

The Bolsa Família program in the spotlight: poverty, clientelism and citizenship

Interview with Flávio Eiró

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Janina Petelczyc: During last 15 years, Brazil's government has implemented more than 140 social programs, changing the life of millions in Brazil. One of the best known is the Bolsa Família Program (BFP) that was even called by the World Bank as 'Brazil's Quiet Revolution'. Can you tell us in brief what are the assumptions and results of this program?

Flávio Eiró: The BFP is the largest conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme in the world in number of people assisted, currently assisting more than 14 million families, about 50 million people, a quarter of Brazil's population. It targets people below the poverty and extreme poverty line, defined by a household income up to R\$ 154.00 and R\$ 77.00 per month per capita, respectively. The programme's conditionalities are: children's schooling and vaccinations, and regular medical checkups for pregnant women. According to the family composition, the benefits vary between R\$ 35 and R\$ 336, in order to lift families above the poverty line. Since 2012, the maximum limit can be exceeded in order to lift families above the extreme poverty line. The 'Benefit for Overcoming Extreme Poverty' is part of the 'Brazil Without Poverty' (*Brasil Sem Miséria*), a broader umbrella plan into which the BFP was inserted. In November 2015, 13.7 million households benefited from the BFP, totalling R\$ 2.2 billion, with an average benefit value of R\$ 163.06.

It is relevant to situate CCTs in the institutional landscape of social protection. Social protection can be understood as 'public actions taken in response to levels of vulnerability, risk and deprivation, which are deemed socially unacceptable within a given polity and society' (Conway, Haan & Norton, 2000: 5), and as having three

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main components: social insurance, social assistance, and labour market regulation (Barrientos and Santibáñez, 2009). Barrientos (2013: 107) suggests a definition of social assistance in developing countries that comprises long-term institutions focused on reducing and preventing poverty, as providing regular transfers (kind or cash) that are tax-financed. This is important to differentiate CCTs from emergency programs, financed by international aid. The novelty of CCTs is that they are usually rooted in national long-lasting institutions, which implies a kind of protection from poverty unseen in the developing world before the 1990s.

The BFP is largely considered a successful case and is used as a model throughout Latin America and worldwide. The programme is righteously seen as a rupture in the development of Brazilian social assistance, guaranteeing by law an income to families in poverty. Others have made a full description of the programme and its creation and development (see: Hallmann, 2015; Hall, 2006). The literature on the BFP's impacts is abundant, such as on poverty and inequality reduction (Sánchez-Ancochea and Mattei, 2011) and gender equality (de Brauw et al., 2013).

In your research you give voice to beneficiaries and social workers. The BFP is always presented as offering some kind of independence of beneficiaries from social workers (for instance, due to the use of a card to access benefits). But your findings show some clientelistic relations. How is it possible to talk about clientelistic practices in this program?

To talk about clientelism in this context requires a few precautions. First of all, as an academic, I treasure good definitions, so we shouldn't confuse an analytical tool with a political strategy – as in framing opponents' activities as immoral or illegal to discredit them. That has been largely done with the BFP. Since its creation, it has been the victim of clientelistic accusations – and to be fair, so was its predecessors from the Cardoso's administration, by the very same Workers' Party (PT).

Adopting a microsociological approach, we cannot talk about a 'clientelistic program', or 'clientelistic government', unless we are referring to institutional practices. Clientelism is a personal unequal relationship between two individuals, based on reciprocal exchanges aiming the maximisation of their interests (see Hilgers, 2011). Moreover, it is important to place the discussion in the context of Brazilian politics and social policies. Still nowadays, social assistance is considered as charity, and I've been in several municipalities where the mayor's wife was officially responsible for the social assistance. It implies not only the framing of social assistance as 'favours' rather than 'rights', but also a fusion between public and personal, where the mayor has a noble obligation to help the least favoured under his tutelage. We refer to this phenomenon as paternalism.

Since the BFP is administered by municipalities at the local level, by their social assistance offices, I found no evidence to sustain the thesis that the BFP is a 'clientelistic programme'. Instead, I've found mayors – from situation and opposition

parties of the federal government – that used the programme for clientelistic practices, making use of their absolute power in appointing social assistance staff, including BFP coordinators.

