

THE NEW “BOLSA FAMÍLIA” IN THE CONTEMPORANEITY OF CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMS IN BRAZIL¹

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Abstract:

The “Bolsa Família”, a cash transfer program, was created in 2003, and it was implemented until November 2021, when it was replaced by “Auxílio Brasil” Program, created by Jair Bolsonaro, Brazilian president between 2019 and 2022. Motivated by political interests, Bolsonaro replaced a successful program implemented during 18 years by his own program, with the objective to be reelected as Brazilian president in 2022. However, who won the election was Luís Inácio Lula da Silva, who was elected for the third time, with the commitment to fight against unemployment, the informal work without social protection, the poverty and the hunger that hit Brazilian population deep in this period. In this context, the “Bolsa Família” returned to be implemented in April 2023, now with a higher cash transfer, embracing more than 14 million families. Therefore, the proposal of the study is to present and problematize the “Bolsa Família” as one of the main social protection policies to face the poverty and hunger in Brazil, placing this program in the contemporaneity of the Brazilian reality.

Key words: “Bolsa Família”. “Auxílio Brasil”. Poverty. Social Protection. Brazil.

1 INTRODUCTION

The present text is a partial product of the project: **Focalized Cash Transfer and Universal Basic Income programs in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and post-pandemic (*Programas de Transferência Monetária focalizados e de Renda Básica Universal no contexto da pandemia e da pós-pandemia da Covid-19*):** follow up and analysis of the reality in Latin America and the Caribbean, approved and funded by the National Council of Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq).

Specifically, I focus on the Bolsa Família (Family Stipend), created in 2003, but resized in 2023 under the name of Novo Bolsa Família (New Bolsa Família), when Luiz Inácio da Silva was elected to a third term as president of Brazil.

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Brazil is the largest country in Latin America, with a territorial surface of 8,547,403 km²; divided into five regions, with 26 states and the Federal District, Brasilia, and a total of 5,567 municipalities. According to the 2022 census, carried out by IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), the Brazilian population in 2022 was 203.1 million inhabitants.

Understanding the largest cash transfer program in Brazil and Latin America, the Bolsa Familia currently requires situating it in the dynamics of the rise and development of the cash transfer programs in Brazil. According to this reflection, cash transfer programs are situated in the context of the Brazilian System of Social Protection (*Sistema de Proteção Social Brasileiro*), considered a cash transfer to people or families, selected by criteria of income, geographic location or situation of poverty and vulnerability. The program was initially created and implemented in 1995. However, in 1991 these programs began to prevail in the field of social protection. A Law Bill authored by then Senator of the PT (Workers' Party), Eduardo Suplicy, was the first proposal of a cash transfer program formulated in Brazil. It was meant for all Brazilians resident in the country, over 25 years of age, with an income of up to three minimum wages. The year 1995 was the time frame that initiated and expanded cash transfer programs called minimum income, at a municipal level. They were initially implanted in Campinas, Santos and Ribeirão Preto in São Paulo, and the Bolsa Escola Program was also created in Brasilia, the Federal District, followed by state programs that reached 45 municipal programs and 11 state ones (SILVA; YAZBECK, GIOVANI, 2012). In 1996 the following were created, at a national level: Child Labor Eradication Program (*PETI Programa de Erradicação do Trabalho Infantil*), aimed at getting children and adolescents out of early labor and sending them to school and the Continuous Cash Benefit (*BPC Benefício de Prestação Continuada*) for elderly people over 65 years of age and people with disabilities, unable to work and living in families with a monthly per capita income of up to ¼ of the minimum wage. This process was expanded from 2001 onwards, at which point the focalized cash transfer programs began to prevail, representing the central axis of social protection in Brazil, through a **Social Protection Network** (*Rede de Proteção Social*), composed by Cash Transfer Programs focusing on poor and extremely poor families, mostly with conditionalities. In 2003, the Bolsa Familia was created, which is the object of analysis and problematization

of the present text, a program that soon began to be implemented in all Brazilian municipalities. (SILVA; YAZBECK, GIOVANI, 2012).

