

Social protection in Brazil: what has changed in social assistance after the 1988 Constitution

Proteção social no Brasil:
o que mudou na assistência social após a Constituição de 1988

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Abstract *This paper discusses the changes in the social assistance component of social protection in the two decades that followed the 1988 Constitution. It discusses the transformations of social protection and social assistance in the past decades and the processes that in the 1990s advanced the reform of social assistance policies in Brazil without, however, producing great changes in how services were delivered. By 2000 there had been a great expansion of resources as well as benefits and services coverage in social assistance. This paper argues that conditional cash transfer programs, though created and spread in an international context of restrictive policies, when integrated into Brazil's public and universal system of social assistance, substantively widened the scope of social protection. Some effects of the expansion in the Brazilian social protection system are identified: less income inequality; creation of an institutional capacity in the area of social assistance; the social, political and symbolic meaning of the inclusion of a large segment of the population in a public system of social assistance by means of a provision structure that does not belong to traditional devices of philanthropy and clientelism.*

Key words *Social protection, Social assistance, Conditional cash transfer programs, Bolsa Família Program, Poverty, Social inequalities*

Resumo *O trabalho discute as mudanças do componente assistencial da proteção social nas duas décadas que se seguiram à Constituição de 1988. Discute as transformações da proteção e assistência social nas últimas décadas e os processos que, na década de 1990, fizeram avançar os processos de reforma da política assistencial social no Brasil, sem no entanto produzir grandes mudanças no modelo de oferta de serviços. A partir dos anos 2000, há uma significativa expansão de recursos e de cobertura de benefícios e serviços na área assistencial. Argumenta que os programas de transferência de renda, embora surgidos e difundidos em um contexto internacional de políticas restritivas, no Brasil, ao se integrarem a um sistema público e universal de assistência social, alargaram substantivamente o escopo da proteção social. Alguns efeitos da expansão do sistema de proteção social no Brasil são apontados: diminuição da desigualdade de renda; construção da capacidade institucional na área da assistência social; o significado social, político e simbólico da inclusão de um amplo segmento populacional a um sistema público de assistência social por meio de uma estrutura de provisão fora dos tradicionais mecanismos de filantropia e clientelismo.*

Palavras-chave *Proteção social, Assistência social, Programas de transferência condicionada de renda, Programa Bolsa Família, Pobreza, Desigualdades sociais*

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Introduction

Even though most of the debate on social assistance policies during the 2000s has been about conditional cash transfer programs for poor families - especially after the Bolsa Família Program (Family Grant Program) was created in 2003 and quickly expanded coverage to reach over 11 million families in 2006 - this process took place together with extensive changes in the field of social protection in the two decades that followed the promulgation of the 1988 Constitution: at the political level, through decentralization and participation processes; in the forms of governance through organizational flexibilization and the creation of new arenas and actors to formulate and implement policies; in the field of social assistance by creating a public and universal social protection system.

The introduction in Brazil of cash transfer programs occurred in parallel with sectoral processes of formulation and implementation of social assistance policy, which refers to the mobilization of a great number of actors at conferences, forums and social assistance councils in the period. Only as of 2003 did poverty fighting via conditional cash transfer programs adopted in the mid-1990s begin to be integrated to the social assistance system. A dualism that expresses different paths, political coalitions and conflicts of values translated in the opposition between targeting x universalism, which defines the logic and the principles of the Bolsa Família Program and of the social assistance policy post-1988.

This paper discusses the institutionalization of social assistance. It approaches the general transformations of social protection and social assistance in recent decades; the reform processes of this field in Brazil in the 1990s, its expansion and redirecting in the 2000s and some effects of these processes.

Social protection and social assistance

The 1980s experienced a change in the meaning of "social protection" when central countries, facing the effects of fiscal crisis, began to reform their classic social security policies. As part of the rent-rentment agenda and the restriction of universalist policies, a set of actions and programs to face the increase in poverty and vulnerability began to be adopted by several countries and publicized by multilateral organizations.