That said, we can now turn to the ‘how’. My first hypothesis was that clientelistic practices were a result of information manipulation regarding the program’s rights and rules. An elaborated theatrical system of mediation would be put into action in order to make beneficiaries believe that receiving the monthly allowance was a favour conceded by a broker. This hypothesis could be easily argued against, since for that to be true, it would be necessary a widespread misconception of the programme and total lack of information access so that the ‘lie’ could be sustained. Furthermore, the BFP beneficiary profile is well defined by the programme’s rules and local offices cannot deny its access to individuals with the right profile.

To test that hypothesis, my observations were directed to the social workers’ practices, where I learned that the arbitrary dimension of their work directly affect the selection and managing of the program. Social workers systematically assume that beneficiaries are lying or hiding information, and inconsistency in the income information or suspicious behaviour are sufficient to request the benefit interruption. These representations of beneficiaries are reinforced by typical cases. The most fundamental of them, shared by absolutely all social workers I’ve interviewed, is that ‘a great deal of the BFP beneficiaries refuse work in order to maintain the benefit’. Even when explicitly asking them if this would also happen when formal jobs were available and paying minimum wage (while the BFP would represent most likely a quarter of it), the interviewees would answer positively attesting they knew some cases. Often referred to as the ‘laziness effect’ [*efeito-preguiça*] in Brazil, this hypothesis has been systematically proven to be false. Either way, the social workers believe they must be severe to avoid comfortable situations where respondents can easily trick them. With a wide range of strategies to verify information, social workers feel absolutely in control of the program’s beneficiaries, and comfortable to ‘do their justice’.

Regarded from the standpoint of the beneficiary, there is a widespread concern of losing the benefit. Social workers must often explain to beneficiaries basic rules of the programme, which they do to a certain extent, since they also want to avoid being tricked in the future. My findings suggest that the rules of the allocation calculations and even the eligible basic profile for the programme are little known. Ultimately, a number of myths surrounding the social workers and their home visits are reinforced by the arbitrary decisions to cancel the allocation and strengthen the clientelistic structure (punishments and reprisals).

It is on the discretionary margin of social workers’ practices that the power of the BFP local office is built, which is used by some to control the inclusion and verification process of targeted families. They do so motivated by their political affiliations that have enabled them to access their function in the first place, which

might or not include social workers themselves. The misinformation and discretionary actions taken by social workers are enough to create uncertainty about the programme, making it so valuable to have a politician or technician ‘guarantee’, justifying clientelistic relationships to maximise interests even when resources are not scarce.

Is every family (or rather beneficiary of the BFP) verified by social workers? It is 14 million families in the whole Brazil or maybe only selected cases? Should all the beneficiaries feel insecure?

Not all the families are verified by social workers. Municipal offices are responsible for the follow-up of beneficiaries: update of cadastral information every 2 years (maximum), compliance with conditionalities, and verification of irregularities, such as: failure to update the household file within 2 years; nonconformity to conditionalities; lack of information or invalid identification numbers in the family file.

However, the word spreads rather easily among beneficiaries. Although the BFP doesn’t work with beneficiaries groups as does other CCTs in Latin America (such as the Uruguayan *Ingreso Ciudadano*), in my experience, beneficiaries know details about others’ benefits, including values and problems experienced. When beneficiaries face a problem they don’t understand, they usually look for help among neighbours and family. Typical cases spread and become myths, distorted, and sometimes reinforced by social workers – who might also not understand fully the functioning rules, or prefer to omit information from beneficiaries. In this context, receiving the visit of a social worker, or being interviewed by them in the BFP office is a delicate moment. These moments are clearly stressful for beneficiaries, moments when they will integrate all those myths and available information to decide what to answer.

Each one of the beneficiaries I’ve met knew of a case, a neighbour, who lost her benefit for no apparent reason. Assumptions are made, and explanations were formulated. Quickly the beneficiaries recognise that there are things beyond their understanding. They usually yield to conformity, rarely trying to solve any problem related to their benefit, and when they do they will take any explanation, since they have no other reference to turn to. They see cases around them of people losing their benefit without apparent reason; they see ‘not so poor’ families earning more than the ones in extreme need, and sometimes some not even benefiting from the programme. Although in theory they shouldn’t, they feel insecure, and are not sure what is going to happen with their own allocation, and they feel somehow lucky to still have one.

