

Conditional Cash Transfer Programs and Their Possible Side Effects: the Brazilian  
Bolsa Família case

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This paper examines the negative impact the Brazilian Bolsa Família Program (BFP) may have on autonomous political participation and tries to present a discussion about how to minimize this impact, without damaging the rights conditional cash transfer programs, as the BFP, seek to promote. The paper is organized in three main parts. The first part is devoted to presenting an overview of the basic structure of BFP, the most relevant evidence on the results of the program in general and, in particular, its negative impact on the political autonomy of its beneficiaries, due to its potential to induce some form of clientelism. In the second part, the study offers a discussion about the relationship between, on the one hand, political rights and democracy and, on other, the fundamental rights to subsistence and food security, especially given Latin America's reality. Finally, in the third part, the study seeks to suggest, for discussion, some proposals in order to minimize the side effects observed.

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The current structure of the BFP dates from 2004, and consolidates other conditional cash transfer programs created in the late 1990s<sup>1</sup>. Broadly speaking,

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<sup>1</sup> Law No. 10.836, of January 9, 2004: Art. 1o It is created, within the Presidency of the Republic, the Bolsa Família Program, aimed at the actions of income transfer according to some conditionalities. Sole Paragraph. The Program to which refers the caput is intended to unify the management and implementation procedures of actions to transfer income of the Federal Government, especially those of the Programa Nacional de Renda Mínima [National Program of Minimum Wage] linked to Education – Bolsa Escola, established by the Law No. 10.219, of April 11, 2001, of the Programa Nacional de Acesso à Alimentação [National Program of Access to Food] – PNAA, established by the Law No. 10.689, of June 13, 2003, of the Programa Nacional de Renda Mínima [National Program of Minimum Wage] linked to Health – Bolsa Alimentação, established by the Provisional Executive Order No. 2.206-1, of

the BFP pays three types of benefits: (i) the basic benefit, in the amount of R\$ 70.00<sup>2</sup> per month for families with monthly income per capita below R\$ 70.00, (ii) a variable benefit, for families with income per capita below R\$ 140.00<sup>3</sup>, in the amount of R\$ 32.00<sup>4</sup> (capped at R\$ 160.00<sup>5</sup> per family), linked to the existence, in the family, of pregnant women, lactating mothers, children and teenagers between 0 and 15 years old; and (iii) another variable benefit, for families with monthly income per capita below R\$ 140.00, in the amount of R\$ 38.00<sup>6</sup> (maximum of R\$ 76.00 per family<sup>7</sup>), linked to the existence, in the family, of teenagers aged between 16 and 17 years old. The benefits can be added up in cases of families with monthly income per capita below R\$ 70.00.

In addition to the criteria regarding the maximum income per capita and, in the case of variable benefits, the presence of family members under certain circumstances, the ability to receive such benefits will depend on the fulfillment of certain conditions<sup>8</sup>. In the variable benefit linked to children and teenagers,

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September 6, 2001, of the Auxílio-Gas [Aid-Gas] Program, established by the Decree No. 4.102, of January 24, 2002, and of the Cadastramento Único [Single Registration] of the Federal Government, established by the Decree No. 3.877, July 24, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Approximately US\$ 39.

<sup>3</sup> Approximately US\$ 78.

<sup>4</sup> Approximately US\$ 18.

<sup>5</sup> Approximately US\$ 89.

<sup>6</sup> Approximately US\$ 21.

<sup>7</sup> Approximately US\$ 42.

<sup>8</sup> In Brazil, there is a conflict between two very different views on the subject of income transfer. One group – which turned out to be politically victorious – advocates a program of cash transfers linked to the families' social and economic conditions and to conditionalities, in the model of the Bolsa Família. Another group, however, supports a program of universal basic income, according to which a value would be paid to all citizens and foreigner residents regardless of social and economic conditions or the compliance with any condition.