The conception of social protection took on a certain polysemy, becoming to be used for services

and benefits secured as rights, as well as for a range of other programs and actions aimed at facing different levels of destitution, risk and vulnerability, and rendered by several types of institutions, public or private. At the beginning of the 1990s, the consequences of the adjustment policies were already clear in the international environment, in a context that also included the collapse of socialist regimes and their social protection systems. 'Safety nets' came to designate a set of interventions and programs directed to the poor¹⁻⁵ that were massively publicized with the support of multilateral organizations, especially the World Bank. The propagation of conditional cash transfer programs is part of the changes in social protection systems, in which the meaning of social assistance itself also changed. The term acquired a much wider spectrum, involving the formation of human capital and reduction of poverty in the long run, a turn from traditional social assistance^{6, 2}.

Based on the argument that in a context of fiscal restriction the resources should be allocated to those with most need, the combination of safety nets, cash transfers and targeting the poor appeared as a new strategy in social protection. It is true that these positions were never unified among the multilateral agencies themselves, as the United Nations (UN) agencies dealing with social issues have always been critical about the socially adverse consequences of reforms. Some international benchmarks directed by the UN system, such as the *World Summit on Social Development* in 1995 and the Millennium Declaration⁷ were able to achieve an international convergence around a view of development including social dimensions and the establishment of goals for the eradication of poverty, as well as the increase of democracy and equity.

During the 2000s the World Bank itself began to advocate that the fight against poverty amid abundance is one of the main world challenges⁸. The idea that poverty comprises not only low income and consumption but also low education, health, nutrition rates and other areas of human development, was disseminated with its approval. In 2001, the first sectorial document on social protection was released that defended social protection programs not only to help people face periods of crisis but also to serve as a springboard to overcome poverty⁴. Social protection is defined as every public intervention to help individuals, households and communities to manage risks or support the chronically poor. In the view of social risk management, these actions should be part of integrated approaches in poverty reduction to decrease

vulnerability of families and guarantee future capacities^{4, 2}.

The broadening of the poverty concept corresponds to the broadening of the concept of social protection³, whose focus is income provision, as well as education and health services to foster human capital and reduce poverty among generations. If during the 80s the agenda of the multilateral banks revolved around state reform, deregulation, privatization, commercial and financial opening and at the political level issues such as transparency and accountability in public action, in the beginning of the 2000s the fight against poverty gained prominence.

New arguments about the relations between poverty and development are asserted as the idea of "pro-poor development"⁹ and Sen's theory of capacities¹⁰. The view that the policies and institutions aimed at vulnerable groups may promote efficiency and equity is based on evidence that investments in basic human needs improve productivity and economic development. Besides income, other dimensions of poverty are emphasized by sustaining a discourse on the need for access to assets such as health and education and conditions to overcome poverty. The association among economic development, equity and democracy reinforces the idea of the role of social protection systems as promoters of the development of individual and social capacities.

The conditional cash transfer programs targeting the poor are then defended for their functions while distributional and poverty reduction, produced several types of criticism. Governance and implementation problems produce inclusion and exclusion errors, thus limiting the effectiveness of poverty reduction. Targeting, in this sense, would be affordable only for countries with more sophisticated administrative apparatus and a State that already had a considerable reach into its population¹¹. In the perspective of the rights, criticism is sharper. Since the idea of a "minimum income" granted to beneficiaries on the basis of means testing and requiring the fulfilling of conditionalities would be opposed to rights, the latter is better expressed in the idea of "unconditional basic income" of citizenship¹²⁻¹⁵. The classic meaning of social protection should not be reduced to access to money, as it is also intended to encourage processes that can guarantee universal rights.

In Brazilian society, this issue refers to the relation between inequality and exclusion. This is a recurring topic in discussions about the obstacles which the country faces. Souza, for example, sees the sources of social exclusion in Brazil in the way

modernity was built through the State and the market, two institutions that have never been able to integrate slaves and their descendants effectively and produce an awareness of interdependence among the several social classes¹⁶. Reis, on the other hand, sees the formation of a feeling of belonging as crucial to the possibility of a collective action that allows overcoming the frontiers of particularism towards universalism¹⁷. For her, the acute disparities in life conditions produce such huge differences in cognitive directions that feelings of belongings simply do not persist. The many destitute only seek protection and, not feeling they belong to society, cannot regard the public assets as their own. Thus, their participation is in order to obtain favors and not rights.

