

The Family Scholarship Program: Unification of Income Transfer Programs in Brazil's Social Protection System

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The Family Scholarship Program is a strategy to unify income transfer programs in Brazil. The assumption is that monetary transfers can help poor families step out of the vicious cycle of poverty when combined with structural policies such as education, health, and job generation. By December 2005, the program had benefited 8.7 million families with a budget of US\$3 billion. The program is targeted to reach 11.2 million families by December 2006, which equals approximately the total poor population in Brazil.

Keywords: *income transfer, family, Family Scholarship Program, poverty, education, Brazil*

There are a number of different conceptions about poverty. They are based on different values, resulting in varying opinions on the construction and implementation of different social intervention policy alternatives. Poverty is seen as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon, thus stressing its structural determinants. Poverty is more than a lack of income. It is a product of job exploitation; inequality in wealth distribution; a lack of access to basic social services, information, employment, and income; and inadequate or lack of social and political participation (Silva, 2002a).

Income transfer programs were introduced at the municipal level in Brazil in 1995 and were then followed by state and federal programs. The federal programs have been extended since 2001 to almost all 51,561 Brazilian municipalities (Silva, Yazbek, & Giovanni, 2004). The programs are decentralized;

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each municipality takes responsibility for its local areas with financial support and general coordination from the federal government (Brasil, 2004a, 2004b).

The income transfer programs provide direct monetary transfers to families or individuals. The central assumption, in the Brazilian case, is that income transfers should be combined with structural policies and programs, mainly education, health, and job policies that are directed at poor children, youth, and families. These programs are guided by two presuppositions. One is that the cost for poor families to keep their children in school is too high because of the already low family incomes. The second is the restrictive role the lack of educational qualifications plays in the ability of future generations to secure higher incomes. These factors create a vicious cycle of poverty in the present and are determinants of poverty in the future. It is worth defining a financial compensation that allows poor families to send their children to school in this context. It is also considered important to balance cash transfers with structural policies and programs directed at poor families that could help combat poverty and social and economic inequalities in the country.

The Family Scholarship Program (FSP) was created in 2003 as a result of a proposal to unify all the income transfer programs. The FSP was designed to fight poverty and inequality and to promote the development of families living in socially and economically vulnerable situations by providing access to basic social rights such as health and education (Brasil, 2004a, 2004b).

It is important to conceptualize the significance of the difference between monetary transfers and structural social policies and programs in terms of the income transfer programs in Brazil, particularly with respect to the FSP. Structural policies and programs demand an expansion and democratization of the basic social services, mainly in the fields of education, health, and job opportunities. The programs require a quantitative and a qualitative expansion of the precarious education, health, and labor systems in Brazil that are insufficient to meet the needs of the beneficiaries of the FSP (Silva, 2006).

Another fundamental presupposition that guides this reflection is that these programs must be placed within the Brazilian social protection system. The social protection system now plays a more significant role in terms of the size of the target population reached and the amount of resources provided by the federal budget (Silva, 2002b, 2006; Silva et al., 2004). There is no doubt that these programs have changed the content and the shape of the Brazilian social protection system (Silva, 2002b; Silva et al., 2004).

It is also important to discuss the nature of the income transfer programs. Any form of income transfer represents some intervention in the market as a regulatory means of correcting the market's poor functioning and increasing the efficiency of the economic system. In this sense, income transfer programs can redistribute income depending on the political framework. The political options can be *liberal* or *redistributive*. The *liberal* option transfers income to support the survival of a population and has a residual and compensatory charac-

ter. So these programs are useful only in relieving poverty, not surpassing it. In other words, poverty is maintained at some level. The *redistributive* option works as a mechanism to decrease social and economic inequalities. In this sense, the income transfer programs redistribute income. Consequently there is a decrease in poverty and in social and economic inequality.