The basic income model came to be made into law: it is the Law No. 10.835, of January 8, 2004 (one day before the publication of the Bolsa Família Act). The following is what the Art. 1 of the Act reads: It is established, from 2005 on, the citizenship basic income, which will be the right of all Brazilians living in the country and foreigners residing for at least 5 (five) years in Brazil, regardless of their socioeconomic conditions, to receive an annual monetary benefit. §1o The range mentioned in the caput of this article should be achieved gradually, at the discretion of the Executive, focusing on the poorer segments of the population. §2o Payment of benefits must be of equal value for everyone, and enough to meet the minimum expenditure of each person with food, education and health, considering, in order to do this,

Brazilian law requires school frequency of at least 85% for children and teenagers up to 15 years old, and 75% for teenagers between 16 and 17 years old. The law also determines the need for nutritional and health routine check-ups, but the existing standards are not so specific on the subject, with only a general indication of the need for child immunization and prenatal care for pregnant women. Another condition involves child labor: if child labor is found in a family, the benefits may be suspended. Although the specific legislation provides the general rules of the BFP, all the values involved (minimum income per capita, which is the eligible criteria for the program, or the benefits' value) can be changed directly by the Federal Administration. Also, the specific discipline of the program's requirements and the supervision of their fulfillment may be found in acts of the Federal Administration<sup>9</sup>.

The benefit payment is made directly to the beneficiary account maintained in a bank controlled by the Federal Administration and administrated with a magnetic card. This is an interesting aspect of the program because most of the beneficiaries, who did not have access to the banking system before, obtained such access only due to the specific BFP requirements regulating the benefits payment. That also created the opportunity to open bank accounts regardless of other requirements normally demanded in the banking market. The regulation also provides that the holder of the BFP benefit should preferably be a woman, who, whenever possible, should be indicated as head of the household. There is no deadline for participation in the program and there is no conditionality associated with seeking employment or improving professional qualification. According to data from the Federal Government, over 13 million families receive benefits from the BFP<sup>10</sup>. According to the latest census (2010), the sum of the Brazilian

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the country's development degree and the budget possibilities. This law was never regulated nor applied.

<sup>9</sup> The current values were defined by the Decrees No. 6.917/2009 and No. 7.447/2011, issued by the President.

<sup>10</sup> [www.mds.gov.br/bolsafamilia](http://www.mds.gov.br/bolsafamilia)

population is 190,732,694 people<sup>11</sup>. Thus, assuming each family comprises four people, on average, it is reasonable to conclude that 52 million people in the country are benefited by BFP. That means over 25% of the population.

The Brazilian BFP is not an isolated phenomenon. Only in Latin America, several other countries have some sort of conditional cash transfer program (Mexico, Honduras, Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, Jamaica, Argentina, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, Ecuador, Chile, Jamaica, Argentina, El Salvador, Uruguay, Paraguay, Dominican Republic, Peru and Panama). Some studies identify the following common features in these programs: they all involve the payment of cash benefits to very poor families (in general with school-age children); it is common that the benefit is paid, preferably, to women; and the benefit has, as a counterpart, the need of compliance, by the family, of certain obligations in terms of education (minimum enrollment and attendance to school) and health (often some kind of routine check-ups). Beyond these general features, some countries have adopted, for example, a maximum period of permanence in the program (Mexico and Chile) and other conditions like the attendance to job training programs (Argentina)<sup>12</sup>.

Back to Brazil, and under the rules of the program published by the Federal Administration, the BFP has five main objectives: (i) promote access to the network of free-of-charge public services, especially those related to health, education and social assistance; (ii) fight hunger and promote food and nutritional security; (iii) stimulate sustained emancipation of families living in poverty and extreme poverty; (iv) combat poverty; and (v) promote intersectorality, complementarity and synergy within governmental social initiatives<sup>13</sup>. The

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<sup>11</sup> [www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/censo2010/default.shtm](http://www.ibge.gov.br/home/estatistica/populacao/censo2010/default.shtm)

<sup>12</sup> Draibe, Sonia. *Programas de Transferências Condicionadas de Renda in América Latina – Desafios da Democracia e do Desenvolvimento*. In *Políticas Sociais para além da crise*, Fernando Henrique, Cardoso e Alejandro Foxley (editores), 2009, p. 103-143.

<sup>13</sup> Decree No. 5.209, 17 September, 2004, art. 4º.

evidence already produced shows that the program has been able to accomplish some of these goals but has not been successful in relation to others<sup>14</sup>.