The institutionalization of universalism - and its pair, equality - as an organizing principle for the public sphere, constitutes one of the pillars of modern societies. The processes of social and symbolic exclusion hinder the formation of feelings of belonging and social interdependence, needed to institutionalize universalism in the public sphere¹⁸. Social protection systems, when promoting inclusion to a system of rights, have a crucial role to form feelings of belonging and social interdependence - and therefore social, political and symbolic inclusion - that are required for the effective institutionalization of the public sphere.

From the viewpoint of rights, the redistributive, developmentalist and social inclusive roles of universalist policies, much more comprehensive than the ones of safety nets, remain still relevant for those who have always bet on the relationship between social policies and development^{5, 11, 19}. Even though the reference is no longer the condition of the post-war Europe, when universal access was combined to reconstruction and economic expansion in a classic social welfare regime, it remains crucial, as Townsend argues to place the importance of social inclusion politically and to establish minimum life standards for people⁵.

In the disputes about the meaning of social protection, the role of multilateral organizations in the formation and diffusion of the poverty agenda cannot be underestimated. However, as literature on diffusion highlights, this role must be seen in the light of specific national contexts in which the choices depend on different variables. This is what Melo does, by demonstrating - using the Brazilian pension reform - how national answers to those influences are heterogeneous and modeled by the institutions and domestic processes. The ideas and paradigms of policies spread in the context of globalization provide a "set of possibilities"

for choices on which incur institutional, administrative and political constraints and path dependency inherent to the several areas and sectoral policies²⁰.

In Brazil, poverty as an “issue” gained greater relevance in the mid 1990s, when the decentralization of universalist policies advanced alongside the introduction of new programs focused on poverty. Facing the polysemy of the social protection notion, several issues collide. Among them: what type of social protection are we talking about? Are safety nets as such specific, precise and short-term interventions focused on the poor or are they part of a social protection system guaranteeing universal rights?

Social protection and social assistance reforms in Brazil

Draibe identifies two cycles of Brazilian social policies reform. The first in the 1980s in a scenario of economic instability and democratization process; the second, as of the second half of the 1990s, when - in the context of economic stability and of institutional reforms - there has been an advancement of decentralization and participation processes as well as the establishment of funds to finance policies, offices and state and city councils²¹.

Costa points out that while the impact of the adjustment policies on the social protection system during the 1980s was only residual, with the increase of public expenditures and the incorporation of a new population by the 1988 Constitution, the 1990s were characterized by the “the denial of the universalist agenda in certain social areas, focusing on programs and constraints to social funding”²². The country got to achieve, therefore, universalist rights for a universalist social welfare in a moment when social financing was restricted.

The decade began with the first president of Brazil to be directly elected - Fernando Collor de Mello - after the end of the authoritarian regime. The restriction on social expenditure was one of the points of adjustment to stabilize the currency; the latter goal however, failed. In the second half of 1992, with the impeachment of the President which was involved in a corruption scandal, a political coalition in the Republic’s Presidency allowed a relative recovery of social financing. After the Real Plan in 1994, currency stability improved conditions so that social protection policies could continue - according to new specific sectorial paths - with their institutionalization processes. However, this process occurred in parallel with the inclusion

in the social agenda of strategies focused on the poor, since the restrictions and social financing on the social protection reforms remained.

Policy implementation within the framework of fiscal and political decentralization implied in greater autonomy for municipalities. The rise and institutionalization of new actors, arenas and partnerships produced new kinds of governance as well as new relations between the State and civil society. Nevertheless, throughout the 1990s, the provision of social assistance services suffered little change in its mode of operation. Non-profit private entities, financed by governmental transferences and tax exemption, remained as the main providers of the services, working in a context of low regulation and state coordination.