In this context the question on citizenship status arises. Can you tell us whether there is a relation between poverty and citizenship?

I understand 'citizenship' in a broad sense as the relationship between the society and the State. This relationship, especially when analysed through the individuals' eyes, is defined by one's social position and material conditions. In some societies this influence is small and public institutions are designed to treat individuals equally. In others, and here I consider Brazil one of them, institutions are designed to differentiate individuals from different classes, or impersonal rules are substituted or enabled by informal social norms. In Brazil, we know that in many forms, such as the '*jeitinho brasileiro*', which means to go around the rules, or to find shortcuts to enable them; or the famous 'do you know with whom are you talking to?' used by high-class members when having to face the rules applied to everyone. The anthropologist James Holston called this a 'differentiated citizenship': inclusive in membership (even the poorest in Brazil are full citizens in paper) and highly unequal in the distribution of rights (Holston, 2008).

The sociologist Jessé de Souza (2012) coined an even more eloquent term to describe this: a sub-citizenship, result of a lack the sense of collective dignity, basis of the modern notion of citizenship and social recognition: equality becomes an abstract notion, since every Brazilian understand that, in fact, citizens are not worth the same. Those who are 'less citizens' often don't meet the social requirements of productive insertion that guarantees social recognition. Those demands are in their turn anchored in opaque institutions and neutral values of meritocratic competition: objective and invisible networks that disqualify precarious individuals and social groups as sub-producers or sub-citizens.

So to make it clear: yes, there's a clear relationship between poverty and citizenship. Extreme social inequalities are directly related to the unequal distributions of rights – and thus the creation of 'sub-citizens' –, and social exclusion more broadly. If we recognise all Brazilians as full citizens, is it fair to close our eyes to material conditions that prevent some citizens to exercise their citizenship? Are we supposed to expect that somebody struggling for survival can perform his/her citizenship? A constitution as inclusive and egalitarian as ours (from 1988) can only become reality when we tackle social inequality once and for all (and in that case, the BFP is not enough, but only a step, as proven by the last couple of years when we've seen an increase in social inequality).

It seems that the full 'social citizenship' can be provided only by a guaranteed minimum income². In any other case – there is always some kind of dependency, and unequal relation between beneficiary and state/administration/social worker. Is there any public debate around this concept in Brazil?

Yes, even among high officials of the MDS, the Ministry responsible for the BFP. Actually, as far as I could trace, the first inspiration in Brazil that led to the creation of the BFP was the Alaska Permanent Fund (APF), a kind of guaranteed minimum income created in 1982, financed indirectly from oil revenues, paid by the state government to every citizen who lives in Alaska. Senator Eduardo Suplicy (PT-SP) openly used the Alaskan case when presenting a bill for a Guaranteed Basic Income Project [*Projeto de Garantia de Renda Mínima*] in April 1991. During the same year, the project was approved (with all parties voting favourably) and sent to the Chamber of Deputies, where it waited 13 years to be voted.

Meanwhile, local initiatives following the guidelines of Suplicy's project were implemented in the Federal District and in the city of Campinas in 1995, but introducing the 'conditional' element, by then already known in other countries. In the following years, other cities started their own versions of CCTs, while many others were discussing the idea in local chambers of deputies.

From there, the model reached the federal government, but the 'conditional' factor was kept. The benefits of such conditionalities are rather dubious. While they assume that we must enforce a certain kind of behaviour, it is not clear if they are really necessary. I – and many others in the academic community – believe that conditionalities exist mainly for political economy reasons: it's easier to justify for the average taxpayer why the money is being given to people in poverty. The problem with this kind of program in my opinion – as a sociologist focusing on poverty as a social phenomenon – is that it differentiates citizens. Differently from Europe, we are not talking about a residual population. Social assistance in Brazil is covering over a quarter of the population.

