

Chapter 10

Work in Progress: Addressing Food Insecurity in Brazil

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Introduction

According to Harvey (2005: 2), neoliberalism is “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free market and free trade”. In the literature, neoliberal practices have often been associated with growing levels of poverty, inequality, violence, and deteriorating health and living conditions of the poor (Kim et al. 2000; Springer 2008; Wacquant 2009). Thus, among present discourses “taken for granted” is that neoliberal economic policies are not compatible with strong social welfare programs. In countries of the global north, growing food insecurity and the rise of food banking, for example, are linked to neoliberal welfare reforms, which led to the dismantling of publicly funded social safety nets (Riches and Silvasti 2014).

The case of Brazil does not fit neatly the classical neoliberal mold, and has political scientists looking for other terms to describe it—“neo-developmentalism” (Morais and Saad-Filho 2012), and “left neoliberalism” (Saad-Filho 2013) have been suggested. In the past twenty years, many of the neoliberal policy prescriptions of price stability (inflation control), privatization, and market liberalization (of domestic finance, foreign trade, exchange rates, and foreign investment) have been closely followed in the country. The 1994 *real* plan is credited as a successful anti-inflation program, which used high interest rates to attract large inflows of foreign capital. Since then, policies on low-inflation targeting, control of the public debt, support of international trade, and maintaining monetary stability have been followed (Morais and Saad-Filho 2011). At the same time, and particularly since

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2003, there has also been a strong government presence in social programs. As a consequence, neoliberal policies in Brazil have coexisted with, if not led to, significant decline in poverty and inequality, even after the 2008 global financial crisis. Critics of the neoliberal path adopted in the country did not expect such results (Mollo and Saad-Filho 2006). What the Brazilian case suggests is that there may be conditions under which progressive social policies are not incompatible with a neoliberal economy.

The focus of this chapter is on describing some of the main policies and programs responsible for the decline in food poverty and insecurity in Brazil, particularly since 2003. These policies require significant state presence and intervention in ways which seem anathema in many neoliberal settings. The chapter also describes some of the main challenges moving forward in the food security area. By discussing the case of Brazil in successfully addressing food poverty and insecurity, the chapter raises the possibility of social advances in a context of mostly neoliberal macroeconomic policies.

Evidence of Reduction in Food Poverty and Insecurity

In its report on the Status of Food and Nutrition Security in Brazil (FAO 2014), the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization declared Brazil off the “hunger map” since, by the end of 2013, less than 5 % of the country’s population showed any degree of undernourishment. This was certainly news to be celebrated in a country where until very recently hunger was assumed to be a permanent part of its social, economic and even cultural makeup.

Changes leading to the elimination of Brazil from the “hunger map” were evident in many fronts. First, in the past two decades, Brazil has been very successful in reducing poverty, particularly extreme poverty. From 1990 to 2012, the incidence of extreme poverty (below US\$1.25/day per capita) went from 25.5 to 3.5 % of the population (IPEA 2014). Historically one of the most unequal countries in the world, a reduction in inequality contributed to the reduction in extreme poverty. Between 2001 and 2012, income of the poorest 20 % of the population grew three times the growth of income of the richest 20 % Brazilians (FAO 2014). Between 1990 and 2012, the percentage of the national income accruing to the 20 % poorest group increased from 2.2 to 3.4 %, while the percentage accruing to the richest 20 % went from 65.2 to 57.1 % (IPEA 2014). Consequently, the Gini index of income inequality decreased from 0.612 in 1990 to 0.526 in 2012 (IPEA 2014).

Health and other indicators have also shown improvement in the past few years. Life expectancy for Brazilian men grew from 63.2 years in 1991 to 71.3 years in 2013. For women, the growth was from 70.9 to 78.6 years in the same period (IBGE 2014). Growth in family incomes, along with improvements in basic sanitation, mothers’ education, breast feeding rates, vaccination coverage, and greater access to basic health services, complemented increased food and nutrition security to put Brazil above the world average in the reduction of child (less than five years

old) mortality rates (UNICEF 2012; IBGE 2014). Between 1990 and 2011, child mortality rates declined from 53.7 to 17.7 per thousand live births (IPEA 2014); infant mortality rates (children younger than 1 year old) went from 47.1 to 15.3 in that period (IPEA 2014), reaching 15.0 per thousand live births in 2013 (IBGE 2014).