In 1995, the First Social Assistance National Conference, with the participation of several sectors and organizations in society, extended the discussion on a social assistance policy based on rights. Yet the State continued to finance philanthropy, slowing down the assimilation of social assistance as a public policy inserted in the scope of social welfare. In other words, institutionalization advanced in the field of political decentralization but not in the provision of services and benefits as part of a system, which would only happen in the next decade. The introduction of poverty reduction strategies also characterizes this period, however these were not integrated into traditional social assistance programs.

In a context that combined democracy, poverty and inequality, the decade also witnessed the mobilization of civil society such as the Citizenship Action against Famine and the struggle for political visibility of famine and poverty. In 1993 the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security - CONSEA was created as a consultive office linked to the Presidency of the Republic; it comprised nine ministries and 21 representatives of civil society. In 1995, during Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s government, CONSEA was ended. The new strategy for poverty reduction Solidarity Community was created that sought to articulate in a decentralized fashion and by means of partnerships with civil society preexisting programs in different ministries to confront famine and destitution. The 1072 poorest municipalities were selected (excluding capitals) that gathered around 700 thousand extremely poor families, or approximately 7% of all extremely poor families in the country; this meant approximately 53% of the extremely poor families in the municipalities²³. Deficiencies in the intersectorial articulation, in the monitoring of implementation and in the selection of beneficia-

ries limited the reach of this innovative attempt to address poverty and inequality in the country²⁴.

When the 1997 global financial crisis hit Brazil, poverty and inequality persisted even if together with advancements in legislation on social assistance rights. The new programs to fight poverty identified a huge client population that was unprotected or distributed among the traditional assistance programs and the assistance benefits achieved after the 1988 Constitution. However, until the next decade, different programs and benefits remained fragmented among different offices and government levels. There was no national and systemic logic.

In 1995, the first conditional cash transfer programs were implemented in the city of Campinas, the State of São Paulo and the Federal District. In 1996, the Federal Government launched the Child Labor Eradication Program (PETI), in order to remove children and adolescents from early labor, combining cash transfers with participation in longer studies and related activities. All these programs were aimed at poor families with children or adolescents.

In Brazil, according to Britto, the international pressure for the creation of conditional cash transfer programs focused on the poor was less than in the case of other safety nets in Latin America, such as the social investment funds. The federal *Bolsa Escola* Program, (School Grant Program) which preceded the Bolsa Família Grant Program, was mainly inspired by pre-existent local actions rather than in international counseling and it was initially based on governmental financing since international resources were only received later²⁵.

In the scope of social assistance rights, the Continuous Cash Benefit (BPC) was the main benefit implemented during this period. Constitutionally guaranteed, it consists of a monthly minimum wage for the elderly over 65 years of age who cannot provide for themselves and for the disabled who cannot maintain an independent life and work. Regulated by the Organic Act of Social Assistance (LOAS) in 1993, its implementation started in 1996.

At the end of the 1990s, despite the high volume of social expenditure - around 21% of the GDP, the intensity of poverty remained relatively stable. Its decrease was mostly associated with the effects of the currency stabilization policy - Real Plan in 1995 - rather than to inequality reduction policies or strategies focused on the poor. With the Gini coefficient during the two previous decades around 0.60, the country entered the 21st century with income inequality at unacceptable levels if compared to other countries^{26,27}.

In this scenario, not only targeting strategies of social programs in poorer segments became stronger but also the criticism, especially from the left, about these strategies. The arguments range from low efficiency in reaching the poorest and in reducing inequality^{28,29}, to its non-universalist, compensatory, philanthropic and selective character that is disconnected from the social welfare system of rights^{14,30-32}. For Draibe, this false dichotomy polarized the debate on the programs against poverty, producing a certain paralysis among intellectuals and opinion makers and causing the delay to face poverty decisively³³.

A new social assistance cycle

In the 2000s, important changes have introduced a new social assistance cycle in a movement that started timidly in Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government and was expanded in Lula's government, but which at the same time redirects certain previous processes. The tendency to extend social protection is evident in the Pluriannual Plan guidelines (PPA) of 2000-2003; in the introduction of federal cash transference programs that were soon unified in the Bolsa Família Program³⁴; in the definition of the two levels of protection within the social assistance system (basic and special) and in the increase of resources invested in social assistance programs, including the conditional cash transfers.

During Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government, after the approval by the National Congress of the Fund for Fighting and Eradicating Poverty in 2001, the first federal conditional cash transfer programs were launched by three different ministries: Bolsa Escola (School Grant), of the Ministry of Education; Bolsa Alimentação (Food Grant), of the Ministry of Health, Auxílio-Gás (Gas Voucher), of the Ministry of Mines and Energy. By 2002, Bolsa Escola, with the greatest coverage, reached around 5 million families²⁵.

Supported by a coalition of left wing parties and popular movements, Lula's election, albeit initially causing great international suspicion, produced a set of favorable conditions for the impulse and direction that social assistance took. These must be highlighted. In 2003, the first year of the government, unification of the federal conditional cash transfer programs in the Bolsa Família Program made it possible to expand nationwide to reach all families below the established poverty threshold. Likewise, the Fourth Social Assistance National Conference passed a resolution to create a Unified Social Assistance System.

The first year of the Lula government was characterized by difficulties, exhaustion and mistakes in the attempts to implement a policy to fight famine and poverty, then concentrated in the Extraordinary Ministry of Food Security responsible for the management of this policy *Zero Hunger*. Besides a new conditional cash transfer benefit, the Cartão Alimentação (Food Card) to be used exclusively to buy food, the articulation of many programs and intersectoral actions were also expected, such as nutritional education, family agriculture, food distribution, food stock, vegetable gardens, community kitchens and school meals. The difficulty to articulate a meaningful number of institutions and establish partnerships among levels of the government and organizations from civil society demonstrated the limits for this strategy to reach the proposed goals.

The unification of federal programs of conditional cash transfer as the Bolsa Família Program (except for PETI at this moment) was one of the first steps to rationalize program management against famine and poverty, which would make national expansion viable. In its turn, the creation of the Ministry of Social Development and the Fight against Hunger (MDS) in January 2004, brought about the organizational conditions to integrate or articulate the different social assistance programs and benefits. Thus, the traditional social assistance actions, the conditional cash transfer programs and part of the food security actions that had been dispersed and fragmented in different offices were unified by federal management.

Between 2000 and 2007 there was a steady increase in the resources of the cash transfer programs and benefits that, as of 2004 became the MDS's responsibility, namely Bolsa Família Program, Child Labor Eradication Program, Continuous Cash Benefit and Youth Agent. The budget put into practice in 2007 reveals almost a fourfold compared to the beginning of the period as seen in Figure 1.

The rapid expansion of the Bolsa Família Program after its unification in 2003 and the high approval rates obtained by president Lula, especially in the poorest regions and with the greatest coverage, stimulated the political debate as well as accusations, especially by a conservative media and opposing parties, about the particularistic and electoral character of the program, the non-fulfillment of conditionalities and targeting errors. Implicitly denying social assistance as a right, attacks were in a certain way able to neutralize or even render obsolete the critics by the left. Besides, the obvious effects of the inclusion of the poorest in a social

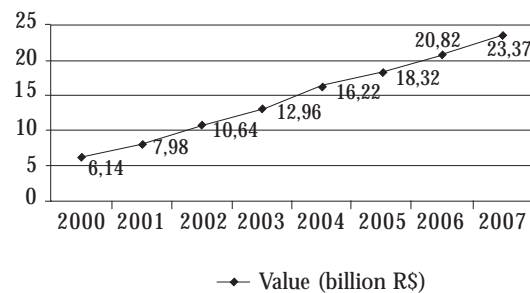


Figure 1. Budgetary execution of cash transfer programs: 2000- 2007. Values corrected by inflation.

Source: Brazilian House of Representatives/SIAFI (National System for the Federal Government's Finance Administration)/ Cadernos do Suas, III, Ministry of Social Development and the Fight Against Hunger.

protection system were able to, to some extent, transcend the ideological dispute between targeting x universalism, thus giving the government support for a rapid expansion of coverage of a program that was clearly a success among the population's poorer strata. An important part of the poorest and most vulnerable population was included in the protection system and in the popular consumption market.