The Bolsa Família became the largest focalized cash transfer program with conditionalities in Latin America, with broad national and international repercussions and, in 2004, when it was sanctioned by President Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, the **Citizen's Basic Income Program** (*Programa Renda Básica de Cidadania*) and Bolsa Família were indicated as the first step to institute the Basic Income in Brazil. Consequently, Brazil began to have the first proposal of a Universal Basic Income aimed at all Brazilians and foreigners legally resident in the country for more than five years, with the concession of a benefit to meet the minimum expenditures of each person on food, health and education. However, this program was not implemented. The proposal was intended to begin with the poorest, with Bolsa Família as the initial step and conditioned to the availability of funds, thus subject to the political decision of the Executive. Nevertheless, this measure had the merit of beginning the debate on Universal and Unconditional Basic Income in Brazil.

The process of creating and implementing the cash transfer programs became the object of demand by organized society and Parliament, from 2020 onwards, seeking to mitigate the socioeconomic consequences of the Covid -19 pandemic. During this period, Jair Bolsonaro, President of Brazil (2019-2022), under pressure from movements of several civil associations, economists, social scientists and people affected by poverty and unemployment, on April 7 2020 launched a cash transfer program called Emergency Aid (*Auxílio Emergencial*) version 2020. According to the Federal Government's Transparency Portal, up to 68,234,466 people were assisted and later, the 2021 version reduced the assistance to almost half, reaching only 39.3 million people, according to the Federal Government's Ministry of Citizenship. The **Emergency Benefit** (*Benefício Emergencial*) was highly focalized and its aim was to mitigate the growing situation of unemployment, loss of income and advancing poverty and hunger among the unemployed and informal worker population, who did not have any social protection from the State, and it was implemented until October 2021 (SILVA, 2022-a, b).

After the end of the Auxílio Emergencial, Auxilio Brasil was created to replace Bolsa Família, a program that was widely utilized for the political interests

of then President Jair Bolsonaro, who was a candidate for re-election. However, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva was elected instead, in 2022. Right at the beginning of his term in office, in 2023, he deactivated Auxílio Brasil and instituted the Novo Bolsa Família, as it is presented below in this text.

2 THE “BOLSA FAMÍLIA” CREATED IN 2003 TO A NEW “BOLSA FAMÍLIA” CREATED IN 2023: what changed in the historical course of twenty years?

Bolsa Família, the largest cash transfer program in Latin America and in Brazil, was instituted officially, by Federal Law nº 10,836 of January 9, 2004 and regulated by Decree nº 5,209 of September 17, 2004. Its national managing agency was the Ministry of Citizenship that, from 2023 onwards was given the name of Ministry of Development and Social Welfare, Family and Combatting Hunger, with the shared participation of the States, Municipalities and Federal District, each level of government with specific attributions. The Bolsa Família was decentralized in the 5,570 Brazilian municipalities, aiming to ensure a cash transfer to complement the extremely poor families' income, with a per capita family income of up to BRL 89.00 (US\$18.42)³ a month, and in poor families, with a per capita monthly income between BRL 89.01 (US\$18.42) and BRL 178.00 (US\$ 36.85), with children or adolescents aged 0 to 17 years.

The Bolsa Família was structured on three axes: **cash transfer** to complement income, aimed at immediate relief of poverty; **conditionalities**, access to health and education rights for the future generations to break the cycle of poverty and **articulation with other programs and actions**, in order to stimulate the development of the families.

The conditionalities in education required **the head of each family** to keep up the school enrollment of the children and adolescents aged from 6 to 17 years, with 85% monthly school attendance and 75% for youths aged 16 and 17 years. Regarding health, children aged 0 to 6 years had to be vaccinated, according to the schedule of the Ministry of Health, and their weight and height had to be followed, and pregnant women were to have prenatal care.

³The exchange rate of the dollar used here was that of June 30, 2023, at BRL 4.83.

The monetary value transferred to each family monthly was the sum of various kinds of benefits⁴, according to family composition (number of people, ages, presence of pregnant women, etc.), and the mean value of the benefit was BRL 191.18 (US 39.58), in July 2021.

Given its massive size, Bolsa Familia, covering about 14 million families, approximately 50 million people, was the object of attention from the candidates to the presidency of Brazil. This was also due to the contribution to render economies more dynamic, mainly in small municipalities, which are in the majority in Brazil, besides their functionality to mitigate poverty and extreme poverty, high and growing in the reality of the years 2020 to 2022. Furthermore, it was a program with wide popular support, and thus with a broad potential to legitimize governments.

