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## **Inclusion amid ethnic inequality**

Insights from Brazil's social protection system

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**Abstract:** Policy frames in Brazil have long run up against conflicting visions and understandings about the causes and consequences of group-based inequality. This paper argues that a class-based lens has dominated the social protection framework. In recent years, political leaders have framed social policy measures along ‘universal’ class lines with the aim of improving poverty and wellbeing. This framing is reflective of Brazil’s national narrative on race relations and the idea that class and employment status have been the most salient barriers to social welfare protections. Brazil’s widely well-regarded anti-poverty conditional cash transfer programme, Bolsa Família (2003–21), is emblematic of the country’s universal and ‘race-blind’ approach to social policy. But given the strong correlation in Brazil between ethnicity and income, social protection policies such as the Bolsa Família have *indirectly* targeted vulnerable black and brown citizens. The analysis addresses how social policy has contributed advances to wellbeing in general and for Afro-Brazilians. A comparative perspective on social welfare systems offers important lessons on how poverty relief can further human development and enhance agency. Future reformers can learn from Brazil’s pursuit of poverty reduction alongside administrative procedures that identify vulnerable groups, as a strategy to address intersectional inequalities of ethnicity and class.

**Key words:** group-based inequality, Bolsa Família, poverty, race, Afro-Brazilian, social welfare

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## 1 Introduction

The politics of inclusion in Brazil has long run up against conflicting visions and understandings about the causes and consequences of inequality. Research shows that indigenous Brazilians and those with darker complexions are far more likely to be poor in Brazil (Borges Martins 2004; ECLAC 2021a; Osorio 2021). Yet policy-makers have differed as to whether targeted approaches to address ethnic inequality are necessary or desirable. The ways in which ideas and problems are defined in the public discourse matter to an understanding of the scope of governmental action and inaction (Rochefort and Cobb 1994; Schneider et al. 2007). ‘Issue framing’ sets the stage for policy debates, agenda setting, and the scope of public policy interventions (Kingdon 1997). Frames also provide rationales and goals and create beneficiary groups and broader meanings that can, in turn, create ‘policy feedback effects’ that then shape future politics (Pierson 1993). In this way, ideas matter because they have concrete and symbolic consequences that can shape politics for generations.

Debates over how to classify and define the groups most harmed by historic and contemporary exclusion are rooted in long-standing narratives about Brazil’s origins, its ‘uniqueness’ and capacity to reflect an idealized democratic country. The centrality of ethnic<sup>1</sup> exclusion in Brazil, where black, brown, and indigenous peoples have faced centuries of discrimination, is both historically clear and analytically contested as a framework for advancing social transformation. While some countries explicitly embrace redress in ethnic terms, with policies directed to members of specific groups, race-based remedies are relatively new to Brazil (Htun 2004a). At the start of the twenty-first century, Brazil faced a markedly divided and unequal society. For a middle-income country, its high rates of poverty and income inequality hindered its aspirations on the global stage. It also presented a moral dilemma for political leaders, who believed that social inclusion and advances in human development were necessary for the country’s progress. This paper examines the extent to which contemporary efforts to tackle long-standing group-based inequalities and entrenched intergenerational poverty have addressed racial inequality through Brazil’s social protection system. How did the framing of inequality and the goals that needed to be met to address social exclusion shape public policy? Why did poverty alleviation policy progress along universal lines? How have racially disadvantaged groups fared in practical terms? Finally, what opportunities and constraints exist for future policy development?

To preview, this paper argues that Brazil’s political leadership has framed social policy along ‘universal’ class lines rather than employing a framework focused on intersecting inequalities, including other markers of ethnicity such as colour, race, and indigeneity, or gender. This approach is reflective of Brazil’s national narrative of inclusion, one that has historically focused on income and employment status (e.g., poverty and informal sector work) rather than existing racial social divisions. In maintaining this focus, policy-makers have embraced social protection models’ universal ‘race-blind’ approach to addressing income poverty. Yet given the strong correlation in Brazil between race and income, social protection policies such as the Bolsa Família (2003–21), *indirectly* target Afro-Brazilians (de Micheli 2018, 55). Bolsa Família, along with other social protection policies, contributed to important advances in wellbeing for black and brown citizens

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Ethnicity’ here refers to categories based on ascriptive attributes that are generally inherited at birth, including colour, language, tribe, religion, kinship, and other markers of communal identity (Chandra 2004; Horowitz 1985; Htun 2004b). The term ‘race’ (*raça*) as it is utilized in the Brazilian studies literature and by political activists fits within this umbrella category.

from 1990 to 2010 (Andrews 2014). This analysis explores how and examines the prospects for future improvement.