Even if the internal conditions and political decisions have been decisive for the fast expansion of the program, the role of multilateral organizations - especially the World Bank - cannot be neglected. This includes the different activities to build and diffuse the agenda, such as financial resources, technical support and the promotion of international events to discuss experiences with the presence of governmental technicians, scholars, specialists and others from the policy community. Between 2002 and 2006, the World Bank organized three international conferences about conditional cash transfer programs, in Mexico, Brazil and Turkey.

This agenda diffusion process fit a scenario that combined at the global level the reformulation of social protection paradigms and at the national level the non-fulfillment of the promise of an integrated social welfare system^{35,36}. However, it is necessary to observe the meaning of the adoption of the conditional cash transference programs within Brazil's contextual conditions. During the 2000s social assistance changes its scope due to the national expansion of the Bolsa Família Program and its convergence on the social-assistance rights system. When highlighting universal coverage in the

beneficiary group, Jaccoud concludes: “if PBF cannot be identified as a social right, its creation, however, meant an expressive widening of Brazilian social welfare in the field of income security”³⁷.

In Brazil, contrary to the situation of retraction or disassembly of social protection systems that occurred in several countries, most of the target-population already lived in destitution and informality. It had never had access to any kind of direct cash transfers, whose counterpart had not been bargained vote or other forms of loyalty through patronage but rather the objective condition to send their kids to school or to a health care center.

Even if targeting errors occur in programs based on selection of beneficiaries according to a means test, the families supported by the Bolsa Familia Program are among those who represent the worst social rates of the Brazilian population. Table 1 compares rates for sanitary drainage, destination of garbage and water supply among families included in the Bolsa Familia Program and the population in general.

In July 2006, the Bolsa Familia Program reached the goal of covering 100% of families below the poverty threshold established for eligibility for the program; coverage reached 11.1 million families. Several conditions contributed to the political viability of the conditional cash transfer programs added from different social sectors and reaching 5,564 cities after its unification. The opposition between targeting and universalism was overcome by the evidence of inclusion of the poorest in a social protection system, the ideas of im-

mediate relief for poverty by means of direct cash transfers and the and the disruption of intergenerational poverty by means of conditionalities in health and education were attractive to a broad ideological and professional spectrum from economists and social assistants as well as health and education professionals. Therefore, pragmatism won over ideological resistances. The national coverage of the Bolsa Familia Program and the creation of a Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS) were the elements that defined the characteristics of social assistance in the country in the late 2000s.

Unified Social Assistance System – SUAS

A new step for social assistance was taken with the resolution to create a Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS) at the Fourth National Social Assistance Conference in 2003. A National Social Assistance Policy (PNAS) was approved in 2004, with the definition of two different levels of protection: basic and special. Even though SUAS had been conceived in the 1990s by keeping in its architecture the consolidated position of philanthropic organizations, PNAS established a responsibility priority at each government level in the conduct of the policy that required the role of the private sector to be defined as complementary and to submit to state regulation and coordination. It was intended to breach the philanthropic bias while offering services, characterized as social assistance rights³⁸.

As of 2005, the federal resources destined to financing social assistance actions reflect this perspective. In 2007, resources transferred to cities in order to co-finance the offer of services had increased by 36% compared to 2004³⁹. This increase was directed mostly to the implantation and continuous defrayal of the new public municipal service units instituted by the SUAS, especially the Social Assistance Reference Center (CRAS), social assistance units that constitute the front door to the system.

In the period from 2003 to 2008, 3,910 CRAS were implemented with financing from the federal government. The expansion of these units gained impulse as of 2005 as Figure 2 shows. These CRAS are spread among 3187 municipalities, which correspond to 57% of the Brazil’s municipalities. Besides these units co-financed by the MDS, approximately 1,200 CRAS are financed exclusively by municipal and state resources, for a total of 5,110 CRAS⁴⁰.

In basic protection, the implementation of Continuous Cash Benefit, which had started in 1996

Table 1. Living conditions: families benefiting from PBF and 2006 population.

