Hunger and malnutrition are growing concerns in both developed and developing nations. Many parts of the world are plagued with wars, draughts and other natural disasters causing wide-scale famine. In these situations, wherever possible, the world mobilizes and provides emergency food supplies through United Nations and other nongovernmental relief agencies. In other parts of the world, hunger and malnutrition are endemic but unequally experienced, with the impoverished lower classes suffering the most. Recent crises such as the Asian Tsunami, the SARS epidemic as well as examples of sustained, endemic deprivation, reveal that no single sector is able to address large scale humanitarian crises on its own. In most societies the onus for providing victims food, shelter, medical care and other forms of succour is on nonprofit/nongovernmental organizations. This notwithstanding, in the face of major crises or sustained deprivation, these organizations are unable to shoulder the responsibility by themselves. Active cooperation by all three sectors is needed to effectively address such problems. However, interorganizational collaborations pose challenges even in optimal circumstances. Shared goals, operational similarities, common understanding and a general level of trust are some of the hard-to-attain ingredients necessary for successful collaborations. These are especially difficult to achieve when the collaboration is between organizations from diverse sectors, whose mandates and modes of operation are very different.

The purpose of this paper is to present an exemplar of a multifaceted approach to addressing the issue of food security in a country – Brazil – that, despite being 100% self-sufficient in food, records that 35% of its citizens are living in a state of malnourishment and food insecurity (Rocha, 2004). The Brazilian situation is particularly interesting. Nongovernmental organizations, often receiving the bulk of their funding from foreign agencies such as OXFAM, have long been involved in nutrition and food security programs, alleviating problems caused by market failure (Rocha, 2005). However the scope of the problem is so large that an underfunded nongovernmental sector cannot on its own, redress the nutritional deficits of forty million people. The president of Brazil, Lula da Silva, has made food security a priority of his government as evidenced by the Zero Hunger program. Although an initiative of the central government, part of the program is carried out at the local level by the Councils for Food and Nutrition Security, made up of government, nonprofit and for-profit representatives. Working together, their mandate varies from discussing and developing policies to implementing programs to address food insecurity.

The study of interorganizational collaboration straddles disciplines; however, the two most frequently cited theories underlying explanations for these relationships are organizational theories: Resource Dependence Theory and Transaction Costs Theory. This is not surprising as both theories address the need for controlling environmental uncertainty. The scope and frequency of collaborations has been observed to be steadily increasing as environmental uncertainty grows (Connor et al., 1999; Mulroy & Shay, 1997; Provan & Milward, 1995; Rapp & Whitfield, 1999). For weaker organizations, collaborations can provide access to scarce resources, thus ensuring some stability in times of uncertainty and also furnish them with added legitimacy, while for more powerful ones they are a route to attaining control over resources (Oliver, 1990; Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Contrary to expectations, resource scarcity is more likely to support cooperation than it is to increase competition (Aiken & Hage, 1968; Molnar, 1978). Joining forces can also reduce transaction costs and maximize benefits, thus leading to increased organizational efficiencies (Oliver, 1990; Williamson, 1975, 1985, 1991; Dickson & Weaver, 1997; Gray & Wood, 1991).

Despite the increase in collaborative relationships, almost half of all efforts fail (Dyer et al., 2001) because the factors necessary for successful collaboration are difficult to achieve. These have been identified as: shared vision and values; clear goals; good personal
relationships; frequent interaction; expectation of mutual benefit; shared power and risk; and mutual trust (Austin, 2000; Huxham, 1993; Phillips & Graham, 2000; Rapp & Whitfield, 1999; Wilson & Charleton, 1993). The difficulties in achieving these synergies are exacerbated in cross-sectoral collaborations (Googins & Rochlin, 2000; Milne et al., 1996).

Most of the literature on cross-sectoral alliances focuses on for-profit/nonprofit or government/nonprofit collaborations. The paucity of literature on tri-sectoral collaborations reflects the fact that these collaborations are themselves at very early stages of development (Googins & Rochlin, 2000). Despite some success stories (Yirkew, 2003; Warner & Sullivan, 2003), tri-sectoral collaborations are fraught with problems stemming from different world-views and modes of operation (Milne, et al., 1996).

In this paper we examine the current situation in Brazil by presenting a brief history of Brazil's food and agricultural policy. This section culminates in the government's efforts to harness the resources of all three sectors of society, government, nonprofit and corporate, in insuring food security for all of its citizens. It is clear that the “on the ground” implementation of any food security policy is predominantly carried out by civil society organizations. However, as will be shown in the second section of this paper, civil society in Brazil is a comparatively new phenomenon, and their work in food security corresponds to the growth, in general of civil society organizations. The third section of the paper describes the work done by seven NGOs that participate in the tri-sectoral collaborative Councils for Food and Nutrition Security.

The data presented in this paper was gathered by archival/historical analysis and in-depth key informant interviews with representatives of the seven NGOs and the ministry officials responsible for food security.

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