Surveys indicate that the BFP has had considerable success in minimizing hunger, securing minimum standards of food safety and removing a major portion of the Brazilian population from levels of extreme poverty. Studies show, for instance, that participation in the program increases between 7 to 11 percentage points the probability of homes to be in a situation of food security. With respect to health, especially for children, the BFP allows people to spend more on food, though there is no record of increasing spending, for example, in child hygiene and the program did not affect childhood vaccinations in a relevant way<sup>15</sup>. Regarding education, the data shows that there was a slight increase in enrollment, though enrollment levels were already high. The program helped to reduce school evasion, increased school attendance and helped to reduce the amount of child's labor hours (though not in a very relevant way). However, there is no evidence that the BFP has had any positive impact on children and teenagers school performance, which is still quite low in Brazil. There is also no indication that the program has fostered families involvement in their children's education (generally considered an important factor to improve learning and school performance)<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> de Castro, Jorge Abrahão; e Modesto, Lúcia (Organizadores). *Bolsa Família 2003-2010: avanços e desafios*. IPEA, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Camelo, Rafael de Souza; Tavares, Priscilla Albuquerque; e Saiani, Carlos César Santejo, *Alimentação, Nutrição e Saúde em Programas de Transferência de Renda: Evidências para o Programa Bolsa Família*, Revista Economia, Selecta, v.10, n.4, p.685–713, dezembro 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Cardoso, Eliana; e Souza, André Portela. *The impact of cash transfers on child labor and school attendance in Brazil*, Working Paper No. 04-W07, Departament of Economics Vanderbilt University, April 2004 ([www.vanderbilt.edu/econ](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/econ)); Glewwe, Paul; e Kassouf, Ana Lucia, *The Impact of the Bolsa Escola/Família Conditional Cash Transfer Program on Enrollment, Grade Promotion and Drop out Rates in Brazil* (<http://www.anpec.org.br/encontro2008/artigos/200807211140170-.pdf>) Mega, Luciano Farias. *Mudanças causadas pelo programa de transferência direta de renda, Bolsa Família, aos beneficiários de Santa Vitória do Palmar, RS*, Dissertação apresentada ao Curso de Serviço Social da Universidade Católica de Pelotas como requisito para obtenção do grau de Mestre em Política Social, 2008, ([http://www.ucpel.tche.br/mps/dissertacoes/Mestrado/2008/Dissertacao\\_Luciano\\_Mega.pdf](http://www.ucpel.tche.br/mps/dissertacoes/Mestrado/2008/Dissertacao_Luciano_Mega.pdf)); Estrella, Juliana; e Ribeiro, Leando Molhano. *Qualidade da gestão das condicionalidades do Programa Bolsa Família: uma discussão sobre o índice de gestão Descentralizada*, Revista de Administração Pública, 42(3):625-41, maio/Jun. 2008.

On the other hand, research shows that the program has not been able to stimulate the sustained emancipation of the families it has benefited, one of its goals. The program regulation stipulates that it will be temporary in nature, will not generate vested rights and the family's registration will be reviewed every two years<sup>17</sup>. There is no record, however, of any relevant disqualification of families by a spontaneous increase in income. Instead, the number of families in the program has grown significantly over time. Apparently, the benefits paid by the program help the families with their basic needs – particularly food needs – but do not create conditions for an income growth that allows them to stop depending on the program to fulfill these same needs<sup>18</sup>.

The data provided above intend to evaluate the results of BFP in achieving its own goals. And, in summary, we can conclude that the BFP has been relatively successful in its basic goals of eradicating hunger and extreme poverty, promoting food security and contributing to reduce school evasion. Nonetheless, and despite the time already passed since the program started, it has not been able to foster the sustained emancipation of the families who receive its benefits.

What we would like to do now is to examine some existing evidence about the impact of BFP on other issues considered relevant in contemporary societies, not directly related to the program objectives. There are already studies, for example, discussing the impact of the BFP on the gender politics (given the focus on women as the head of the household)<sup>19</sup>. The aim of this study is to address a

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<sup>17</sup> Decree No. 5.209/2004, art. 21.