In terms of the population's nutritional status, the percentage of children presenting deficits in height per age (or 'stunting' as an indicator of chronic undernutrition) declined from 19.6 to 6.8 % between 1989 and 2006 (IPEA 2014; see also FAO 2014); the percentage of children presenting weight below the expected for their age (or 'wasting' as an indicator of acute undernutrition) went from 7.1 % in 1989 to 1.8 % in 2006 (IPEA 2014). National Household Surveys showed a decline in the percentage of households reporting any degree¹ (mild, moderate, or severe) of food insecurity, from 34.8 % in 2004 to 30.5 % in 2009, with the more pronounced decrease being in the number of households reporting severe food insecurity (Burlandy et al. 2014).

Policies, Programs, and Governance

Macroeconomic policies helped in controlling inflation and sustaining growth at sufficient levels to promote the increase of formal employment in the country. Although in decline in the previous decade, between 2003 and 2012 formal employment grew by 70 % (Costanzi and Ansiliero 2013), corresponding to the occupation of 57 % of Brazilian workers (Martins 2013). The growth of formal employment and a steady decrease in the open unemployment rate (from 12.3 % in 2003 to 5.0 % in 2014), even after the global financial crisis of 2008, were added to a policy of valorization of the minimum salary (which gained 68 % in purchasing power between 2004 and 2014) (DIEESE 2014; Pinto 2014). These led to significant improvements in the lives of workers, particularly the poorest cohorts whose compensation amounts to only one minimum salary. With an overall population of 200 million people, in 2012, 10.8 million workers and 20.3 million social security recipients depended on only one minimum salary as their income (DIEESE 2014).

Beyond the favourable results emanating from economic growth and stability (which could be credited to the neoliberal macroeconomic policies followed since the 1990s), since 2003 the government has pursued a deliberate policy to decrease food poverty and insecurity. Federal expenditures on social programs corresponded to 17 % of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) by 2012, an increase of

¹In the survey, "mild" food insecurity was reported by households expressing preoccupation with the possibility of running out of food or not being able to procure quality food; "moderate" food insecurity was detected in households which suffered some form of food restriction, compromising the quantity and/or quality of food during the period covered in the survey; and "severe" food insecurity was detected in households which went without food (experiencing hunger) for some time during the period in question.

128 % since 2000 (CAISAN 2014). Specific programs to combat hunger and food insecurity were first organized under what became known as the *Zero Hunger* strategy (Rocha 2009; Graziano da Silva et al. 2010), which reflected a systemic view of food and nutrition security by addressing food access and also production, distribution and consumption of quality food and diets (Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 Zero hunger strategy (circa 2004)

I— <i>Food access</i>
• <i>Bolsa Familia</i> —family grant (PBF)
• National school meals programme (PNAE)
• Food for specific groups
• Rainwater cisterns
• Popular restaurants and community kitchens
• Food banks
• Urban agriculture
• Food and nutrition surveillance system
• Distribution of vitamin A
• Distribution of iron supplements
• Food and nutrition for indigenous people
• Food and nutrition education for consumption
• Promotion of healthy habits/healthy diets
• Workers food programme (PAT)
• Basic food basket tax reduction
II— <i>Strengthening family agriculture</i>
• National programme for family agriculture (PRONAF)
• Harvest insurance
• Family farming agriculture insurance
• Food procurement programme (PAA)
III— <i>Income generation</i>
• Social and professional training
• Solidarity economy and productive inclusion
• Food security and local development consortium
• Food and nutrition security organisation
• Cooperatives of recyclable material collectors
• Guided productive micro-credit
IV— <i>Partnership and civil society mobilisation</i>
• Social assistance reference centre
• Social mobilisation and citizenship education
• Social and public agents capacity building
• Volunteer work and donations
• Partnership with private sector and NGOs
• Social development councils

Source Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger (MDS), <http://www.mds.gov.br/>