The expansion of programs labeled as minimum income, income warranty, Scholarship programs, or basic income can be placed within an international movement that called for the substitution of the Keynesian/Beveredgian welfare model with the welfare pluralism or mix model (Abranhamson, 2004; Johnson, 1990; Pereira, 2004). The new model emphasizes market participation along with the participation of the nongovernmental and nonmercantile sectors of society (third sector, volunteers) under a neoliberal direction that favors the reduction of the state and an active role for the market. The social, economic, and political conditions that allowed the increase and the expansion of these programs in Brazil were marked by an increase in unemployment and job insecurity, an increase in the violence index in big cities, and an increase in child labor and poverty indexes (Silva et al. 2004).

This article evaluates the FSP by addressing the following questions: Does the unification of the income transfer programs signify the beginning of a new era in the development of social programs in Brazil? What does this new step represent in terms of the evolution of the central goals of these programs? Is there an increase in the level of education and health of the population? Can poverty be overcome by a large part of the Brazilian population?

Socioeconomic Characteristics of Vulnerable Populations in Brazil

Brazil is a large South American country with an area of 8,547,403 square kilometers and a population of about 182 million inhabitants. The indigent people make up 12.9 percent of the population. Brazil is divided into five regions that are culturally diverse and are characterized by unequal economic and social indicators. There are twenty-six states, the Federal District, and 5,561 municipalities in the country (IBGE, 2004).

According to IBGE (2004), 17.8 percent of all domiciles did not have access to water and 31.1 percent did not have adequate waste disposal systems. In relation to education, 8.9 percent of children ages five to seventeen did not go to school. About 26 percent of the population ages ten and older reached a median of eleven years of education, and only 4.1 percent of the population had university degrees. The population ages twenty-five or older had a median of 6.4 years of education.

Employment indicators show that 56.5 percent of the population age ten or older were in the job market; of this, 68.2 percent were male and 45.6 percent were female. Among them, 55.2 percent were employed, but only 55 percent of those employed were registered. Data on child labor reveal that the percentage

of children ages five to seventeen who were employed decreased from 19 percent in 1993 to 11.4 percent in 2004. This decrease must be an important effect of the income transfer programs in Brazil (IBGE, 2004).

It is important to note that there is a social consensus that economic and social inequality and the extreme income and wealth concentration are the main causes of poverty and indigence in the country. Data from Social Radar (Brasil IPEA, 2005) show that 53.9 million people live in poverty. About 31.7 percent of the population receives half of the minimum wage (about US\$145 monthly). The indigent receive only a quarter of the minimum wage (US\$ 72.5). Brazil is the second-largest country in the world in terms of income concentration. However, IBGE (2004) data reveal that there has been a decline in income concentration in Brazil; the Gini Index has fallen from 0.571 in 1993 to 0.535 in 2004. This may also be an important effect of the income transfer programs that must be evaluated.

The Family Scholarship Program

Background

The year 2003 saw a new government under the leadership of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. The main priority of Lula's government was to fight hunger and poverty. The social programs were considered an important mechanism in fighting poverty as long as they were combined with economic policies that considered the redistribution of income in the country, an increase in wage income, protection of workers, the inclusion of all formal and informal workers, the inclusion of urban and rural areas in a universal and national welfare system, and the development of agrarian reforms with technical assistance to rural workers, among other actions (Silva, 2006).

The compromise with a neoliberal economic policy has not allowed the federal government to reach these goals so far. However, a process to unify the income transfer programs began in October 2003 with the creation of the FSP. The FSP was decreed as the main income transfer program in Brazil in September 2004 (Brasil, 2004a, 2004b). The Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger was created in January 2004 to carry out the objective of fighting poverty and hunger and to support the unification of the income transfer programs. The objectives of the FSP are to combat hunger, poverty, and inequalities through monetary transfers by guaranteeing access to basic social rights such as health, education, social aid, and food security, and to promote social inclusion of beneficiaries by providing means to leave the vulnerable conditions in which they are living (Brasil/MDS, 2005c).

