help for lobbying from these countries.

One of the big problems of public schools is teachers unions. They come in defense of public education teachers, victims of low salaries, low auto esteem, and low incentives for professional and personal growth. But many times they are involved in party politics and seems that it is more important for them to create problems to the government or to achieve individual advantages than to improve public education. We think that with this attitude they do not represent the majority of the teachers, sure they do not represent the best of them. But their cause is a just one. The strong identity of Fe y Alegría helps to involve teachers in the effort for better education of which their just salaries are an important part. But this permits a completely new approach.

But the main result is that we are starting to break the idea of opposition between public and private, the idea of a totally governmental public sector, and the idea that we only have rights because we already paid taxes for our duties.