## 2 Framing group-based inequality: race and class in Brazil

Does race matter for defining and ameliorating social exclusion in Brazil? While this might seem a simple question, Brazil's public intellectuals, government officials, and activists have long been at odds over the answer to it. Debates about race and its centrality date back to the country's founding myths and the frameworks used to define the nation's character. Although a full review of the intellectual history of debates surrounding racial formation remains outside the scope of this analysis, it is impossible to address the politics of racial inequality in Brazil without acknowledging how ideas of race and racial inequality influence contemporary politicians' and policy-makers' views on how to address exclusion.

From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, the Brazilian government embraced a nationalist agenda of racial 'whitening' (Skidmore 1974). Elites advanced the view that a population of European descendants was preferable for nation building. The country's large and newly emancipated black population raised an existential problem for white elites who wished to maintain existing social hierarchies. (Brazil was the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery, in 1888). Immigration from Europe, including large numbers of Italians and Portuguese, represented one numerical strategy to alter the country's demographics. This approach also met the immediate need for cheap labour for labour-intensive coffee production. Another 'whitening' strategy came from philosophical arguments surrounding the virtues of racial mixing. 'Miscegenation', or racial mixing, offered Brazil a unique pathway towards the whiteness which European-descended elites desired. Political discourse and public policies dating from the early twentieth century laid the foundation for the future trajectory of social protection. The Getúlio Vargas era established a Bismarckian social insurance system which is credited for the political, social, and economic incorporation of white working-class urban sectors. At the same time, a nationalist ideology cemented idealized notions of citizenship that rendered systems of racial oppression harder to identify. A brief overview of these two divergent approaches to social inclusion highlights why the 1930s was a critical juncture for Brazilian public policy on social inclusion, and how it created lasting legacies for future reformers.

The Getúlio Vargas era of the 1930s ushered in profound political, social, and economic transformations that laid the foundation for Brazil's approach to social inclusion and racial framing. Vargas amassed political power by courting urban workers and the growing middle class, selectively incorporating formal sectors as beneficiaries of state incorporation (Collier and Collier 1991). Brazil's Bismarckian welfare system extended key social benefits linked to individuals' employment status. Formal sector workers—railroad workers, the military, and government workers, among others—would enjoy social protection benefits such as workers' compensation, death benefits, pensions, and health insurance. For this reason, formal sector employment, through acquisition of a formally signed worker's card (*carteira assinada*), would represent the hallmark of citizenship (DaMatta 2002). For everyone else—the vast majority—basic employment protections and social benefits would be out of reach. By uplifting the predominately white, urban, and newly minted middle class while excluding indigenous, brown, and black communities that worked in agriculture and the large informal sector, the Brazilian state created systems that would perpetuate inequality. In this way, economic and racial exclusion overlapped and were entrenched by the social protection system. To add a third layer of disadvantage, Brazil's social protection system was also deeply gendered. Social benefits followed a male breadwinner model and prioritized sectors of

industrial development where men dominated the workforce, leaving out those associated with women's labour (Wolfe 2012).

In practice, the legacy of a formal work-based social protection system had profound effects on exclusion during the twentieth century. Informal workers both rural and urban were left out of early social protection schemes (Hunter and Sugiyama 2009). The large numbers of black and brown women workers in the informal rural agricultural sector (e.g., family agriculture) did not receive social benefits, for instance. Notably, Brazilian law also excluded domestic workers from the possibility of enjoying workplace protections. Domestic workers (e.g., maids and nannies) were excluded from the country's labour code regulations (1943) and their employment was classified as 'non-economic activity'. Without legal protections, domestic, informal, and agricultural workers faced exploitative arrangements. Social sector reforms did not dismantle the employment-based foundations of social insurance, but extended eligibility by reaching more segments of the workforce. For instance, the government would establish FUNRURAL in 1993, a non-contributory rural pension programme for rural workers.<sup>2</sup> Only in 2013 would domestic workers gain constitutional rights to full employment protections as other categories of formal sector workers.<sup>3</sup> In this way, much of the social protection architecture of the Vargas era has persisted as the pathway to the incorporation of previously excluded groups.