It is important to say that there was no interference in the significance of the Bolsa Família and its continuity during the administration of President Michel Temer (1996-1998). However, in 2019, Jair Messias Bolsonaro was sworn in as president of the Republic of Brazil. He was sustained by a moralizing, **antidemocratic** discourse, and by the dismantling of social rights and the **cleansing** of social programs aimed at the poor, guided by the radicalization of the conservative concept of focalization. It went as far as a discourse of criminalization, individualization, and blaming the poor for their situation and making them responsible for overcoming poverty. Even with this conservative change of direction, the aforementioned president made good use of the potential of Bolsa Família for his political legitimation. Indeed, in his electoral campaign, he promised to maintain the Bolsa Familia and also proposed a thirteenth benefit to be paid beginning in December 2019, which only occurred in the first year of his administration. Then measures restricting the Bolsa Família and a broad process of review and control of beneficiary families were adopted. In this process he transferred the Bolsa Família from the Ministry of Citizenship to agencies responsible for the economy. He adopted actions called **pente fino** (fine comb) to remove from the program those that he considered did not meet the criteria

⁴ The Program adopted a varied set of benefits, such as: Benefício Básico (*Basic Benefit*); Benefícios Variáveis (*Variable Benefits*); Benefício Variável Vinculado ao Adolescente (*Variable Benefit linked to the Adolescent*) and Benefício para Superação da Extrema Pobreza (*Benefit to Overcome Extreme Poverty*).

established for their insertion, but without transparency, and without saying what he considered to be **irregularities**. (Silva, 2020).

The dynamics of disqualification, adoption of restrictive measures and budget reduction was the beginning of a process that culminated in the substitution of the Bolsa Família by the Auxílio Brasil in November 2021. In this way, the Bolsonaro Administration assigned to the Ministry of the Economy the task of creating a program with a broad coverage to substitute the Bolsa Família to mitigate the situation of poverty, hunger and lack of social protection which became worse during the Covid-19 pandemic. The justification was to raise the monetary value of the benefit granted by Bolsa Família, as though for this purpose it were necessary to create another program. In fact, the monetary value of the Bolsa Família was not even updated during the three years of the Bolsonaro Administration.

In brief, the legitimizing potential of a massive cash transfer program like Bolsa Família; the need to consolidate the popular acceptance already shown with the Emergency Benefit (*Benefício Emergencial*); the wish to ensure his re-election in 2022 and the determination to remove from the social ideology, in Brazil and abroad, the designation of **Bolsa Família**, a hallmark of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores), Bolsonaro 's greatest political adversary was, possibly, the main determination that led him to ignore 18 years of experience of a successful social program widely accepted in the country and an international reference, and create **his own program**. In this context, it was Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva who was elected President of Brazil in 2022, beginning his third term in 2023. He fulfilled the promise he made in the electoral campaign and deactivated the Auxílio Brasil, reincorporating the Bolsa Família into the Brazilian Social Protection system, now under the name of New Bolsa Família (*Novo Bolsa Família*).

3 THE NEW “BOLSA FAMÍLIA”: the first step to an unconditional and universal basic income?

The New Bolsa Família, like the previous version, is situated in the context of the Brazilian System of Social Protection, as a set of federal programs, institutional arrangements and mechanisms to provide social assistance in money and in services, pensions and market programs. (BIRD/Banco Mundial (2020)). It is a reconstruction of the previous version which presents under a sociojuridical, economic-political and ideocultural reality different from 2003 (RBRB, 2023)

Through Provisory Measure n. 1,164 of March 2, 2003, in article one, the Bolsa Família Program was instituted, within the scope of the Ministry of Development and Social Assistance, Family, and Combatting Hunger, substituting the Auxilio Brasil Program instituted by Law nº 14,284, of December 29, 2021., and § 1º determines that the Bolsa Família is a stage of the gradual and progressive process of implementation of the universalization of citizen basic income, in the form established in the single paragraph of art. 6º of the Constitution and in the **caput** and § 1º of art. 1º of Law nº 10,835, of January 8, 2004.

The Bolsa Família Program is conceived as a direct and conditioned cash transfer of income, and its aims are:

I – to combat hunger through the direct transfer of income to the beneficiary families;

II – to contribute to interrupting the cycle of reproduction of poverty among the generations; and

III – to promote the development and social protection of the families, especially of children, adolescents and youths in a situation of poverty. (Provisory Measure n. 1.164 art. 3º)

It is aimed at families in a situation of poverty, whose monthly per capita family income is at most BRL 218.00 (US\$ 45.13) and that are enrolled in the Cadastro Único (CadÚnico- Single Registry) of the federal government, with correct, up to date information (Decree 11,566, art. 4º)