	PBF*	PNAD*
Sanitary Drainage		
Collection Network/ Septic tank	52.7 %	70.7 %
Others (inadequate)	47.3 %	29.4 %
Destination of trash		
Collected	66.4 %	86.6 %
Not collected	33.6	13.4 %
Water supply		
General network	65 %	83.2 %
Others	35 %	16.8 %

*Total in millions of families: PBF- 10.801; PNAD (National Household Survey) - 53.114.

Sources: SENARC (National Secretariat for Citizen Income/ Ministry of Social Development and the Fight Against Hunger and PNAD – Synthesis of 2006 Indicators, Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, Rio de Janeiro, 2007).

with around 346,000 beneficiaries, expanded to cover a total of 2.68 million beneficiaries in 2007 (see Figure 3). In budgetary terms, R\$11.55 billion were spent in 2007, being R\$5.99 billion in payments for the physically disabled and R\$5.56 for the elderly.

Effects of social assistance expansion

The most evident redistribution effects are associated with cash transference programs. Even though it is difficult to determine the full impacts of these programs on poverty and on several types of inequality, studies have shown positive correlations with income inequalities. In fact during the 2000s, the income inequality scenario has been changing.

The degree of inequality declined continuously. 50 % of the drop is attributed to the evolution of income not derived from work, among which are cash transfer benefits and programs²⁸. Between 2001 and 2006 there was a drop of 3.45 points of the Brazilian Gini Coefficient, ending the period at 0.56 - a very remarkable reduction if it is maintained in the next years²⁷. Soares *et al.* estimate for the year 2004 that BPC and Bolsa Família were responsible for 28% of the reduction of the Gini Coefficient compared to 1995, with the BPC responsible for 7% and the conditional cash transfer programs for 21% of this drop⁴¹. The income increase among the poorest, enabled by cash transfers, has removed a great number of people from a situation of complete destitution and poverty. Based on the National Household Survey -2004, Jaccoud estimates that without the PBF, the BPC and the Social Security Pension Fund, the number of paupers would go from 11% to 23% and the number of poor people would rise from 30% to 42%³⁸.

The second effect was the increase in the institutional capacity of the State in the field of social assistance. The unification of conditional cash transfer programs managed by a single ministry, also responsible for social assistance, induced a similar administrative restructuring, especially in municipalities. Since the operational format for decentralization of social policies in Brazil tends to reproduce at local levels the organizational formats of the federal administration, the need to manage Bolsa Família Program promoted an improvement in the municipal administrative structures and resources in the social assistance area. The fact that the management of a social program with national coverage and great political and social legitimacy such as Bolsa Família became part of the actions developed by social assistance municipal offices favored the status of this area in municipalities.

With the budget, tax and management diversity of Brazilian municipalities, problems related to the governance and decentralized implementation of social policies are huge. However, the implementation of SUAS and of Bolsa Família Program has intensified the institutional and organizational apparatus of municipalities. The induction to institutional capacity and professionalization of social assistance have made municipal office of social assistance take responsibility for the implementation and management of Bolsa Família Program in the scope of municipal governments. In 2005, 80% of the Brazilian municipalities had a Municipal Social Assistance Office, 21% united more than one sectorial policy and 59% consisted in an exclusive Office for this area⁴². In the other municipalities, the

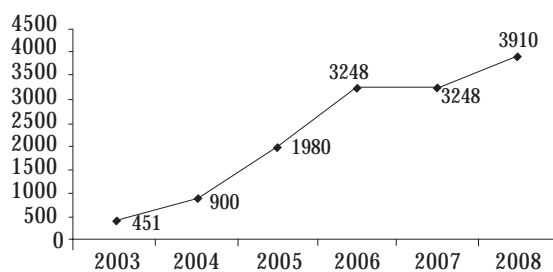


Figure 2. Evolution of CRAS implementation.

Source: National Secretariat for Social Assistance/ Ministry of Social Development and the Fight Against Hunger.