<sup>18</sup> Draibe, Sonia, *Programas de Transferências Condicionadas de Renda in América Latina – Desafios da Democracia e do Desenvolvimento*. In Políticas Sociais para além da crise, Fernando Henrique, Cardoso e Alejandro Foxley (editores), 2009, p. 103-143; Kerstenetzky, Celia Lessa. *Redistribuição e Desenvolvimento? A Economia Política do Programa Bolsa Família*, DADOS – Revista de Ciências Sociais, Vol . 52, n1, 2009, pp. 53 a 83; Sousa, Juliane Martins Carneiro de. *A superação da pobreza através da distribuição justa das riquezas sociais: uma análise da consistência teórica do Programa Bolsa Família e das perspectivas dos beneficiários de saída autosustentada do Programa* (Dissertação de Mestrado apresentada à Escola Brasileira de Administração Pública e de Empresas – FGV), 2009; e Rego Walquiria Leão, *Aspectos teóricos das políticas de cidadania: uma aproximação ao Bolsa Família*, Revista Lua Nova, 73: 147-185, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> As mentioned above, the option of preferably giving responsibility for the Family unit to

specific side effect of BFP: the impact of the program on the political autonomy of its participants. For the purposes of this study, political autonomy means freedom of choice in the context of voting<sup>20</sup>.

A number of studies indicate that the BFP has played an especially important role in the last Brazilian elections, helping the continuation in the Executive branches (especially in the Presidency) of the political party that created the program, and stimulating the development of a contemporary form of clientelism. These studies claim that the BFP induces families that receive its benefits to vote for State governors linked to the program (or for those politically sponsored by them), minimizing their political autonomy, once the benefit paid is seen as a gift from the political authority. This perception establishes a kind of personal connection between the group of beneficiaries and the authority. In this context, and in exchange for the benefits/gifts received (and hoping to preserve them), the payback from the individuals would be electoral support. This relationship of subordination and dependence that exists between those who manage the program and those who receive benefits is close to the old models of patronage and minimizes the individuals real freedom to, at the moment of the vote, express their political preference in an autonomous way<sup>21</sup>.

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women is common in conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America. On this subject v. Gomes, Simone da Silva Ribeiro. *Notas preliminares de uma crítica feminista aos programas de transferência direta de renda – o caso do Bolsa Família no Brasil*, Revista Textos & Contextos, v. 10, n. 1, p. 69 - 81, jan./jul. 2011.

<sup>20</sup> Political autonomy may involve, of course, many other activities, besides the act of voting.

<sup>21</sup> Bursztyjn, Marcel; e Salgueiro, Suely, *Ligações perigosas: proteção social e clientelismo no Semiárido Nordestino*, Revista Estudos Sociais e Agrícolas, vol. 19, n. 1, 2011: 30-61; González, Zaira. *Rewarding Voters Through Welfare Transfers in Mexico and Brazil*, March 12, 2011 (<http://people.carleton.edu/~amontero/Zaira%20Gonzalez.pdf>); Zucco, Cesar. *Conditional Cash Transfers and Voting Behavior: Redistribution and Clientelism in Developing Democracies*, February 1, 2011 (Electronic copy available at: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1753234>); Licio, Elaine Cristina; Rennó, Lucio R.; Castro, Henrique Carlos de O. de. *Bolsa Família e Voto na Eleição Presidencial de 2006: em busca do elo perdido*, Revista Opinião Pública, vol. 15, nº 1, Junho, 2009, p.31-54; Marques, Rosa Maria; Leite, Marcel Guedes; Mendes, Áquila; Ferreira, Mariana Ribeiro Jansen. *Discutindo o papel do Programa Bolsa família na decisão das eleições presidenciais brasileiras de 2006*, Revista de Economia Política, vol. 29, nº 1 (113), pp. 114-132, janeiro-março/2009; e Cândido-Pinheiro, Maurício. *Bolsa Família ou desempenho da economia? Determinantes da reeleição de Lula em 2006* (<http://www.anpec.org.br/encontro2009/inscricao.on/arquivos/000-2fe45547c2ee01762d90d5759cd9ea0c.pdf>), 2009.

