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The Threat to Bolsa Familia

With more than a quarter of its residents living below the poverty line, it is abundantly clear that Brazil has an income inequality problem. Of the country's 207 million inhabitants, more than 50 million earn less than six dollars a day. However, change is coming thanks to a government funded welfare program called Bolsa Familia. The program provides families with financial aid so long as they educate and vaccinate their children in an effort to lift these families out of the extreme poverty, defined by the UN as "a condition characterized by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information", that 8.5 percent of the country is faced with. In a society that tends to ignore these struggling families, Bolsa Familia stands out as one of the most effective sources of alleviation from poverty that is characteristically impossible to escape.

Bolsa Familia works because it is a temporary program that helps only those who need it, and currently provides social assistance to over 14 million families. Empirically, "Ninety-four percent of the funds" from Bolsa Familia "reach the poorest 40 percent of the population" ("Bolsa Família: Changing the Lives", 2016). This statistic demonstrates that Bolsa Familia is unique within Brazil's government as being relatively free of corruption. Studies prove that most of the money received by families from the program is used to buy food, school supplies, and clothes for their children. This money is by no means a large sum, on average amounting to under 60 USD a month, but for the receiving families it provides enough support such that they can afford to buy food and clothing. More than 75% of Brazilians stand in support of the program and "most Brazilians, sixty percent, would rather pay more taxes and have better universal health and education" ("Brazilians Support Bolsa Família", 2013). Ultimately, it is clear that Brazilians utilize Bolsa Familia for good and are willing to provide the program with funding to continue its efforts.

Such funding is critical in reducing both income inequality, and the number of Brazilians living in poverty. The Bolsa Familia program "accounted for a significant share (20-25%) of Brazil's recent (and impressive) reduction of inequality and 16% of the recent fall in extreme poverty" (Lindert, Linder, Hobbs, & Brière, 2007). Even more impressive, Bolsa Familia achieved this with only .05 percent of the Brazil's GDP as funding. The program has become an international phenomenon because of the numerous benefits it provides to Brazilian society as well as its ability to accomplish much with relatively little.

Before Bolsa Familia's effects began to manifest, more than 70 percent of Brazilians believed the poor had little chance to escape from poverty. This negative outlook on poverty became embedded within Brazil's culture due to the discouraging trend of cyclical poverty, defined as a "set of factors or events by

which poverty, once started, is likely to continue unless there is outside intervention”. One of Bolsa Familia’s most recognized achievements is that in its short lifespan it has disrupted the cyclical poverty observed in communities across the country. The nature of the program requires and helps struggling families to educate and support their children, as well as providing a small amount of financial support. Education is fundamentally the most important factor in lifting people out of poverty, and by making it a requirement to receive funding Bolsa Familia is able to provide younger generations with the means to overcome the financial burdens that would otherwise trap them in the cycle of poverty. Families benefiting from Bolsa Familia gain the means to properly educate and provide for their children, increasing the chances that these children will not be stuck in poverty as their parents were.

Along with education, Bolsa Familia requires and ensures that low income families and their children receive proper vaccinations. It has also been associated with increases in medical care and checkups since it began in 2003. Even minimal access to healthcare is vital for struggling families, especially in Northern Brazil where the number of medical professionals and facilities is extremely limited. Access to these services is important because they help detect and fight illnesses that can impose an insurmountable financial burden on families in poverty. Widespread vaccinations in poorer communities provide solvency for outbreaks of diseases that have occurred, and caused a fair amount of damage to these communities in the past

Arguably, despite disease epidemics, the most damaging health issues in low income Brazil cannot be treated by required vaccinations. Anemia and malnutrition are both deficiencies that are largely determined by socioeconomic factors like food insecurity. Globally, agricultural advancement has made it so that the cheapest food options are mass produced and of little nutritional value. Families in poverty do not have the ability to buy a sufficient quantity of nutritious foods which often creates food insecurity and a reliance on cheaper unhealthy alternatives. Recently however, Bolsa Familia has made it easier for these families to obtain more nutritious food through the payments the program provides. Over the past decade, the quality of nutrition across different economic classes has become less varied indicating a decrease in the number of people affected by malnourishment or anemia in poorer communities. This effect “can be attributed to the receipt of the benefit, both due to the financial increase and the nutritional monitoring required as conditionality of the program” (Oliveira, Cotta, Sant'Ana, Priore, & Franceschini, 2011)

Bolsa Familia has undeniable benefits, but recently, it has been heavily criticized by professors, legislators, and people on both sides of the political spectrum. Those who oppose the program claim it hasn’t done enough, and that it propagates neoliberal policies. Supporters of these ideas stand to defund and eliminate Bolsa Familia on the account that it is taken advantage of by ruling parties by means of clientelism to effectively “buy” votes. More notably, they claim that because the program deals with money-transfer, it is susceptible to the corruption that runs rampant in Brazilian politics. All appear to be reasonable claims, but none detract from the benefits that Brazil has seen thanks to Bolsa Familia. Furthermore these claims are always cite either no, or intentionally misconstrued evidence. Under the current government led by President Michel Temer “a total of 4,775,301 Bolsa Família beneficiaries have been canceled from the program. Another 4,278,690 recipients have had their benefits altered”(“Brazil

Cuts 5 Million People”, 2018). Temer cites fraud as the reason behind these actions but there is again no evidence to support his claims of mass public benefit fraud, and the cancellations were not limited to groups accused of said fraud. These actions indicate that the current legislation does not value Bolsa Familia or its recipients and that they take advantage of the weakest members of society in their budget cuts.