Philosophical debates in the 1930s about Brazil's path to modernity also grappled with the question of ethnic inclusion. Brazil's elites advanced the idea that it was a unique and inclusive 'racial democracy'. The anthropologist Gilberto Freire's seminal work *Casa grande e senzala* (1933), translated as *Masters and Slaves*, posited that the country offered a unique contribution to the world's civilization. Under Freire's lens, the ever-evolving, ever-mixing, and ever-whitening nation reflected a unique people. It was argued that Brazil never legally banned inter-racial intimacy and marriage, even during Portuguese colonization. Freire also advanced the notion that the 'backwardness' of Indians and Africans was the result of cultural and historical circumstances and not exclusive or primarily due to nature. Freire thus 'simultaneously affirms the superiority of white Europeans rescuing African and Indians from permanent denigration' (Nobles 2000: 97). Freire's body of work, from the 1930s to the 1970s, would later claim that Brazil enjoyed greater social harmony compared with other racially diverse countries. While Brazil's comparative race relations did not include the kind of institutionalized legal apartheid structure found in South Africa or in the US under 'Jim Crow' laws (Marx 1998), the racial democracy framework constituted a deliberate nation-building agenda that was entrenched through government policy (Dávila 2003; Loveman 2014; Nobles 2000). Yet in practice, Brazilian society can be described as a pigmentocracy, where social stratification falls along colour lines, those with lighter skin being the most valued and those with darker complexions the least valued (Telles 2014). While democratization brought important legal advances to racial equality through the democratic Constitution (1988),<sup>4</sup> social, economic, and political stratification persists along racial lines.

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<sup>2</sup> Even so, few would enrol because they lacked proper identity documentation.

<sup>3</sup> This, known as *PEC das domésticas*, altered Article 7 of the Constitution to establish equality of rights between domestic workers and other formal sector workers. Employers were required to provide full benefits and protections (e.g., minimum wage, overtime pay, paid vacation, pension contributions, etc.). In practice, the law on domestic workers focus on the intersection between gender, race, and economic vulnerability. Brazil has approximately 6.5 million domestic workers, with 93 per cent being women and 61 per cent black (Acciari 2018).

<sup>4</sup> The Constitution (1988) established equal rights without prejudice with regard to origin, race, sex, colour, age, or any other forms of discrimination (Art. 3, V). It also recognized cultural and land rights for Quilombo communities, an important victory for the Afro-Brazilian movement. In practice, these rights are still unrealized for many.

The myth of ‘racial democracy’ has had enduring consequences for contemporary Brazil, as it shaped the scope of imaginable remedies to realize a more just society. By elevating class as the main social cleavage and downplaying the importance of race altogether, the government has historically obscured the deeply rooted prevalence of colour-based discrimination. In this way, the policies themselves reflect a ‘policy feedback mechanism’ that has been difficult to dislodge. The social benefits conferred to privileged sectors, such as pensions and social insurance, were highly coveted and protected by political and economic elites as well as the social sectors they benefited. The founding myth of racial democracy simultaneously hindered non-white Brazilians from advocating for their full citizenship rights. Even the collection of data on ethnic and racial demographics has been difficult and contested. As Nobles (2000) explains, census racial categories have evolved over time, as well as the administrative procedures utilized for enumeration.<sup>5</sup>

The very task of enumerating the black, brown, and indigenous population has been mired in debates surrounding racial classification. Some wondered whether census methods of self-identification would result in under-reporting because the racial democracy construct discouraged positive black identification (Hanchard 1994). Others, borrowing from the racial democracy framework, argued that the evolving nature of racial mixture in Brazil made it impossible to classify Brazilians into clear and distinct groups because of the ‘plasticity’ of racial identity.<sup>6</sup> Demographers have been active participants in these debates throughout history, either including or eliminating racial categories over time. The Brazilian census has included different racial definitions and methodological considerations to produce census data on Brazil’s main racial and indigenous groups. Demographic comparisons across time are therefore challenging.