This relationship of dependence, as well as the damage to the political autonomy, seems to be worsened precisely because, as noted above, the BFP deals with very basic needs of an extremely poor population, but does not lead to a sustained emancipation of these individuals. The benefits paid by the BFP help minimize hunger and poverty, but if they cease to be paid, families will return to their previous state of poverty and food insecurity because they are not capable of supplying these needs independently. So, from the perspective of their subsistence, it is really important that the program continues and, therefore, the political group committed to the program must be voted for. It is interesting that the relationship of dependence established is not purely individual, considering the beneficiaries, once the criteria for program participation are relatively objective. In fact, the relationship of dependence is established between the authority and the group of people awarded the benefit or even eligible for the program. Some studies suggest that a similar phenomenon of clientelism occur in other Latin American countries, which also have conditional cash transfer programs in place. In the Brazilian case, the problem seems especially worrisome given the fact that more than 25% of the population benefits from the program, which is already running for about 10 years (actually, more than 10 years, considering that other conditional cash transfer programs existed before the BFP).

The question raised by the data described above is complex and especially relevant for Latin America in general and Brazil in particular for another reason. Extreme poverty and hunger were (and still are) real and far-reaching problems in Brazil and in other Latin American countries. On the other hand, almost all countries of the continent have a history of authoritarian movements, many of them with significant populist appeal. Research conducted by the United Nations Development Program (2002-2004) reveal a high index of Latin American ambivalence toward democracy. In a poll in the region, most of the interviewed answered that economic development is more important than democracy and that

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they would support an authoritarian government to solve economic problems. Over 40% of those who participated in the survey do not believe that democracy is capable of solving the problems of the country<sup>22</sup>.

To what point do these data lead us? Are clientelism, and the consequent restriction of poor people political autonomy, the inevitable price to be paid to solve the problem of hunger? But for how long, if conditional cash transfer programs are not capable to induce autonomy in generating income? Is the present generation of adults really lost, and the only possible thing to do is to invest in their children? Is political autonomy actually less important and should be sacrificed for the achievement of a greater good? But sacrificed for how long and to what extent?

## II

History reveals that, in times of severe economic crisis – such as wars or natural disasters, for example – people consent to increase the power to the government, and, as a consequence, to suffer greater restrictions on their freedom and autonomy, so that the political authority can address the causes of the crisis and overcome them. Although we cannot say Brazil faces any crisis of this nature, what could be said about the number of people in a state of permanent poverty and hunger in the country? It seems natural that the means available to satisfy their basic needs for food and shelter are more important to them – at least more urgent – than political autonomy or ideal conditions for democracy. As a matter of fact, however, the misery in which these people live does not necessarily have a specific cause (such as war, for instance). It is, in general, a phenomenon much more complex and with multiple causes, that cannot be solved by exceptional or emergency measures that political authorities could provide, even if they had the

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<sup>22</sup> [www.pnud.org.br/cidadania/reportagens/index.php?id01=287&lay=cid](http://www.pnud.org.br/cidadania/reportagens/index.php?id01=287&lay=cid)  
[www.pnud.org.br/democracia/documentos/PK.IAD.pdf](http://www.pnud.org.br/democracia/documentos/PK.IAD.pdf)

and

power to do so. In other words, to grant extraordinary powers to the Government will not necessarily solve the problem on a permanent basis. How, then, to relate the apparent tension between economic development and social rights *versus* democracy and political autonomy in a context of institutional normality (outside of emergencies)?

Reducing hunger is directly connected to the preservation of life, to human dignity and, for these reasons, is a huge priority in the context of fundamental rights. The question of time emphasizes that priority. Unlike what can eventually happen with other rights, hungry people cannot afford to wait for a long time for that right to be granted. In Brazil, the Federal Constitution provides that access to food is a social right (art. 6), which means that the Government should provide some kind of support to prevent people from reaching levels of extreme poverty and starvation. In fact, besides the BFP, Brazilian Social Security Office provides a number of other benefits for people who, for various reasons, are unable to provide their own subsistence. Food access is also considered a human right from the perspective of international standards. The article 25-I of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) provides that "Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food (...)". In addition to a right in itself, the right to food and other rights related to minimum subsistence work as conditions to the effective exercise of basic liberties. Indeed, the formal recognition of freedom of expression, assembly, association, profession or initiative means little to those who are illiterate, hungry and have no place to live.

On the other hand, however, and though on another level, political autonomy is also a fundamental right recognized by democratic States<sup>23</sup> and international society<sup>24</sup>. If it is true that access to food is directly linked to human

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<sup>23</sup> The Brazilian Constitution deals extensively with political rights, political pluralism and democratic institutions.