Art. 6º of Decree n.11,566 which regulates Provisory Measure n. 1,164 that instituted the New Bolsa Família defines a set of benefits as follows:

I **Citizen Income Benefit (*Benefício de Renda de Cidadania*)** paid to members of the beneficiary families to the amount of BRL142.00 (US\$ 29.39);

II **Complementary Benefit (*Benefício Complementar*)** aimed at families whose sum of Citizen Income Benefits is less than BRL600.00 (US\$ 124.22);

III **Early Childhood Benefit (*Benefício Primeira Infância*)** to the amount of BRL150.00 (US\$ 31.05) for beneficiary families that include in their make up children aged between zero and just under seven years, a benefit aimed at each child in this situation;

IV **Variable Family Benefit (*Benefício Variável Familiar*)** to the amount of BRL50.00 (US\$10.35) paid to members of the beneficiary family, pregnant women, children between the age of zero and just under twelve years and adolescents aged from twelve to just under eighteen years;

V **Extraordinary Transition Benefit (*Benefício Extraordinário de Transição*)** for families whose sum of the amounts indicated in paragraphs I to IV referring to the month of June 2023 is less than the corresponding full amount received in the month of May

The beneficiary families have a card to withdraw the benefit and the payments follows a Schedule that provides information previously regarding the dates of payment. The Paying Agent is the Caixa Econômica Federal (Federal Savings Bank) which provides the bank card and for withdrawal a social savings account is opened automatically in the name of the head of the family, preferably the woman.

It should be recorded that neither the Provisory Measure nor the Decree have an indication regarding periodicity of financial readjustment of the benefits. This is one aspect that has been questioned since the first Bolsa Família, due to the possibility of political use of the Program, and because it depends on the will of the Executive.

Another aspect that merits consideration is maintaining the conditionalities, according to art. 10º of the Provisory Measure n. 1,164 that determines that maintaining the family as a beneficiary in the Bolsa Família Program will depend, without prejudice to the requirements established in the aforementioned

Provisory Measure and its regulations, on the members of the families complying with the conditionalities involving:

I – having prenatal care;

II – complying with the national vaccination schedule;

III – following up the nutritional status of beneficiaries who are aged up to just under seven years of age; and

IV – minimum school attendance of:

a) sixty per cent for the beneficiaries from four years to just under six years of age and

b) seventy-five percent for the beneficiaries aged from six years to just under eighteen years, who have not yet finished basic education (art. 10º of Provisory Measure n. 1,164)

The conditionalities indicated for the New Bolsa Família are practically the same as in its previous version. There is no doubt that enrollment and attendance at school and access to the vaccination schedule and nutritional follow up for children and adolescents, as well as prenatal care for pregnant women are important measures for the well-being of the beneficiary families. What I question is its punitive character, with an indication of cancelling the benefit because of non-compliance with the conditionalities established. I believe that the conditionalities should be replaced by educational actions and, above all, by making these services available at the places where these beneficiary families live.

We can have **conditionalities considered weak** because they include following up the families, seeking to identify the causes of non-compliance with conditionalities associated with providing opportunities to favor their compliance. That was the option of the prior version of the Bolsa Família that only excluded families that were non-compliant with the conditionality after successive non-compliances, even when conditions were provided that favored the families' return to compliance with the conditionalities. Regarding the New Bolsa Família, what we have seen is an emphasis attributed to complying with the conditionalities and with their punitive character, emphasizing exclusion from the

Program when they are not complied with. Are we seeing the adoption of **strong conditionalities**?⁵

Control and social participation in the New Bolsa Família, according to Art. 16 of Provisory Measure n. 1,164 should be performed locally by the Council of Social Assistance.

In the initial dynamics of the implementation of the New Bolsa Família, attention was called to the broad dissemination, via the press, of the fact that the federal government adopted what has been called a 'fine comb' regarding the families registered as one-person families. Their number grew during the campaign for the presidency of the Republic in the second semester of 2022. It was predicted that over 1.5 million people would be excluded in March 2023, under the justification that it was necessary to combat fraud. The people on the list of possibly included received messages by SMS or on the Bolsa Família app requesting that the beneficiaries who live alone update the registry for Bolsa Família, and that if they live with the family, it was requested that they cancel the Cadastro Unico on the app. The indication is that if they prove that they live alone and have a right to the cash transfer of Bolsa Família, the benefit would be reinstated, which included the months that had not been paid.

Such situations occur when the cash transfer program is focused on given population groups.