Until recently, many Afro-Brazilians declined to identify as black (*preto*) due to widespread discrimination and stigmatization, instead preferring to identify with other terms. Since 1940, the white population has declined (in relative terms) compared with other groups (Andrews 2014: 833); the share that identified as black similarly declined, with the share identifying instead as ‘mixed’ growing in similar proportions (Andrews 2004: 157). Between 1950 and 1980, there was a flux of about 38 per cent between the mixed and black categories (Andrews 2004: 157). By 2010, for the first time in Brazil’s history, a majority self-identified as brown or black. Much of this outcome is due to the decades of activism by Afro-Brazilian leaders and non-governmental organizations, who have worked on public education campaigns to positively affirm and promote Afro-Brazilian identity among brown and black citizens. In this paper, the terms ‘Afro-Brazilians’ and ‘Afro-descendants’ include both brown (*pardo* or mixed race) and black (*preto*) categories and uses them interchangeably, as is now standard practice by the Brazilian census bureau (IBGE) and other research agencies (Borges Martins 2004: 19).

## 2.1 Advocating for policy reform: when race is at the forefront

Since the 1970s, Brazil’s vibrant black social movement has worked with scholars, policy-makers, and local leaders to document the existence of intersectoral inequalities,

related to race, colour, class, and gender discrimination. The lack of data collection in the 1970 census, for instance, spurred considerable activism around the need for data to argue that racism existed. This first step of documenting colour-based racial discrimination has been crucially

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<sup>5</sup> For example, the indigenous category has changed significantly over time, sometimes having its own category and at others incorporated into a ‘mixed’ category. Early censuses were based on enumerator’s determinations compared with more recent procedures that allow for self-identification.

<sup>6</sup> For more on the complexity of racial and colour identity, see Guimarães (1999); Nogueira (1998); Teles (2004, 2014). On affirmative action debates, see dos Santos (2014).

important for building public awareness and holding government accountable. The diverse Afro-Brazilian movement has sought multiple strategies to address discrimination, including campaigns to promote positive Afro-Brazilian images, advocacy for human rights, police justice and related legal protections, advocacy for worker rights, access to education, and policies to address racial discrimination. Black activists were also closely connected with transnational movements and later participated international conferences, such as the UN World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia, and Related Intolerance in Durban, South Africa.

In 2001, the announcement that Brazil would embrace affirmative action policies in higher education took many observers by surprise (Htun 2004a). Federal activity in this domain followed early initiatives autonomously led by some universities, such as the State University of Rio de Janeiro and the University of Brasília, to adopt affirmative action. Since entrance to public universities is based exclusively on entrance exam scores, the policy called for reserved seats, or quotas, for top-scoring black and brown applicants. These proposals were very controversial. Advocates saw the policy as the clearest way to advance educational opportunities for black and brown students, who face clear discrimination. Some opponents argued that Brazilians' racial ambiguity would be an impediment to effective implementation of the programme. Some institutions would implement race boards to determine whether candidates' phenotype fitted the policy. Critics lamented that this 'foreign' import was ill suited as a policy solution for Brazil, echoing old refrains that class, not race, was the most salient social cleavage that hindered entry to universities. These advocates argued for the prioritization of reserved seats for students at public secondary schools, who are more likely to be low-income.

In response to these criticisms, federal affirmative action policies shifted in 2012 (Law 12.711/2012) to prioritize lower-income students, regardless of race. Since middle- and upper-income students from private secondary schools have historically dominated admissions to prestigious public universities, reserving seats for public high school graduates is a proxy for inclusion of poor or lower-income background students. While some universities, such as the University of Brasília, have retained their own race-based affirmative action programmes while *also* adopting the federal programme, most federal universities now solely comply with the federal law. These changes reflect the lasting legacy of the 'myth of racial democracy' and the persistent preference of policy-makers for addressing class over racial discrimination (dos Santos 2015). While the change has nonetheless promoted black student enrolment at federal universities, dos Santos argues that the reframing had the effect of diminishing a vibrant national debate on the existence of racial discrimination (dos Santos 2015; personal communication, 2022). Interestingly, the federal government's affirmative action policy—established in 2014 (Law 12.990/2014) – federal civil service employment based on competitive exams remains in place. In recent years, some private sector employers have also adopted race-based affirmative action programmes to diversify their companies. Such moves may reflect increasing acceptance of the approach (Takano et al. 2021).