President Temer has also proposed a complete reworking of the program, suggesting changing the name to Bolsa Dignidade. This rework of the program would increase the aid provided to families, but require them to perform hours of volunteer work. Bolsa Dignidade would effectively leave those in poverty with no choice but to enter a system of forced labor tantamount to slave labor. Forcing low income families to spend hours working without pay in order to obtain minimal government aid would be an inhumane and unwelcome change to the current system. Additionally, the strategy of threatening the funding of low income families to force them into performing volunteer labor is a violation of human rights because forced volunteer work is in fact involuntary labor. Recent studies have proven the existence of a “relationship between the institution of slavery in the colonial period and the current income inequality in Brazil” (Fujiwara, Thomas et.al) furthermore, the same study concluded that slavery had also contributed to racial inequality. It can, and should be assumed that by reinstating a system of forced labor, the same impacts of increased inequality would manifest in Brazil, and reverse the positive changes Bolsa Familia has created.

The Brazilian public’s disapproval of Bolsa Dignidade is observable in the media, but in terms of resistance from the generally less educated beneficiaries of Bolsa Familia, there is significantly less uproar. This works to the administration’s advantage because it is under no obligation to appease the media. Bolsa Familia is a hugely successful solution to the economic inequality engrained in Brazilian society, cuts and changes to this program could mean nullifying and potentially reversing more than a decade of progress towards equality. The current administration’s intent to defund and manipulate Bolsa Familia is dangerous and could force families back into the extreme poverty they were raised out of thanks to the financial support.

The proposed changes to Bolsa Familia are a serious threat to the most vulnerable members of society, and their most basic human rights, but circumventing the problem is complicated because it involves Brazilian politics, which are notoriously corrupt as indicated by the current Lava Jato bribery scandal. It is difficult to navigate such an unpredictable system riddled with so many parties, such that a solution cannot reliably be obtained by political means. Rather, the simplest solution is to raise awareness within the low income communities in Brazil affected by Bolsa Familia and to have them heavily vocalize their support of the current system. If more individuals are informed about Michel Temer’s intent to change the program and the consequences of such changes, these people will ideally speak out against them. Enough people vocalizing their opposition to Bolsa Dignidade will make it extremely challenging for the changes to take place. Opposition makes it morally very difficult for the current administration to implement Bolsa Dignidade while maintaining their democratic values, because to go through with the change would strongly contradict the will of the people. This solution would, if effective, have the benefit firstly of

preventing the implementation of Bolsa Dignidade, and secondly of indicating to the Brazilian public that simple resistance and vocalization can create political change. This second impact would also be valuable in providing the poorer people with a voice, which would be a welcome change as the power in Brazilian Politics almost exclusively lies in the hands of the wealthy. This solution in itself could reduce political inequality between classes as well as ensuring the endurance of Bolsa Familia and its benefits, but it relies on the mobilization and informing of millions of people, as well as the administration's desire to maintain power.

By far the most effective and internationally viable solution would come from foreign investment into Brazil's economy. The empirical government cuts are occurring as a result of the recent recession in Brazil in an effort to recover the country's financial state. By injecting money into promising Brazilian industries that have already shown incredibly rapid expansion such as agribusiness, life sciences, or renewable energy, foreign investors in the United States and other countries could stimulate economic growth. Investors could consider these investments safe and secure because of the observed rapid growth, which makes this solution all the more viable. Agriculture is the foundation of Brazil's economy and by providing these industries with more funding an increase of agricultural yields would be assured. This would both generate revenue for the country, and provide more of the nutritious food much of Brazil lacks access to. Investment into agribusiness would also create more, higher skill job opportunities for the newly educated generation, that would prove effective in lifting people out of poverty. More high skill jobs in the aforementioned industries would also raise the overall development level of Brazil in turn likely attracting more foreign investment and trade. The increased economic growth as a result of investment would provide enough revenue such that the government would have far less incentive to decrease funding for Bolsa Familia, especially if it is combined with the people of Brazil opposing decreases in funding. These actions would allow the program to continue to improve the lives of those living in poverty by sustaining its trend of lessening income inequality, improving health and nutrition, and providing better education to the people of Brazil.

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