Considering the information that characterizes the New Bolsa Família, as indicated above, besides considerations about the conditionalities, other aspects should be taken into account. It is found that neither the Provisory Measure n. 1,164 that institutes the New Bolsa Família, nor Decree n.11,566 that regulates the Program explicitly inform what would be the steps for advancement of the Bolsa Família towards the Basic Income. In fact, no area is indicated as responsible for programming the steps to be taken in order to reach the Citizen Basic Income (RBRB, 2023).

⁵ See a discussion about concepts and controversies on conditionalities in cash transfer programs: BENTURA et al 2018).

Eduardo Suplicy, taking an optimistic view, believes that the main advantage of the Citizen Basic Income is from the point of view of human dignity and freedom. After participating in a Senate hearing, in April 2023 he admitted that he began to see more concrete chances of implementing the Citizen Basic Income in Brazil, saying:

Those who know me, know how great an effort I have made to see during my lifetime the implantation of the project that foresees, the Universal and Unconditional Citizen Basic Income for all women and men. I believe that my dream is increasingly close to coming true – and this dream is what brought me back to Brasilia on April 25 last. (SUPLICY, 2023, p. 1)

However, there is no indication in legal instruments regarding the New Bolsa Família about concrete chances of implementing the Citizen Basic Income in Brazil.

Next, a few general thoughts are presented as a conclusion.

4 CONCLUSION

The thoughts developed show the broad protagonism of the focalized cash transfer programs in the context of the Brazilian System of Social Protection, with special emphasis on the Bolsa Família. This protagonism has expanded since 2021 because of the Covid-19 pandemic, due to the increased unemployment; informal work which is badly paid without any social protection; poverty and hunger.

This reality has been fed by the functions taken on by these programs in the field of dynamization of the economy; because they are measures to relieve poverty and due to their massive character, especially the Bolsa Família, they contribute greatly to legitimize governments that use these programs as bargaining chips imposed on the poor who need to survive. Nevertheless, focusing on the poor and extremely poor, even attenuating basic needs for survival, they are unable to change the growing situation of poverty and social inequalities.

When we deal with cash transfer programs, it should be considered that we have at least two groups of cash transfer programs that have a difference in fundamentals, contents and objectives. On the one hand, we have the Focalized Cash Transfer Programs with their conditionalities, that represent the group of programs implemented in Brazil until then. On the other hand, we have the Universal Basic Income. The function of the former is to mitigate poverty and cover emergency situations. The proposal of the Universal Basic Income is to contribute to the redistribution of socially produced wealth and to promote social justice. Consequently, each group of programs is referred to different political-ideological orientations. This is because cash transfer programs are not neutral formulations, and they are guided by the perception of the world, of society, of citizenship, of poverty.

The reality which is pointed out, analyzed and problematized indicates, in the context of the Bolsonaro Administration, a regression of concepts and criteria of the Focalized Cash Transfer Programs in Brazil, ignoring a situation that was socially and economically worsened by the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 onwards. The option is to perform a conservative focalization and control the poor; an attempt to demobilize society's debate seeking to increase rights and social protection, which increasingly diminishes the possibility of implanting the Universal Basic Income, since it adopts excessive criteria for inclusion, further contributing to exclusion and to generating instability and insecurity; because it transforms follow up of the beneficiaries into inspection and enforcement focusing on exclusion and stigmatization, reinforcing the logic of performance and individual effort.

Finally, there is an advance in attitudes that blame the poor for the situation and make them responsible for overcoming the situation of poverty in which they live, as though poverty were an option, denying that poverty and wealth are structural products of the way in which society organizes itself to produce and distribute the fruits of their production. To break this paradigm, the New Bolsa Família was created by Provisory Measure n. 1, 164 of March 2, 2023, whose § 1º determines that the Bolsa Família is a stage in the gradual and progressive process of implementing universalization of the citizen basic income, as established in the single paragraph of art. 6º of the Constitution and in the **caput** and § 1º of art 1º Law 10,835 of January 8, 2004. This indication presents

the dilemma of the concreteness of the New Bolsa Família, as was also indicated in its previous version, when it was considered the first step toward the implantation of the Citizen Basic Income, in the form enounced by Law n. 10,835 of January 8, 2004. Eighteen years have gone by since its implementation, until it was replaced by the Auxilio Brasil Program, and no concrete signs were recorded of advancing from the first step to the subsequent positions. This situation is also a focus of questions regarding the current version of the Bolsa Família called New Bolsa Família in the present text.

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