The arguments that justified the need to unify the income transfer programs were based on a survey of all social programs (Brasil, Presidência da República, 2002). The survey focused on the social programs that were being implemented in Brazil during the transition from Fernando Henrique Cardoso's government (1995-2002) to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government (2003-2006) in the

second half of 2002. *The* survey highlighted, among others, the following features of these social programs: the existence of competing and superposed programs in terms of objectives and in target populations; the lack of a general coordination of these programs, causing a waste of resources and the lack of cohesive administrative planning of programs; the lack of adequate budgets to support these programs; and the inability to reach the target populations as a whole (Brasil, Presidência da República, 2002).

Main Features of the Family Scholarship Program

The FSP was created to address the problems highlighted by the survey. Its main objective was to unify the income transfer programs and to build a national policy of income transfer to poor families. The unification proposal included local, state, and federal programs but has been limited to six federal programs so far: School Scholarship Program, Food Scholarship Program, Gas Aid, Food Ticket programs and, more recently, the Child Labor Eradication Program, and the Young Agent for Social Development Program (Brasil/MDS, 2005c).

The proposal to unify the income transfer programs in Brazil is seen as an evolution of the programs mentioned above because it protects the whole family represented by the mother, and it also proposes to raise the value of the amount of the monetary transfer to poor families. The proposed unification represents a step forward in the field of social policy in Brazil (Fonseca, 2003). President Lula noted that the proposal also represents a fairer and more rational and efficient program when he presented the program to the public (Brasil/MDS, 2005a).

The program is an alternative for a better focalization of the target population in the fight against hunger and poverty, adjusting the focus of attention and the development of a systematic follow-up and evaluation process, and to simplify the access to the benefits. The implementation of the FSP demands shared responsibility among the federal, state, and local governments and the organized participation of the society. It is directed to indigent families with per capita monthly incomes about US\$23 and to poor families with per capita monthly incomes about US\$ 55. The indigent families get fixed cash transfers in the amount of US\$23 and US\$7 more per child up to fifteen years of age, for no more than three children, reaching a total benefit of US\$44. The poor families get cash transfers that depend on the number of children they have. They receive transfers in the amount of US\$ 7 per each child up to fifteen years of age, for no more than three children, reaching a total benefit of US\$21 (Brasil/MDS, 2005a). However, it is important to note that the exchange rate changes daily because of the mobile conversion of the Brazilian currency.

The families have the freedom to use the money as long as they meet the eligibility requirements for the program. These requirements include keeping children ages seven to fifteen in school, taking children up to six years old to health units for immunization, prenatal visits for pregnant women, literacy classes,

professional training, and the participation of all family members in nutritional education (Brasil/MDS, 2005b). The objective is to provide opportunities for poor families to reach economic and social independence.

The FSP reached 3.6 million families with a budget about US\$2 billion in 2003. By December 2005, the program had benefited 8.7 million families in all 5,561 municipalities; 77 percent of the families had a monthly per capita in-come of US\$46, using a budget of US\$3 billion, and a median benefit per family of US\$3.3 per month. The program is targeted to reach 11.1 million by December 2006, which represents almost 50 million people or approximately the total poor population in Brazil (Brasil/MDS, 2006).

The Family Scholarship Program: A Critical Assessment

The Unification of the Income Transfer Programs

The main goal of the unification of the income transfer programs is to increase their effectiveness in the fight against hunger and poverty, which was also the main goal of Lula's government. According to the official point of view, the unification represents an evolution and an innovation in social policies in Brazil, because the proposal protects the whole family, enlarges the number of beneficiaries, and increases the monetary transfer to the families. Its orientation is a shared perspective among the federal, state, and municipal governments (Fonseca, 2003). Its objectives are the creation of a fairer program, a better focalization of the target populations in the fight against hunger and poverty in Brazil, the development of a systematic process of follow-up and evaluation, and a simplification in terms of program access. This has been carried out by the municipalities with MDS assistance and financing.

The intention of unifying income transfer programs is a hopeful thought. However, it is a challenging objective because there are many people, institutions, and political interests involved. Furthermore, it is necessary to consider some preconditions that would allow real functionality of such a proposal.