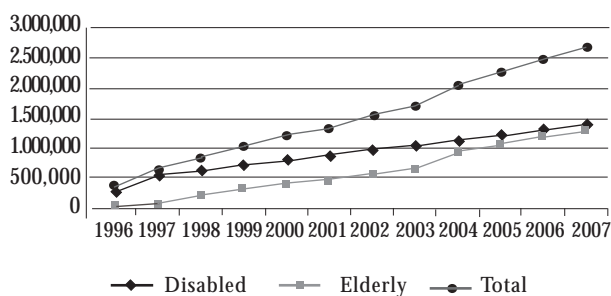


Figure 3. Evolution of BPC coverage.

Source: Ministry of Social Development and the Fight Against Hunger.

political management of social assistance was performed by some department or sector subordinate to another Office or to the Executive Branch. Only 16 municipalities lacked specific administrative structures to manage this area. In the same year, in 91% of the municipalities, the managing body of social assistance in the municipality was responsible for the Unified Registry System for Federal Government Social Programs, which registers the families benefited by Bolsa Família Program⁴².

Financial incentives to the municipalities for the improvement of the management (updating registry and information; information on health and education conditions) were created by means of the Decentralized Management Index (IGD). In December 2006, 5,346 cities had received over R\$160 million in federal resources to incentive management based on the IGD, used to acquire equipment, hire human resources, etc.⁴³. Due to the political success of Bolsa Família Program, many municipalities created their own cash transfer programs, be it by complementing the amounts of the cash transfers, be it with activities aimed at the beneficiaries of federal programs^{44,45}.

The third effect is the social, political and symbolic meaning of the inclusion of a large segment of the population in a public system of social assistance by means of the creation of mechanisms to provide benefits and services beyond the traditional standards of assistentialism/clientelism. It is not only a matter of access to consumption via cash transfers but the creation of institutional and organizational bases to include the poorest and most vulnerable social segments in a protection system, in which the benefit of assistance does not mean favour and patronage. Even if the particularist relations remain as a phenomenon that is far from disappearing from the public sphere, especially in the field of social assistance, the creation of SUAS and the institutionalization of the Bolsa Família Program as a means of income security have produced a field of universalist action for the area of social protection.

Final considerations

The specific conformation of the Brazilian social assistance system results from a path combining constitutional processes and achievements, the

emergence of new actors and social participation arenas - therefore new projects and disputes - and also conditions produced by other policies such as currency stability and the introduction of a poverty agenda in the 1990s. Compared to, for example, the health sector, the advancements in the area of social assistance were slow and intermittent, because, among other things, the lack of voice of this client population. About 10 years have passed since the publication of the Organic Act of Social Assistance and the approval of SUAS and the Social Assistance National Policy. In this period, the conditional cash transfer programs aiming at the poor were adopted and expanded, which ended up converging in the same social protection system.

Even though the conception of social protection as part of a welfare system is wider than the provision of services and social assistance benefits, the institutionalization of universalization processes of social assistance has, notwithstanding, included a population segment that had, until recently, a limited access to a system of rights in this field. The social assistance system substantively widened the scope of social inclusion. This is one of the main gains of the period in social protection.

The political, economic and symbolic dimension that took on the Bolsa Família Program was able to mobilize - for and against - a wide circle of actors and opinion makers. A positive, unintentional and unforeseen effect of this political exposition was the political debate on poverty, inequality and other social policies. Giving visibility to the existence of 11 million poor families, the program revealed at the same time the insufficiency of the other policies in Brazil in reaching the poorest populations for different reasons, from financing and implementation problems to bad quality of the services offered.

Certainly the redistributive, institutional, political and symbolic effects of social assistance policies have limits to reduce the different forms of poverty, inequality and exclusion in Brazilian society. The fight against famine and poverty as an object of public policies, the introduction of a national income guarantee program and the implementation of benefits and services as social assistance rights have posed a problem to the public agenda that other countries with more mature welfare systems had already posed decades ago: the importance of social inclusion and the establishment of minimum life standards for the whole population.

Collaborators

J Vaitsman has contributed with the general conception, analysis and writing; GRB Andrade contributed to bibliographical survey and writing; LO Farias contributed to data survey and analysis. The authors are grateful to Caio Nakashima.

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Artigo apresentado em 06/11/2008

Aprovado em 09/01/2009

Versão final apresentada em 30/01/2009