Beyond affirmative action policies, the federal government took steps to address racial discrimination through changes to the state apparatus. President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Brazilian Social Democratic Party/PSDB, 1995–2003) was the country's first president to publicly acknowledge racism in Brazil. His government, along with Brazilian NGOs, would engage the UN meeting in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–11) and Dilma Rousseff (2011–August 2016), both of the Workers' Party (Partido dos Trabalhadores or PT), had close ties with black social movements and brought in its leaders into senior governmental administrative positions. Lula would establish the Secretariat for Policies and Promotion of Racial Equity (Secretaria de Políticas de Promoção da Igualdade Racial or SEPPIR) in 2003 and assign it ministerial status. Its mission was to advance racial inclusion in governmental policy, and to coordinate with ministries and other federal agencies, state governments, the federal district, and

municipalities to work horizontally and transversally. The creation of SEPPIR reflected a long-standing demand from black social movement organizations and activists, and the political alliance they formed within the PT (Ribeiro 2014). The agency's agenda drew from a national participatory policy platform developed in conjunction with black social movement actors (da Costa Santos and de Souza 2016). Since the agency's needs were huge, administrators took on pragmatic and targeted priorities (M. Ribeiro, personal communication, 12 April 2022). Among them were partnerships with the Ministry of Education for a black studies curriculum, as well as development of the Projeto Brasil Quilombola (Quilombo Project), created in 2004 by Decree 4.887/03. Quilombos—communities founded by runaway formerly enslaved people—are particularly important because their residents are among the most socially and economically vulnerable in the country.<sup>7</sup>

While politically visible, SEPPIR faced institutional constraints that limited its potential for broader impact. First, it did not have a large portfolio of its own with a significant budget. By design, the agency would serve to co-ordinate across ministries, seeking opportunities to collaborate to advance racial inclusion. This required a high degree of buy-in from other ministries, which was a challenge; the lack of awareness, resources, data, and technical know-how posed obstacles to collaboration (M. Ribeiro, personal communication, 12 April 2022). Later, when the federal government faced fiscal constraints, President Rousseff joined several ministries together to create the Ministry of Women, Racial Equality, Youth, and Human Rights (Ministério das Mulheres, da Igualdade Racial, da Juventude e dos Direitos Humanos), arguably diminishing some of SEPPIR's previous visibility.<sup>8</sup> Advances on racial inclusion during the Lula and Dilma administrations took many forms, some more focused on race and others much less so. As the next section explains, poverty relief has been framed in universal and 'race-neutral' terms. Within this framing, anti-poverty programmes aimed at indigent and poor families have *indirectly* targeted large segments of the Afro-Brazilian population (de Micheli 2018: 55), who are significantly over-represented among the poor.

### 3 Income-based approaches to social inclusion

Since democratization in the late 1980s, Brazilian policy-makers have largely embraced incremental reforms to the country's Bismarckian social protection system. Social protection—in the form of social insurance and worker protections—has expanded. The democratic Constitution established universal social rights in key areas, including the right to education and healthcare. Debates surrounding reform to education, healthcare, and later social assistance were largely driven by centre-left politicians from the Workers' Party (PT), the centre-right PSDB, technocrats in the ministries of Health, Education, and Social Development, and progressive advocates in civil society. With the election of presidents Fernando Henrique Cardoso (PSDB), Lula da Silva (PT), and Dilma Rousseff (PT), Brazil experienced a sustained period of stable centrist democratic governance that facilitated incremental reforms. 'Access reforms' expanded eligibility to better serve previously excluded groups, such as informal workers and the poor (Hunter and Sugiyama 2009). For instance, healthcare is guaranteed through the national Unified Health System (Sistema Único da Saúde, SUS), which expands healthcare access to previously underserved poor communities. The primary healthcare model, Family Health Strategy, which operates under the

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<sup>7</sup> While they are found throughout the country, their absolute number of residents are unknown. These communities are often in remote rural territories that lack access to basic services (Jaccoud 2009). Their irregular status means residents lack legal claims to the land; without documented land titles the continuous threat of their removal from these territories hinders their participation in social programmes (Ribeiro, personal communication, 12 April 2022).

