Brazil enters the Twenty-First century having achieved a solid record of social and economic progress in the past decade. Starting from an unfavorable position relative to other countries at similar average incomes, Brazil achieved substantial improvements in education, health, and poverty levels during the 1990s. In addition, Brazil was able to transform its macroeconomic environment through a remarkable turnaround in fiscal management and monetary and exchange rate policies, complemented by major policy reforms in the social sectors.

Poverty and inequality remain the most important medium-to long-term development challenges for Brazil. There is no single, simple or quick solution to these challenges, which will require concerted and coordinated action across a number of fronts. Policies directed against poverty include increasing income earning opportunities through macroeconomic stability and renewed growth, targeting policies to enhance the human and physical capital of the poor (especially through education, health, land reform, and urban and rural services) to allow them to take advantage of economic opportunities, and a social safety net to provide protection from shocks in a volatile international economic environment. Importantly, sub-national governments carry a significant share of the responsibilities for many of these policies.

In this context the Northeast of Brazil stands out as one of the country’s priority areas, due to the significant levels of poverty the region has long endured.

The Northeast

The North and Northeast of Brazil are characterized by large wealth inequalities (human, physical, and social) among its states and its people. These regions are home to more than 50% of Brazil’s poor, although their populations correspond to only 35% of the total population. Moreover, the poverty headcount ratio (P0) and the depth of poverty (P2) are both double that of Brazil as a whole and more than five times higher than those of the state of São Paulo. Furthermore, the average number of years of schooling in the Northeast is 30-40
percent lower than that of their peers in the south, and infant mortality rates are at least three times higher.

Not only are the people in the states of the Northeast and North, on average, poorer than in the South of Brazil, but the capacity to deal with and solve these problems is lower. In recent years, while some states have made significant efforts to obtain the capacity necessary to analyze pertinent questions related to the development of their state, others still lack this capacity. There may also be issues of inadequate use of existing capacity, with, for example, less than optimal engagement of university resources to improve understanding of the determinants of developmental change and little participation of NGOs and communities in public policy-making.

**Time for a New Approach**

The World Bank has been working with the states in the North and Northeast for three decades both supplying loans and technical assistance, including State Economic Memoranda (SEM)\(^2\) in the last 1990s. The Bank’s standard approach, based on economic and sector reports, has tended to be both too long and too short in duration: it takes too long to provide quick concrete advice to governments, or to inform debates, on what to do in response to pressing policy challenges; but it is also too short in duration, to build the knowledge base and capacity in the states.\(^1\) Reports are important instruments to initiate dialogue about government policies and to influence the reforms of these policies, but they are not enough. This realization led to the creation of the Rede Nós - The North and Northeast Network for Social Inclusion and Poverty Reduction.\(^3\) The choice of the name “NÓS” seeks to reflect multiple meanings of the word in Portuguese:

The aim of the network is to shift part of the Bank’s focus away from “report writing” towards a process of engagement that supports debate and analysis in the Northeast. The network, supported by the Global Development Learning Network, GDLN – see Box 2) uses two complementary approaches: First, videoconference-based events focusing on fostering learning, debate and capacity building at the state level, increasing analytical skills and participation; and second, parallel activities across the states which enhance, systematize and provide context to the ongoing debate and build capacity through sharing of global experience.

**Developing the Network**

The Nós network, is intended to enhance institutional capacity and expand the knowledge base is support of public policy-making in the region and so accelerate the development of the North and Northeast regions. The activities of Rede Nós have included:

(i) Flying Seminars or Seminários Volantes - a monthly Bank Country Management Unit (CMU) / ESSD\(^4\)/ Global Development Learning Network (GDLN) initiative.

(ii) Large events on Poverty Measurement and Monitoring, Social Inclusion and Inequality, and Monitoring and Evaluation of public policies and programs.

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**Box 2 - The Global Development Learning Network (GDLN)**

The GDLN is a worldwide partnership of distance learning centers (GDLN Centers) and other public, private, and non-governmental organizations committed to development learning and development dialogue for lasting poverty reduction. Offering a unique combination of distance learning technologies and methods, GDLN facilitates knowledge sharing, consultation, coordination, and training. The Latin America and the Caribbean Region of the Global Network is made up of fifteen primary Distance Learning Centers (DLCs) and extensive secondary national networks established in a variety of organizations, including universities, public training institutes, international agencies and private companies.

Since it was launched in June 2000, the Global Network has grown remarkably. Today, it includes over 60 Distance Learning Centers around the world and hundreds of content providers, from various types of organizations, including the GDLN Centers themselves. Distance programs are geared toward development catalysts, members of the public and private sectors and civil society, as well as academic institutions, whose work influences national development in their countries. GDLN programs use a “blended approach”, combining locally-facilitated sessions, materials, on-line discussions or modules and exchanges among countries by videoconference. Learn more at http://lac.gdln.org

In Brazil, GDLN has supported the NOS Network in its aim to develop a permanent forum in the North and Northeast of Brazil to foster an exchange of views, experiences and ideas amongst the decision-makers and shapers of poverty reduction policies at the state and federal level. The development community supporting this initiative includes, but is not limited to, DFID, IFPRR, Banco do Nordeste (Federal Northeast Development Bank), UNDP, SIDA, UNICEF, the World Bank among others.
Two events established the need and feasibility of the Network. First, a seminar on Monitoring and Evaluation of Public Policies was held on March 2002 and this was followed, in February 2003, by an event on Poverty Measurement and Monitoring, the first event carried out in connection with President Lula’s Zero Hunger (Fome Zero) Program.