The unification of the income transfer programs is not enough. This is just a management task. The most important issue is to build a Brazilian social protection system with the capacity to reach anyone who is at risk or in a vulnerable situation. In this sense, the unification must develop a system that considers poverty as a complex and multidimensional problem that requires income allocation as well as democratic social services to meet the basic needs of all citizens. The proposed unification demands appropriate structures at the local level because the FSP is implemented in a decentralized manner. It also requires qualified professionals who can connect with the local network of social services; use of adequate and efficient mechanisms to ensure the focus on the target families; existence of a local network of social services to meet the needs of the families in the program; adoption of a functional and unique cadastre of the families so that the program can better target the vulnerable groups of the population; local and national agile and efficient coordination of programs; and the effective

coordination of monetary transfers with other social and economic programs in order to promote opportunities for families to overcome poverty. Economic and social development is particularly important in order to change the high level of income concentration and to decrease the large number of people living below the poverty line in Brazil.

The author has conducted research on the implementation process of the FSP along with a research team under her supervision. This research will be extended until 2008 and focuses mainly on the following issues: a political evaluation of the income transfer policy in Brazil, socioeconomic characterizations of the target population of the program, empirical evaluation of the implementation process of the program, and identification of the possible effects of the program in relation to combating poverty in Brazil. In addition to reviewing documents and secondary sources of data, the research team created an online questionnaire for the municipalities implementing the program and focus groups. The main objective of this strategy was to bring together practitioners and administrators of the program to discuss its different aspects with people who are involved and responsible for it. The author believes that this research will provide important data to evaluate the program in relation to its main objectives: raising literacy, improving health conditions of families, and fighting poverty in Brazil.

Empirical research (Silva, 2006) in relation to the implementation of the unification process of the income transfer programs carried out by the FSP indicates that the unification process is limited to five federal programs and does not reach several active programs that were created by municipalities and states. The unification has not included the two more important features of the program: 1) the monetary values that classify the family as poor or indigent, establishing two categories of poverty; and 2) the monetary values transferred to the families are also too small and leave out a number of families living in poverty. The median value transferred to the families is about US\$33 a month, US\$7 being the lowest and US\$44 being the highest (Brasil/MDS, 2006).

The empirical research also identified unsatisfactory synchronization between the monetary transfers to the families and their access to basic social services and structural programs such as education and health, thus limiting the opportunities for families to gain economic and social independence in the future. The empirical research did not find any significant improvement in the teaching or health services offered to the families. There was a quantitative increase in school attendance and use of health services; however, this increase could be a reflection of families meeting the requirements of the program in order to receive the benefits.

The unification of the income transfer programs, represented by the FSP, needs to be followed-up and evaluated in its development to allow for necessary corrections. However, the proposal of unification itself represents, without any doubt, an advance in the Brazilian social policy agenda. The proposal must lead to the establishment of a national income transfer policy as a strategy to combat

hunger and poverty. In this process, different realities, specificities, and autonomy of the local governments must be considered and, above all, each citizen must be socially and economically included with dignity.

The Conditionalities of the Family Scholarship Program

The FSP maintains a set of requirements called *conditionalities*, considered by the authors of the programs as social counterparts that must be followed by the beneficiaries so they can receive the monthly benefit of a monetary transfer. The conditionalities were created by municipal, state, and federal governments and are reaffirmed by the main federal program. The conditionalities aim to verify the responsibility of the families.

The conditionalities imposed by the FSP include a minimum frequency of school attendance (85%) for children ages six to fifteen; prenatal visits for pregnant women; and regular health visits for children up to seven years of age, composed mainly of routine medical examinations, vaccinations, and follow-up of nutritional guidelines (Brasil/MDS, 2005a).

Gradual sanctions are imposed on families that fail to meet the conditionalities without providing any justifications. The sanctions start with a temporary interruption of the monetary transfer benefit for thirty days, then sixty days, and finally cessation of benefits. In the case of the cessation of the benefit, the family is notified and can return to the program after 180 days, if the families maintain their previous economic situation as an indigent or poor family, and if there are adequate resources in the municipality in which the family lives (Brasil/MDS, 2005b).