<sup>8</sup> On history, see da Costa Santos and de Souza (2016).

SUS umbrella, provides preventative healthcare in underserved areas. The non-contributory pension programme, the Benefício de Prestação Continuada (BPC), extends benefits to the elderly poor and disabled people (physical, mental, intellectual, sensory, or long-term conditions) living in extreme poverty.<sup>9</sup>

Poverty relief emerged as a hallmark priority for President Lula. His long-standing campaign promise to eliminate hunger elevated social policy to the forefront of his government's agenda for social inclusion. His administration had inherited several unco-ordinated poverty relief programmes that were scattered across several federal ministries. For instance, the Ministry of Education administered the Bolsa Escola Federal (2001–03) (federal school grant), which provided a monthly conditional cash grant to families as long as children maintained regular school attendance. The Bolsa Escola Federal was a scaled-up replication of municipal governmental innovations to address low school enrolment and persistent absenteeism (Sugiyama 2012). The Ministry of Health had the Bolsa Alimentação (2001–03) (nutrition grant), which provided a nutritional cash grant to poor families with pregnant women and households with children of up to six years of age. Auxílio Gás was a propane gas voucher programme for poor families to ease the cost of household cooking. Each of these programmes largely benefited the same population but had their own enrolment criteria and operating rules, making it difficult to evaluate impact. Faced with the need to reform social assistance and a disjointed set of federal programmes across multiple ministries, the federal government created a unified logic for social assistance, under the auspices of a federal Unified Social Assistance System (Sistema Único da Assistência Social, SUAS). The government's anti-poverty policies would be managed by a newly created Ministry of Social Development (MDS).<sup>10</sup> From the start, the federal government would emphasize inclusionary values alongside administrative reform by relying on a technical team of policy wonks and career civil servants for policy design and implementation.

### 3.1 Universal targeting

Bolsa Família (2003–21) was Brazil's signature initiative to alleviate poverty and address intergenerational poverty. It reflected a more rational, targeted, and efficient administrative approach to rights-based social protection. Law 10,836 (January 2004) laid out the programme's aims, operation, and administrative structure to create an administratively ambitious modernization effort to address poverty. It was designed as a conditional cash transfer (CCT) programme, and eligibility was universal, based on means testing. Families with per capita incomes below the poverty line were eligible to receive a monthly cash grant if they complied with behavioural conditions designed to further human development. Grant amounts differed according to household composition, including the number and ages of children and whether anyone was pregnant.<sup>11</sup> Conditionality requirements included school matriculation and attendance for children. Children also needed regular health check-ups to maintain vaccination schedules and monitor nutrition, with height and weight screenings. Pregnant women were required to receive prenatal healthcare. After childbirth, mothers received post-natal care and were encouraged to breastfeed their infants. To receive Bolsa Família benefits, applicants had to apply for the

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<sup>9</sup> The BPC, formally created in 1993, has gradually increased in scope and size since its enactment in 1996, now reaching an estimated 4.2 million people; two-fifths of beneficiaries are below the age of 24 and have a disability (Taulo et al. 2020: 14).

<sup>10</sup> The ministry in charge of social programmes has changed names since it was founded. Throughout the Lula and Dilma administrations, it was referred to as the Ministry of Social Development. In 2022, it goes by the name Ministry of Citizenship.

<sup>11</sup> For an excellent overview of the programme and its growth over time, see Layton (2018).

programme at their municipal social assistance agency by completing a long questionnaire as part of the national Cadastro Unico (Unified Registry, or CadÚnico). The programme prioritized women (mothers) heads of households, regardless of marital status. About 93 per cent of all designated Bolsa beneficiaries were women (Costanzi and Fagundes 2010: 266). Títular beneficiaries received a unique electronic cash card and personal identification number to withdraw funds at a federal bank, the Caixa Econômica. Designated beneficiaries were also responsible for meeting their household's conditionality requirements. Participation in Bolsa Família grew over time and peaked in April 2020 with 14.27 million enrolled families.