Rede Nós was launched in a Seminario Volante, which took place on the symbolic date of April 22nd, the date when Brazil was discovered by the Portuguese navigators in 1500. It was broadcast through the GDLN to all 9 capital cities in the Northeast using the facilities of our strategic partner, Banco do Nordeste, as well as to Fortaleza, Brasília, Washington and 20 sites in Ceará. It was also videostreamed online.

The government of the poorest Brazilian state, Piauí, hosted the first event under the umbrella concept of the “four hands”, representing the Bank, Civil Society, Local and Federal Government, and taking into consideration each party’s main questions and concerns. Governor Wellington from Piauí inaugurated the session on behalf of President Lula.

The “flying seminars” have three main objectives:

1) To increase the dialogue between Non-Governmental Organizations, Federal and State Governments, Universities, and Communities in the North and Northeast of Brazil;

2) To increase collaboration both within states to improve coordination, reduce duplication of actions and increase partnerships - and across states, there being many issues that the states have in common;

3) To identify and disseminate successful experiences in the areas of social inclusion and poverty reduction.

An average of 55 invited participants attended in each site (see picture), including key NGOs and networks of NGOs based in the Northeast, members of federal, state, and municipal governments, communities, universities and international organizations. Costs, which were a fraction of what it would cost to convene the group in a face-to-face meeting, were shared by the partners.

The process involved in mobilizing participants was as follows:

- Each State governor appointed one facilitator in their states (usually from the Planning Secretariat) to invite at least 12 key participants for the seminar from different secretariats and government institutions. An average number of five State Secretaries participated from each State; Banco do Nordeste, making use of their videconference network and contacts in the region, invited at least 10 more participants, including professors from local universities and key operational staff;

- The universities provided one or more facilitators in each state and included both graduate students, professors and rectors;

- Key NGO networks such as MADALA (Rural community articulation, encompassing 150 communities), MH2O (involving 6000 youth in urban peripheries), ASA (Semi-Arid articulation, comprising more than 700 NGOs), Ashoka, CARE, Brasil Junior (comprising 600 junior companies in Brazil), RITS, Kellogg Foundation (which collaborates with several organizations in the Northeast and North), as well as communities and other social movements such as CNBB (Brazilian National Confederation of Catholic Bishops) enthusiastically supported the NÓS Network and mobilized participants.

The process was both top-down -as things are normally done in the Northeast of Brazil- and bottom-up -given the high interest aroused in civil society with the dissemination of the Rede Nós Proposal and the willingness of NGOs, communities and universities to participate in it. In this process, the work, creativity and credibility of local World Bank staff was key to bringing together parties that seldom talk to, or cooperate with each other, in a region where social issues are very politicized and public institutions inspire little trust.

Rede Nós was launched with the support of the nine State Governors and the active participation of all State Planning Secretaries, and several NGO representatives who had not previously had a forum to maintain open, ongoing dialogue with the government. Banco do Nordeste also plays a key role supporting the development of the network by funding the seminars and using Nós as a strategic development tool to integrate and empower the Northeastern communities to reduce poverty and foster social inclusion in the region.

**Next steps**

Participants in the Northeast and Universities and NGOs from other regions have welcomed the new approaches
outlined above. Beyond improvements in dialogue, coordination and knowledge sharing, a wealth of other benefits have emerged. Through this interactive and consultative dialogue, for example, needs have surfaced which are providing a general framework for a videoconference dialogue series on several topics under the Seminarios Volantes. These topics are in direct relation to the development of the region and decided jointly by the “four hands” and have led to the:

- Coordinated actions in the Office of President Lula via Rede Nós, notably around the issues of local development in Ceará and violence in Pernambuco;
- Creation of more than 50 partnerships among actors in the Northeast, e.g. the governments of Bahia and Maranhão are working together on public sector management;
- Training courses for specific target audiences, including small farmers.
- A direct forum for the Bank to consult on the Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) and the Northeast Development Strategy, (this occurred in the second and third seminars, respectively).

Currently the team is actively involved in discussions with the private sector and bilateral donors that have previously not been invited to participate in Rede Nós.

Based on feedback received from the participating Government, NGO, University, and Community representatives, Rede Nós intends to launch a website dedicated to enhancing the monitoring and evaluation of public policies, and also to serve as key instrument for integrating and empowering different sectors of society.

The innovative use of information and communications technologies have brought together the stakeholders involved in the development of the Northeast and allowed participation by those who would normally be excluded by distance, cost, or social status. It has also allowed the Bank to enter into a new relationship with its clients, characterized by facilitation of continuous dialogue rather than presentation of periodic studies. The experience of Rede Nós, which can be replicated elsewhere, has shown the clear benefits of moving from product to process and of a clearly defined role for the Bank, as convener and facilitator.

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**Notes**

1 Dorte Verner and Mike Walton (2001): “Learning, Debate, Capacity-building & Support For Public Action in the Northeast Brazil”

2 The SEM type work in the NE is undertaken mainly for two purposes: to deepen the understanding of development processes in a state; and to help state governments on documenting the state of fiscal, growth and poverty issues.

3 The choice of the name “NÓS” seeks to reflect multiple meanings of the word in Portuguese:

   a) The network will have its own identity and is not solely the sum of individualities (“we” or “nós” instead of a sum of “me’s”) or divergent interests; it will be a union based both on common general objectives and an agreement with its basic principles.

   b) Each person or individual can be seen as a link (“nó”) in the network and should become a protagonist, communicating its demands and offering information and knowledge to the others.

   c) Problems of social inclusion and poverty are obstacles or obstructions (knots or “nós”) that are difficult to solve in Brazil, especially in the North and Northeast regions. Social exclusion and poverty is the core (“nó”) of the problem faced by the North and Northeast regions.

4 Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Development Network - The Bank’s Thematic Unit dealing with Environment, Rural and Social Development.

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