The Family Grant Program (*Programa Bolsa Família—PBF*) has been the most important initiative of the *Zero Hunger* strategy. Introduced in 2003 as an amalgamation of diverse and smaller programs, PBF has become the largest conditional cash transfer program in the world, covering 13.8 million families (a quarter of the Brazilian population) in 2012 (IPEA 2013). The conditions to be met by the recipients are related to the children's school attendance and currency with vaccination schedules. The program transfers monthly payments to families classified as poor or extremely poor. In 93 % of the cases, the transfers go to an adult woman in the household, with the total amount received depending on the number of children younger than 16 in the family. Studies have shown that families receiving the grant have increased consumption of all food groups (Lignani et al. 2010; Jannuzi and Pinto 2013).

Recent evaluations disseminated by Brazil's Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA) reveals that PBF has been both effective and cost efficient (IPEA 2013). While federal resources going to the program grew by 350 % between 2004 and 2013, reaching R\$24.9 billion or approximately US\$10 billion (Pinto 2014), PBF accounts for only 0.5 % of the country's GDP, but it has an estimated 1.78 multiplier effect on the country's gross domestic product. PBF also accounts for 28 % of the decline in extreme poverty, and between 12 and 21 % in the fall of the Gini income inequality coefficient (IPEA 2013). The program has decreased regional inequalities in Brazil, since the majority of beneficiaries reside in the poorest regions of the country. Other studies have also shown that the PBF scores high for its target accuracy (i.e., it does reach the intended group) without any negative effect on incentives to work or any increases in fertility rates (IPEA 2013). Additional benefits include the growth in children's school attendance, better health monitoring of infants, and advances for women in gender relations. Since 2003, 1.7 million families have "graduated" from the program as their incomes increased above the cut-off level of eligibility for benefits (Gombata 2014).

Another set of programs originally associated with the *Zero Hunger* strategy were designed to create institutional markets for food produced by smallholder farmers (Rocha et al. 2012). The Food Acquisition Program (*Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos—PAA*) provides public funding for the purchase of food crops and milk from family farms (Chmielewska and Souza 2010). Its largest modality promotes direct purchases from family farms to be simultaneously donated to government food programs such as subsidized restaurants, community kitchens and food banks, as well as charitable organizations (community child-care centres and nursing homes, hospitals, homeless shelters, etc.). The program donates food to institutions, which in 2010 benefitted 18.8 million people (MDS 2011). The number of participating farmers increased from 42,000 in 2003 to 185,000 in 2012, with a program budget of US\$450 million in that last year. Such expenditures represent only 0.0004 % of Brazil's GDP (IPC-IG 2013).

Support for family farmers is also coming from the Ministry of Education and Culture, responsible for funding the country's School Meals Program (*Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar—PNAE*). Requiring (since 2009) that 30 % of the funding for school food be spent on products from family farms, PNAE can

potentially take institutional markets to a new level. Unlike most government programs associated with the PAA (food banks, subsidized restaurants, community kitchens, homeless shelters), which are not necessarily present in all municipalities and, when present, are characterized by precarious conditions and uncertainties, the School Meals Program is well established in the country. Since 1955, municipal and state public schools are required to run a feeding program to cover at least 15 % of the children's daily nutritional needs (calories, proteins, and other nutrients). Public schools in Brazil are important institutional buyers of food. PNAE serves over 45 million children per day throughout the country (IPG-IG 2013). Favouring the supply of fresh vegetables and fruit from family farms, this initiative also aims at increasing the availability of healthy foods for children in the public school system (Burlandy et al. 2014).

While the PBF, PAA and PNAE are examples of innovative and successful programs contributing to the elimination of hunger and reduction of other forms of food and nutrition insecurity, one may argue that the most significant gain in the past few years has been in the institutionalization of policy for food and nutrition security in the country. This institutionalization includes not only laws and regulations, but also the creation of institutions and practices of governance, which include the participation of civil society (Rocha 2009).