To exemplify my argument, I've heard many times that BFP beneficiaries shouldn't be allowed to vote. And I heard that from social workers, people just above the poverty line (and thus not benefiting from the BFP), and also from politicians. Although this might sound extreme, it expresses a feeling that is at the core of what some might call a 'class conflict' in Brazil: that people in poverty are not full citizens.

A guaranteed minimum income could ease this tension. We would eliminate issues related to the framing of social programs as favours given by politicians, for instance. The benefit wouldn't be used as easily to differentiate people in poverty. It would also be easier to secure the notion of the basic income as a right: one is entitled to it

² Unconditional basic income is a form of social security system in which all citizens or residents of a country regularly receive an unconditional sum of money, either from a government or some other public institution, in addition to any income received from elsewhere.

because he/she is a citizen, and more, in order to be a full citizen. Administration costs would decrease and, if well designed, the program's total cost wouldn't necessarily be heavy for the government budget. The study of the subject is gaining importance worldwide, and I believe soon it'll reach countries that are not so rich. As the BFP proved, there are many benefits for the direct distribution of income, at micro and macro levels.

In your work, you focus on Northeast region of Brazil. Why?

Poverty for Brazilians is mainly represented by two images: Rio de Janeiro's favelas and the Northeast hinterland, or the *sertão*. Nowadays, the favelas are at the spotlight for many reasons, but poverty in Brazil is not reduced to them. The Northeast remains the poorest region of the country, but most importantly, it is where the country's recent development had its strongest effects. The region also concentrates most of the BFP beneficiaries, with some municipalities reaching over 90% of its population assisted by the program. Moreover, for anyone studying clientelism in Brazil, the Northeast is the traditional hotspot. All the classic works on the subject had the region as an object, and until today it remains a reference for the study of clientelism worldwide.

For me, to combine these two objects is challenging, but also intellectually inspiring. When I present my research, I'm constantly confronted with strong ideals from both sides of the political sphere: some people tell me to be careful when presenting my results to avoid a right-wing appropriation of my work to delegitimise the program. On the other hand, studying the BFP is seen by some as a clear position pro-government, as publicity for its good impacts. I recognise I have to be careful with these critics, but I have to make an effort not to let them shape my work. As a sociologist, not even my own ideals can interfere on my research, even if I never hid my favourable position towards the program, and my personal wish that my research will contribute to making the BFP better and advance the study of social policies in Brazil.

That said, I must say that, just as most of qualitative and inductive research, I didn't know exactly what I was going to do when I started my PhD. My first fieldwork in the region inspired me to go deep in the BFP, but only in a second visit I realised the importance of clientelistic practices within the program, and decided to focus on that. And although I believe such practices are common in the Northeast – even if I could only visit a few municipalities –, my work consists in showing how they rely on a structure that is not exclusive of the region. In theory, they can happen anywhere else, and that's precisely what I believe that makes my work more relevant.

Nowadays Brazil is facing political turmoil. At the moment of our conversation (March 2015), impeachment proceedings against President Dilma Rousseff are open and, moreover, the icon of the changes, the most popular president in the history, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is being questioned by police as part of a huge fraud inquiry into the state oil company Petrobras. Do you think that Brazil can lose much of what the country has reached during last 13 years?

Unfortunately, my answer to this question is contradictory, because I honestly can't see much ahead in BFP's future. On the one hand, I'd say we shouldn't fear for what we have conquered, in which the PT has played a major role. That's the beauty of democracy: if a step is taken in the right direction by one government, the next one, even if not agreeing, can't simply go back. If society sees it as important, this new government will be punished if it jeopardises these advancements. Being more specific: no opposition party in Brazil is officially against the BFP. To do so is to commit political suicide.