<sup>24</sup> The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, UN (1948): "Article 21. 1. Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen

dignity, from the perspective of the physical existence of the individual, it is also true that the right to political participation and the right of self-government – or, in a more modest way, the power to influence decisions that will affect the political instances in society (or at least the power to influence the choice of those who will take such decisions) – are also rights that connect with human dignity, from the perspective of equality. If all men and women are equal, nobody has the right, in himself or herself, to govern others. The decisions that affect the community should be taken by everybody (the winning majority) or, at least, those who will be responsible for the decision making process should be selected by the vote of the majority of people.

Interestingly, in addition to a right in itself, political autonomy also has an instrumental character in relation to other rights. Through political participation, Government can be led to implement policies more or less comprehensive for the protection and promotion of certain rights. The priorities Government pursues and the actions it implements are guided, to some extent, and influenced by election results. Thus, it seems consistent to say that, to some extent, political participation can drive the Government to create social, educational and economic conditions so that individuals are able to make a living and to no longer depend on Government to meet their basic needs (or, at least, that only a small part of the population would depend on government aid to eat – not 25% of the population). That is, besides being a right in itself, autonomous political participation can guide state action towards the promotion of certain rights, including rights related to the existential minimum.

In this context, and considering the connections established between different rights over time, it seems wrong to establish a hierarchy between

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representatives. 2. Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country. 3. The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedure."

fundamental rights and, particularly, to fix a hierarchical relationship between the right to access to food (or any other social right) and the right to political participation. This consciousness is important because, although it may be a truism to say that political autonomy is also a fundamental right, the fantasy that we could have a good, competent and efficient dictator – who could save us from our hardships and secure rights, all without the need for tedious and slow democratic political action – seems to be very vivid in the Latin American political imaginary.

In more concrete terms, it is certain that the right to political participation has many dimensions and presents a lot of complexities, since it relates back to the discussion around the very concept of democracy. There is no need to tackle this debate at this time. That is because, despite the controversies regarding the concept of democracy, people will generally agree that the right to political participation involves, at least, the existence of free and periodic elections, universal right to vote and to run for office and the possibility of some kind of control – at least through the election process – over the performance of public officials. People will also agree, at least in general, that, beyond the formal provisions on the right to vote and to run for office, autonomous political participation requires these rights to be freely exercised. But what does it mean to “freely exercise” the right to vote? Which conditions are required so that one can say a person can freely exercise his or her right to vote? Or, on the other hand, which conditions may affect the free exercise of the voting rights?

The identification of the conditions required for the free exercise of the right to vote will inevitably involve the historical and cultural circumstances of each country. In most democratic countries, for example, the law determines the secrecy of vote. Freedom of speech, particularly with respect to political criticism, and political pluralism are well considered conditions to autonomous political participation. Most people will also agree that public policies that establish clientelistic relationships between the government and some groups of citizens

may affect the free exercise of their voting rights, since it can make it difficult for them to use election as an arena for democratic control of public official's actions.

There is no precise conceptualization of the phenomenon of political clientelism, as it can take several forms. Either way, the use of the term clientelism in contemporary political environment seeks to describe situations in which people provide political support to the authority, or to a particular political group, as a payback for some sort of personal profit received from this authority. The relationship established between individuals and the Government in this context is not one of citizenship, but one of subordination. The person views the personal profit as a sort of favor (and not a right), which is provided by the person exercising the authority, with whom he or she establishes a bond of loyalty. The other side of this relationship is the political and electoral support provided by the individual. Voting, therefore, is no longer an opportunity in which the individual can control the action of public officials, but the moment to "return the favor" for the benefit received (and to guarantee its continuation).

Of course one can say that any vote, in a democracy, can be described by almost the same logic. People vote according to their best interest, in terms of the benefits they have received or the benefits they expect to receive from the Government, directly or indirectly. It is not the case to make any moral judgment about the various kinds of interests – personal or collective, ideological or not, etc. – that can determine the vote of each individual. However, the sensitive point, which seems to distinguish the self-interested logic underneath any vote from the logic related to clientelism, is not the fact that people vote one way or the other because of their interests. Individuals who have the freedom to vote for the government and the same freedom to vote against the government, according to their interests, exercise their political autonomy as they see fit. What happens in clientelistic relationships is that the individual has a significant restriction on their freedom to vote *against* the authority providing him or her with personal advantages. The harm to individual political autonomy can be identified in this moment: it is difficult for him or her to oppose the authority by voting or to exercise some unencumbered control of the state action in times of election.