At the national level, this model of governance is represented in the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA), an advisory body to the President on policies and general guidelines for food and nutrition security. Composed of two-thirds from civil society and the private sector, and one-third from the federal government, among its members CONSEA has representatives from labor unions, business associations, food industry, church groups, professional associations, academics, and non-governmental organizations representing family farmers, Indigenous communities, and others. Since 2003 CONSEA has been central in the institutionalization of food and nutrition security policy. In 2006, its proposed National Law on Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN) was passed by congress. Article 1 of LOSAN “*establishes definitions, principles, guidelines, objectives and composition of the National System for Food and Nutrition Security—SISAN, through which the State, with the participation of organized civil society, will formulate and implement policies, plans, programs and actions towards ensuring the human right to adequate food*” (Brazil 2005). For the first time in the history of the country the Right to Food is institutionalized as a matter of public policy and an obligation of the state. In 2010, the Right to Adequate Food was added to Brazil's constitution.

New and Continuing Challenges

The path towards food and nutrition security is a work in progress in Brazil. Despite the significant gains described above, close to seven million people are still extremely poor, and a quarter of the country's population is receiving cash grants

under the PBF for being poor (falling under the country's poverty line). So, challenges abound. Among those, inequality continues to be high. Extreme poverty is more common among rural households (9.3 %) than urban (2.6 %), affecting more black families (4.8 %) than white (2.1 %). Only 1.5 % of the population in the South was classified as extremely poor in 2012, but 7.3 % of the people in the Northeast were in this situation. While child and infant mortality rates have declined in all regions of the country, in 2011 child mortality rates were 20.7 per thousand live births in the Northeast region, but 13.0 in the South; infant mortality rates were 18.0 in the Northeast and 11.3 in the South (IPEA 2014).

Of particular concern is the situation of Brazil's indigenous population (800 thousand people or 0.4 % of the country's population in 2010). The child mortality rate in this group is 41.9 per thousand live births, more than double the average rate in the country. Among the main causes of indigenous child mortality is malnutrition and this population's precarious access to basic health care services. The highest incidence of tuberculosis and other infection diseases has also been linked to poor nutrition and poor living conditions (Ferreira et al. 2011).

Another challenge in the field of food and nutrition security is the growth in the prevalence of overweight and obesity in all ages and socio-economic groups in Brazil. In the adult population, from 2006 to 2012 overweight rates increased from 43.2 to 51.0 % of the population in the major cities of the country, while the prevalence of obesity rates went from 11.6 to 17.4 % in that period (Malta et al. 2014). Among children from five to nine years old, in 2009 33.5 % were overweight and 14.3 % were considered obese (Reis et al. 2011).

The federal government has developed a number of policies and initiatives to combat the rise of overweight and obesity (Reis et al. 2011; Malta et al. 2012, 2014), many of those focusing on children in public schools. In 2011 the government launched the Strategic Action Plan to Combat Chronic Non-Communicable Diseases (2011–2022) incorporating many initiatives, including a revision of the Food Guide for the Brazilian Population. Launched in 2014, the new Brazilian food guide is being lauded as “revolutionary” for the promotion of sustainable food systems and the classification of foods into three main groups: minimally processed, substances extracted from whole foods, and ultra-processed foods (Brasil 2014). The simple recommendation which follows is that diets should be based on fresh and minimally processed foods, and that the consumption of ultra-processed products should be avoided or at least minimized (see also Monteiro 2009). The Guide focuses on food processing, and proposes “10 steps to healthy eating” which go much beyond the importance of nutrients (Table 10.2).

Worries about the country's less-than-impressive economic growth in the past few years are also challenging the progress ahead. Economic growth during the past twenty years relied greatly on commodity exports, particularly agriculture (Amaral and Peduto 2010). Brazil is a leader in the export of soybeans, beef, poultry, orange juice, sugar, and coffee. Trade and currency liberalization favoured the growth of agribusiness exports, which benefitted from a trade diversification policy increasing South-South commerce, particularly with China. The agribusiness sector also received support from public investment in research (through, for example, the

Table 10.2 10 steps for healthy eating

1. Make fresh or minimally processed foods the basis of your diet
2. Use oils, fats, sugar and salt in moderation
3. Limit the consumption of ready-to-consume food and drink products
4. Eat regular meals, paying attention, and in appropriate environments
5. Eat in company whenever possible
6. Buy food at places that offer varieties of fresh foods. Avoid those that mainly sell products ready for consumption
7. Develop, practice and share skills in food preparation and cooking
8. Plan time to give meals and eating the space they deserve
9. When eating out, choose restaurants that serve freshly made dishes and meals. Avoid fast food chains
10. Be critical of the information, guidance and messages conveyed by commercial advertisement of food products

