

The Consolidation of Social Assistance Policy in Brazil

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Brazil's trajectory in the field of income transfers is quite well known internationally. Especially after the implementation of *Bolsa Família*, Brazil's experiences in the field have been the object of constant references, studies and analyses. Such experiences were even used as a foundation for a wide array of South-South cooperation initiatives. Less known, however, is that conditional cash transfers are just a part of the non-contributory social-protection system that Brazil has been developing over the past 20 years.

After the enactment of the 1988 constitution, the country's social protection scheme was thoroughly reorganised. The list of social situations that would trigger legal protection guarantees was expanded, as was public responsibility in the face of various problems whose mitigation strategies had thereto been confined to contributory social-insurance policy programmes and initiatives spearheaded by the private sector. Among the main changes was the creation of the Unified Health System (*Sistema Único de Saúde*, SUS), a public and universally accessible service offered free of charge, as well as the designation of social assistance as a non-contributory public policy to provide cash benefits and services to populations living in poverty, in need, or in a condition of social vulnerability.

Significant changes were made to the social-assistance policy. This can be regarded as a positive step towards breaking from the path followed during the previous period. The social-assistance policy operates under the principles of public accountability, decentralisation and social participation, and is used both as an income guarantee and in the provision of services to poor and vulnerable portions of the population. According to the National Social Assistance Policy, signed into law in 2004, social assistance is responsible for ensuring the following securities: income, shelter, coexistence, autonomy and the survival of circumstantial risks. As regards non-contributory cash benefits, we highlight the Continuous Cash Benefit (*Benefício de Prestação Continuada*, BPC) and the *Bolsa Família* programme (PBF). Social assistance services refer to a broad set of integrated services offered by the Unified Social Assistance System (*Sistema Único de Assistência Social*, SUAS).

The BPC was established by the constitution and regulated by the Organic Law on Social Assistance (*Lei Orgânica de Assistência Social*, LOAS), which was enacted in 1993 and implemented from 1996 onwards. It provides unconditional, guaranteed income for the elderly aged 65 or older, as well as for disabled people who are unfit to work and to care for themselves, and who live in extreme poverty. The amounts disbursed by the BPC are substantially higher than those of the PBF, and it provides a replacement income to a population in conditions of acute vulnerability because of they are severely disabled/elderly or in extreme poverty—or both, since the two conditions may overlap and thus further increase the risk and degree of exclusion. This was the first non-contributory, social

minimum implemented in Brazil, and it currently covers about 3.5 million beneficiaries who thereto had been excluded from any public-income security mechanism.

Unlike BPC beneficiaries, recipients of the PBF do not have to be limited in their ability to participate in the labour market; they need only lack a minimum income. The PBF's conditionalities—in education, health and the absence of child labour—have favoured the expansion of access by the poorest groups of Brazilian society to basic social rights. The programme has been a stimulus to economic development in countless municipalities across the country, enhancing markets and fostering local production. It has also allowed for an expansion of the process of identifying vulnerable families and in the overall quality of the social-assistance services provided.

As regards the new model of providing assistance services, progress has been slower than in the case of cash benefits. Whereas assistance benefits (BPC and PBF) mostly fall under the auspices of the federal government, social-assistance services are a shared responsibility between the three levels of government: federal, state and local. Wider access requires integration with social services offered by charities, as well a unified set of quality standards. The following services are part of the social-assistance policy: Programme for Integrated Family Care (*Programa de Atenção Integrada à Família*, PAIF); Programme for the Eradication of Child Labour (*Programa de Erradicação do Trabalho Infantil*, PETI); Service to Combat the Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of Children; specific services for those facing violence and neglect, as well as other situations that result in violations of rights; and services for those who require care and shelter, which in turn are provided by institutions such as hostels, shelters, temporary homes and long-term institutions.

Because of its comprehensive scope, Brazil's social-assistance policy also faces a broad set of challenges, including: securing a more in-depth federative pact; an increase in shared, available funding; and the integration of social-assistance services and benefits. This policy has undergone significant changes in the last 20 years, and such changes continue to this day. Actions and initiatives in different situations of vulnerability, and in distinct conditions of poverty and destitution, require continuous capacity building in the public sector, as well as ongoing improvements to management. They also call for constant reaffirmation of the social commitment in place to support such objectives.

Reference:

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