Although no major candidate declares to be against the BFP, from time to time right-wing politicians come publicly against the program. A right-wing government post-PT could in fact jeopardise social advances made, especially in a context of economic crises that are usually used to justify social cuts. At the same time, the opposition constantly complains that false rumours are spread during elections saying that a non-PT government would end the BFP. To avoid that, even the main right-wing presidential candidate for the 2014 elections, Senator Aécio Neves, tried to pass a bill in the congress transforming the BFP in a constitutional right, even though it was clear the bill would be rejected by deputies allied to the government. His goal was to put the PT in delicate position, risking letting the opposition taking credit for the BFP advancement while being opposed to the program since its creation. Legitimate or not, since the 2006 elections (when Lula was reelected) opposition parties tries to decrease the influence of the program in electing the PT candidates. This personalisation of the program (who is commonly seen by the beneficiaries as Lula's creation and responsibility) undoubtedly undermines citizenship construction, but that never seemed to be a preoccupation of the PT.

In this context, I proceed to the second part of my answer: we should fear to lose the advancements made, and the PT has a great responsibility in that. The BFP was created by a presidential measure and its legal base can't be mistaken with the establishment of an acquired right: 'the granting of BFP benefits has a temporary nature and does not generate an acquired right. The eligibility of families, to receive such benefits, should be mandatorily reviewed every two years' (Article 21 of Decree 6.392, own translation). The BFP is a federal government programme, and not a constitutional social policy (in Brazil we use to say it is a 'government program', not a 'State program'). Its beneficiaries are not entitled to the benefit, which would mean an unrestricted access to those qualifying for the programme. Since the program's coverage is not a current problem, not much is said about that. But it does mean that

the government can suspend or change the rules of the programme at any moment, with a simple majority in the congress.

After 13 years holding the federal government, the PT should have used the moments when it enjoyed great support to pass a stronger legislation to protect the BFP. Many inside the party worked in that direction, the best known being the former senator Eduardo Suplicy, known for his work on Basic Citizenship Income (which was one of the inspirations of CCT pilots in Brazil). Nowadays, with an uncertain future and with the lowest support recorded, such ambitions are unreal, and probably will remain like that for a very long time. With the president Dilma Rousseff's impeachment becoming a real possibility, even the PMDB, the vice-president's party (who is likely to take the office if the impeachment happens), already gave signs of reducing the BFP, focusing on the program's poorest.

*How today, in the context of our conversation, would you interpret the expression 'Brasil, País do Futuro'?*³

When I hear the expression 'country of the future', the first thing that comes to mind is that we lack a project of future. Since the 1988 Constitution, we never really asked ourselves what kind of country we want to be. We tackle one problem at a time when they urge attention (usually, due to something horrible). Very few political forces are tearing the country apart trying to reach (or staying in) power, always with a very short-sighted view of the future. For a very long time we haven't united the country around one problem, or better, one solution.

As surreal as it can sound, some people are using the current political crises to call for a military dictatorship in Brazil, which they call an 'intervention' to reconstruct the country and wipe it clean from corruption. In my subject of studies, there's a growing discourse in the country about how people in poverty are responsible for their own situation, and that assisting them only encourages laziness. In a country like Brazil, with such a structural inequality, we should expect a better comprehension of the functioning of poverty. The meritocracy discourse simply doesn't apply to our reality, and the few cases of 'self-made man' used to justify it only prove how exceptional they are. In a way, we are importing (or rather bringing back to life) conservative discourses that no longer fit our democracy, nor our century.

So this is a tricky moment to ask this question. One thing we do not lack is potential. I can highlight a couple of examples in which I believe Brazil could be a major player in the world. The first is the cultural plurality, especially with the coexistence of different religions. This is a critical moment where we are choosing how to deal with intolerance, prejudice and racism, and here I have in mind African-Brazilian

³ This is a title of our book.

religions. The second example is the feminist movement. Likewise, the discussion about violence and discrimination against women is finally reaching a national-level, and feminist movements are growing strong in Brazil. The country was once an example of environmental protection and sustainable development. The recent disaster of the dam in Mariana and the unfolding events (mainly government apathy and protection of companies involved – who supported political candidates of all major parties) give hints that things were worse than we believed. And to conclude, although Brazil could lead the wave of basic income projects in developing countries, as it did with CCTs, I'm not sure if this is going to happen soon. Once again, I believe the PT could have used its high moments to give permanent steps in this direction, but the current moment is not favourable.

There is still a possibility to regain the label of 'country of the future' that we once had, and the examples above can give a hint of where should we focus our attention to in order to get there.

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