Source Food guide for the Brazilian population (Brasil 2014)

Brazilian Corporation for Agricultural Research—Embrapa) and the expansion of cultivated areas (The Economist 2010). The country grew an average of 2.3 % annually from 1995 to 2002 (during the government of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso), and 4.0 % annually between 2003 and 2010 (during the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva). While it has registered average annual growth of 2.0 % between 2011 and 2013 (under President Dilma Rousseff), it had zero growth in 2014 (Martello 2015). Adding to the economic pressures, growing inflation and rising public debt are signaling a more austere macroeconomic policy ahead.

Maintaining social programs in times of austerity pressures requires not only a strong commitment from the government, but also a government that enjoys strong political support and legitimacy. This is another concern in the current political situation in the country. President Dilma Rousseff was reelected for a second term in 2014 with the smallest of the margins in recent elections, and many members of her party (the Workers Party—PT) have been associated with notorious scandals of large-scale political corruption. The election campaign and corruption scandals have undermined government legitimacy, making it more difficult to move its agenda forward. In 2014 the government proposed a new National Policy on Social Participation (*Política Nacional de Participação Social—PNPS*), much in response to the street protests it faced in 2013. The PNPS had the expressed objective to further promote social participation in the planning, design, monitoring and evaluation of federal public policies. The proposal, however, was defeated in congress, with the opposition describing the initiative as “anti-democratic” since, it argued, it could lead to non-elected individuals (from civil society) having undue influence on policy-making (Azevedo 2014).

Conclusion

The adoption of neoliberal policies by centre-left governments in the last decade of the 20th and first decade of the twenty-first centuries both in the global north (e.g., Bill Clinton in the US and Tony Blair in Britain) and in Latin America have forced political and other social scientists to “rethink” neoliberalism (Ibarra 2011; Baeten 2012; Dean 2014; Flew 2014). Some have argued for abandoning the term altogether, as it is not an appropriate or useful concept to represent these new realities; that we have now entered (particularly after 2008) a “post-neoliberal” phase (Peck et al. 2009; Yates and Bakker 2014). Others, however, see neoliberalism as malleable, being shaped by and expressed through different geographies, modalities and pathways (Brenner et al. 2010). According to Dean (2014: 154), under liberalism there can be a “positive role for the state in the construction of the conditions necessary for the free operation of the market”.

Many of the macroeconomic policies followed in Brazil in the past twenty years have embraced neoliberal principles, but the country has also seen a strong presence of the state in social programs. Greater international trade, particularly in agricultural commodities, provided much of the basis for economic growth. At the same time, a strong government commitment to reducing poverty saw the growth of resources towards social programs. That combination has led to significant positive results in the reduction of food and nutrition insecurity.

Despite this undeniable progress, Brazil still faces many challenges ahead. Poverty continues to be a reality for a large portion of the population, and more nuanced ways to reach the most marginalized groups, including its indigenous population, must be devised for further meaningful gains to be detected. Having practically eliminated hunger, the country is now turning to issues concerning the quality of its foods and diets, and to the sustainability of the food system.

Further progress, however, requires continuing political commitment and government resources. As austerity pressure mounts and the political capital of the federal government further deteriorates with corruption revelations, the future of social programs is uncertain. The popularity of the Family Grant Program will most certainly protect it from significant changes. But this cannot be said about other programs promoting family farming or supporting minimum salaries. In times of austerity and loss of legitimacy, it is even more difficult to see how the transformation of the food system envisioned in the country’s new Food Guide could have a chance.

Still, despite having come to fruition in the past 10 years, the set of policies and programs leading to better food and nutrition security in Brazil have been in the making for much longer than that. And despite the recent defeat of the National Policy on Social Participation in congress, the participation of civil society in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of public policies and programs is a reality, well ingrained in the country (Rocha et al. 2012). In times of austerity pressures, the future of social programs may depend on how engaged and determined civil society groups are in maintaining that participation.

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