If, as stated above, people would not have the freedom to vote *against* the Government, it seems correct to say that clientelism limits the political autonomy of the individual in a significant way. Depending on the nature of the benefit provided by the authority, on how the benefit is provided and on the need of the people who receive it, this relationship of dependence, simultaneously existential and political, can be more or less intense. If the benefit is connected to the very survival of the individual and if it is continuous, individuals may be induced to support, continuously, the political group that provides it – regardless of other considerations – because the benefit is, after all, essential or extremely relevant to their own subsistence<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>25</sup> This does not mean that only poor people are extremely vulnerable to this kind of dependency. A similar phenomenon is observed in relation to public officials who occupy, for example, positions of free appointment and dismissal, also very common in Brazil.

It is not hard to notice that conditional cash transfer programs, such as Bolsa Família, have most of the characteristics listed above, providing a favorable environment for the development of clientelistic relations between the program beneficiaries and the authority that manages the program. Besides the theoretical perception of this risk, the studies already conducted in Brazil, and mentioned above, show that, in fact, the results of recent elections, particularly for positions in the Executive branch, have been strongly influenced by the bond of loyalty from the beneficiaries of the BFP – more than 25% of the population –, induced to vote for the groups supported by the authorities that manage the program.

Hunger was, and to some extent remains to be, a serious problem within Brazil, and one cannot minimize the importance of the BFP in promoting the fundamental right to access to food, to food security and, indirectly, to health. The BFP intends to prevent situations of misery and ensure minimum living conditions for the poorest population and has been successful in this goal. The problem is that the temporary nature of the program – at least within one generation – is not real: the program, as structured, does not help people overcome the poverty cycle so as to be able to fulfill, by themselves, their and their families' basic needs. It has been seen above that although this is one of the stated objectives of the BFP, there is no evidence of progress towards this end. A bit on the contrary: after about 10 years of BFP, the amount of people benefited from the program only grows, reaching today more than 25% of the population. On the other hand, the negative impact of the program on the political autonomy of this group of people seems undeniable. In this context, it seems important to discuss how these collateral effects could be, at least, minimized.

### III

The problem described above is not a simple one. The pure theoretical discussion seems to be able to deal with the tension between free political

participation and fighting starvation in a fancy way. Nonetheless, in the more concrete level of the public policy discussion, when real people are involved and results are not perceived immediately, this dispute cannot be solved so easily. The mere awareness of the problem is already something important in the discussion.

Furthering the discussion, it is time to try to examine the questions proposed in the beginning of this paper. Are clientelism, and the consequent restriction on poor people political autonomy, the inevitable price to be paid to solve the problem of hunger? But for how long, if the conditional cash transfer programs are not able to induce autonomy in generating income? Is the present generation of adults really lost, and the only possible thing to do is to invest in their children? Is political autonomy actually less important and should be sacrificed for the achievement of a greater good? But sacrificed for how long and to what extent? After all, how can any discussion about the BFP be framed considering not only the food security issue but also the political autonomy of the program beneficiaries? It is possible to imagine two completely different approaches to the problem.

One possibility would involve an attempt to politically disconnect the BFP of any political group in particular, turning it into a permanent policy of the Brazilian State. The purpose here would be to try to blur the link people identify between the program and some authority or political party in particular, so that its beneficiaries would not fear to lose the benefit if not voting for the incumbents. But how this result could be produced? If it can, ever, be produced. One could consider changing the Brazilian Constitution in order to incorporate the BFP on a permanent basis. In any case, however, running the program demands several decisions that will always be in the President's sphere of action – he or she will inevitably be connected to the program. One could consider, also, another possibility, involving the opposing party behavior in the political campaign. Indeed, the clientelistic impact of the BFP would be lessened when the opposing party openly supports the BFP's continuation. In fact, opposing parties in Brazil



are already behaving this way so, at least over time, there is a possibility that this negative impact of the BFP could be minimized.