The conditionalities of the FSP seem to have a positive effect on the program and ensure that the families play an active role in working toward improving their life situations. Even so, such conditionalities present some challenges that should be considered. First, they hurt the rights of all citizens to access job opportunities and social programs in order to secure a life with dignity; second, the basic social services offered by the majority of Brazilian municipalities, even in the field of education and health, are insufficient both quantitatively and qualitatively to meet the needs of the beneficiary families. Some conditionalities should therefore also be imposed on the state and not just on families, since the provision of basic social services is a state responsibility. The author believes that these services should be made available to the target populations without any conditionalities. The services must be available. At the same time, information, orientation, and education programs need to be developed so that families can take advantage of the available social services.

Empirical research (Silva, 2006) shows that only two conditionalities required by the FSP have been monitored: frequency of school attendance and immunization records. It is important to note that the administrators and the practitioners of the FSP consider the mentioned conditionalities in the implementation of the program as educative rather than punitive. They believe they

are trying to provide orientation and support to families by helping them take advantage of the available social services. However, they recognize that the available social services are not enough to meet the basic needs of the families.

Focus on Poor Families

"Focalization is in a large sense the direction of some resources and pro-grams toward some specific groups of the population. considered vulnerable in the society" (Silva, 2001, p. 13). Focalization is also oriented by a neoliberal ideology in the context of social policy reform in Latin America. In this sense, compensatory measures for economic and structural adjustment weakened an al-ready vulnerable population. This conception tried to stop a development of a social movement for the universalization of social rights. Therefore, we can have different conceptions of focalization.

A conception that the author *calls progressive/distributive* demands a harmonization between social policies and economic policies, and it demands the social responsibility of the state. This focalization asks for large coverage of the target population, good quality of social services, appropriate institutional conditions, and qualified professionals. The author calls improving the life conditions of excluded populations *positive discrimination*. This form of discrimination is to ensure the effective inclusion of the vulnerable populations in the access of the wealth and social goods (Silva, 2001). In this sense, focalization is not the opposite of universalization. When all the vulnerable groups of the population are included, we have universalization in relation to that population. Another conception of focalization is guided by a neoliberal/liberal/conservative perspective that focuses mainly on relieving poverty. In this perspective, the state has no social responsibility, and this perspective is centered on compensatory, discontinuous, insufficient, and emergency measures directed to populations living in extreme situations of poverty. This conception of focalization fractions the poor population rather than considering the group as a whole.

The FSP is guided by the principle of focalization because it is directed at poor populations. The question is which concept of focalization the program is based on. Research has shown that the income transfer programs have focused on the target populations of these programs compared with other social programs. De-spite this focus, the national media has criticized deviations from this focus (Silva, 2006). It is hard to avoid exclusion in a country as large and heterogeneous as Brazil. However, this situation can be minimized with the development of a unique cadastre of the population and by linking this cadastre with national bank data around the country.

The central point of the debate is the question of universalization and focalization. However, the real problem does not seem to be a conflict between universalization and focalization, but the challenge to develop an effective proceeding to identify and reach the poor population. This means that we can have a relative concept of universalization and we can also understand focalization

as an effort of positive discrimination. In this sense, some social programs can be universal when they reach the entire population of the target groups.

Empirical research (Silva, 2006) reveals that the main problem seems to be the applied criteria for the inclusion of families in the program. The level of family monthly per capita income is very low (up to US\$ 55). This leaves out a large number of families living in poverty because they cannot acquire what they need to improve their living conditions. This aspect becomes worse when we note that income is the only criterion used to classify the families as poor or indigent, and the income transferred to the beneficiary families is also very low (median US\$33 a month). These families also do not have adequate access to basic social services, and most of them live in severe and structural poverty permanently. The adults of those families have limited access to information, and they have very low levels of professional qualifications and only a few years of schooling.

Conclusion

The reflections presented above show important aspects of the Family Scholarship Program, which is considered an actual expression of the income transfer programs in Brazil. Some possibilities, limitations, and challenges that must be considered by policy makers and practitioners are presented as concluding remarks.

Follow-up on the income transfer programs in Brazil has presented the following important outcomes and effects of these programs: increasing school attendance and visits to health units by children and adolescents; decreasing school evasion; decreasing malnutrition rates; decreasing the number of children and youngsters on the streets; and increasing self-esteem and confidence in the future (Silva et al., 2004). However, these improvements are not sufficient to eliminate poverty. Even though these outcomes and effects in relation to avoiding hunger and poverty in Brazil are moderate, it is necessary to consider the real meaning they have to the assisted families. They can improve the total income of these families and sometimes constitute the only income that most of them can access because they belong to the lowest economic levels of society. However, this does not mean that these programs are able to overcome poverty, but that they may simply keep poverty under some control.

Another possibility that one must consider is the potential of these programs to create progressive conditions for social inclusion of the future generations of children and youngsters of the assisted families who can attend school, go to health units, be removed from the streets, and be taken away from harsh labor. However, in order to reach those goals, it is necessary to improve educational and health systems.

The outcomes and effects of income transfer programs can be maximized by decentralizing program implementation and by combining cash transfers with structural policies such as education, health, and generation of jobs and in-

come. However, that requires a local network of social services to meet the basic needs of all citizens, local administrations with qualified professionals for the implementation of the program, adequate material and financial resources for the municipalities, and social organizations and social movements that are able to monitor the programs.

The author believes that direct monetary transfers to personal accounts in banks would give greater freedom to the heads of the assisted families to buy goods and services that they think meet their needs in a better way. Direct transfers can also reduce the possibilities of corruption because they need less intermediation. Transfers can simplify the social system with the reduction of administrative costs and clientelist practice that are very common in the implementation of social programs in Brazil (Silva, 2006; Silva et al., 2004).

The limitations of the program include the very low value of the monetary transfers to the families, which are insufficient to effectively reduce poverty. The transfers are useful just to help the vulnerable populations survive but not over-come poverty. Another important limitation is the adoption of very restrictive criteria of inclusion in the programs. A very low poverty fine is adopted to select the families without considering other criteria that could take into account the various dimensions of poverty. It may be important to consider other factors such as the level of education of the members of the family, housing needs, access to other social programs, and support from family, friends, and community. Inclusion of these factors may create better living conditions for the families.

The vulnerable populations face the challenges of structural and severe poverty, low educational and professional qualifications, and limited access to information. These challenges make it more difficult for families in these situations to gain economic and social independence.

Even considering the above possibilities and limitations, there is no doubt that the income transfer programs represent the main face of the Brazilian social protection system because of their geographic dimension (they are implemented in all 5,561 Brazilian municipalities [Silva, 2006]); because of the number of families met by the FSP (9.2 million families [Brasil/MDS, 2006]); and because of the amount of budget resources applied (more than US\$ 3 billion in 2006 [Brasil/MDS, 2006]). These programs represent the most successful experiences in focalization of poor populations in spite of some denunciation by the media (Silva, 2006). Thus the creation and implementation of the FSP represents a step ahead in the development of the income transfer programs because of its proposal to unify the programs despite the limitations and problems identified in this process.

However, a number of challenges remain. The criteria of inclusion need to consider families with incomes per capita higher than that fixed by the program to classify poor and indigent families in order to meet a large number of families who also are living in bad conditions; the income benefit needs to be increased in order to reach at least a minimum wage, as suggested by the members of the focal group in the context of the empirical research that is in development

(Silva, 2006); the monetary transfers need to be combined with basic social services; and the income transfer programs, like other social programs, must, above all, be combined with structural economic policies that are able to distribute income and wealth so that jobs and incomes are generated for the vulnerable populations who can then become more independent.

The income transfer programs and the PSP form the central dimension of the Brazilian social protection system today. It is important to thoroughly evaluate the programs in order to identify the possibilities and limits of these programs in changing life conditions of the poor population in Brazil. The research being carried out by the author is a step in that direction.

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