Another approach for the problem – and, of course, the most desirable one – would be to try to speed up the sustained emancipation of families, so that participation in the BFP would become, in fact, temporary. The general idea would be that, after some time in the program, the families would actually be able to leave it because they would have overcome poverty and could generate, by their own means, enough income to meet their needs. The dependence cycle would then end and also the clientelistic impact on political autonomy. But, again, how this result could be produced and when? It is important to notice that the BFP, as other conditional cash transfer programs, focus on (at least) two different generations: the adults and the children/teenagers. Let's start with the adults.

The adults are the ones that earn so little from their labor that they cannot support their family. The BFP provides them with food, basically, and demands attention to health care routines. They will not starve. But how could these adults overcome poverty and generate, by their own means, enough income to meet their family needs? Some programs, in other countries, work with a maximum period of permanence. This rule assigns the burden of trying to overcome the cycle of poverty to the individual himself (or, most frequently, herself). Setting a time limit may create some stimulus, in terms of personal responsibility, to those who *can* do something about their situation but don't do what they can. However, often individuals simply will not have the means to do anything more to leave poverty behind. Picture a couple with several children, which do not have any professional qualification: a very common situation in Brazil. Both work all day long but earn so little from their labor that their income is not enough to meet the needs of their family, so they receive the BFP benefits. They live far away from the places they work and spend a considerable amount of time on public transport, which makes impossible, for instance, to take any kind of training course at night. In addition, that the gap between a demanding job market and the qualification these adults

can offer grows continuously over time, making it more difficult for them to find any well paid job.

The amount paid by the BFP in the current model is not sufficient to fulfill the family's basic needs and allow one of the adults to stop working for some years and invest in his or her professional qualification. That is not the purpose of the program anyway. So, which kind of personal effort would be reasonable to expect from these adults to overcome the poverty cycle of their family while receiving the benefits of the BFP? Giving these people the opportunity to study and enhance their chances of qualifying for better paid jobs – so they are able to generate enough income for their families – seems important, but the mere existence of training programs with this purpose, even the ones free-of-charge, will not be enough if people do not have real conditions to attend them. Let's turn our attention, now, to the future generation: children and teenagers.

The BFP has three basic purposes when dealing with children and teenagers: prevent hunger, avoid certain diseases and keep them at school. In this context, the idea, referred to above, of setting a maximum time limit for participation in the BFP can damage not only the adults with the threat of starvation, but also the children and teenagers in the family. Considering children and teenagers, the logic underneath the public policy seems to be the following: the next generation will receive an educational background that will make possible to these children and teenagers, when adults, to generate enough income to fulfill their needs and their future families'. At this moment in the future, the cycle of existential and political dependency will end. If breaking the cycle of poverty within a generation, as seen above, presents a number of difficulties, the intergenerational breaking, even with mid-term results, should not be ignored as the focus of public policy.

The problem is that overcoming the intergenerational poverty cycle demands much more than just attendance to school. If public education provided

now by the State to children and teenagers will not allow them, in the future, to have jobs that pay enough to fulfill their families' needs, the poverty cycle will be reproduced in the next generation. The children of the present beneficiaries of the BFP will continue to be, as adults, beneficiaries of the program too, and the cycle of existential and political dependence will continue for, at least, the next generation. The BFP does not intend to deal with the quality of the public education in Brazil and it is probably not reasonable to expect this kind of outcome from a CCT program.

### **Conclusion**

Brazil is not willing to let their citizens starve and the BFP has had considerable success in minimizing hunger, secure minimum standards of food safety and remove a major portion of the Brazilian population from levels of extreme poverty. At the same time, evidence suggests that the BFP impairs the political autonomy of the program beneficiaries (over 25% of the Brazilian population now), who are induced not to vote against the authority that manages the program and his/her political group.

Attempts to turn the BFP into a permanent policy, not perceived by the population as politically connected to any political group, can help to lessen the clientelistic impact the program has. The ideal outcome, however, would be to help families to overcome situations of poverty and severe poverty within the present generation, ending, then, the cycle of dependence. It does not seem feasible, though, to produce this kind of result within a generation. In this context, the discussion about political autonomy of the BFP beneficiaries will have to go beyond the program and focus on the next generation and on the conditions children and teenagers will have, in the future, to break the dependence cycle their parents could not break. One of the issues relevant in this discussion will be, for

certain, the quality of public education provided now to children and adolescents in Brazil.