From a technical point of view, the CadÚnico's vast database fulfilled several important needs that modernized social service delivery. First and perhaps most important, the registry allowed for more-efficient targeting of resources to eligible families. The registry, which is still in operation and utilized for management of all social services, includes questions related to family income, household composition and demographic characteristics, household conditions, and other social conditions. Effective targeting is a perennial challenge for development practitioners. For the Bolsa, the database allowed for cross-checks to verify income eligibility. Verified information on household members, including documentation for all individuals, also addressed problems associated with duplication of benefits. Second, fiscal 'leakages' associated with social service benefits were a serious problem that could have undermined the programme's clean operations. Brazil is a large federal country, and co-operation between the national government and its 5,570 municipalities was necessary for the administration of the programme. Federal oversight of the registry by the MDS represented intentional policy design to avoid local political malfeasance, whether due to patronage or clientelism (Fried 2012; Lindert et al. 2007; Sugiyama and Hunter 2013). As one senior administrator explained, operational errors—whether due to mismanagement or fraud—would undermine confidence in the programme (L. Modesto, personal communication, 1 July 2011). When initially rolled out, the Bolsa faced media scrutiny over cases of errors of inclusion. Federal technocrats moved quickly to address programme shortcomings. For this reason, technocrats affiliated with the programme's operations consider the creation of the CadÚnico to be one of the most important administrative innovations associated with the Bolsa (L. Modesto, personal communication, 1 July 2011). Finally, the creation of the registry allowed for better co-ordination across multiple programmatic sectors, including health and education. For conditionality requirements to work, they had to be monitored locally and tracked over time. Thus, the depth and quality of data collected allowed programme evaluators to evaluate not only the Bolsa Família but also how the programme engaged with other programmatic interventions.

In the early years of Bolsa Família operations, policy-makers focused on enrolling applicants who self-identified as needy and eligible. 'Street-level bureaucrats' at the point of contact with vulnerable families then turned to second-order complications. They needed to support those families that were enrolled but were having difficulty meeting the conditions. The establishment of the SUAS, through which community-based social assistance could proactively engage with the families, was foundational. Brazilian municipalities established community-based social assistance centres known as CRAS (Centro de Referência da Assistência Social or Social Assistance Reference Centres), with integrated teams of social workers and psychologists to support vulnerable families. CREAS (Centro de Referência Especializada em Assistência Social, or Specialized Social Assistance Reference Centres) focused on cases of rights violations. As such, CREAS teams had a more diverse group of professionals, including lawyers. In instances where families failed to meet conditionality requirements, social workers were directed to lend support via counselling and other interventions so that they would not lose benefits. Rather than take a punitive view, the philosophy on the ground was that non-compliance was a sign of vulnerability, not defiance.

A second implementation challenge related to the under-enrolment of eligible beneficiaries. These include people who lacked documentation, moved frequently from one address to another, were

unhoused, lived in isolated territories, or simply did not know their rights. The MDS framed these as generalized social vulnerabilities.

Around the same time, some progressive and black career technocrats within the MDS were pressing for better data collection as part of the CadÚnico, calling for integration of data on race and communal affiliation to capture residents of quilombos. The timing was good, as the MDS leadership was focused on the need for proactive outreach. The *busca ativa* (active search) philosophy placed responsibility on the government to identify individuals who, for whatever reason, were not yet included in the social protection system and to bring them into it (Wong n.d.).<sup>12</sup> Technocrats could use data from the registry to create a territorial map of social vulnerability. With this information, CRAS and CREAS teams could engage in the communities they served and seek out those who had fallen through the cracks. Once individuals were registered, social workers could also proactively search for benefits for which those individuals were eligible. These included Bolsa Família, BPC, Programa de Erradicação do Trabalho Infantil (Programme for the Eradication of Child Labor/PETI, 1996—), Programa Bolsa Verde (2011–18), and Programa de Fomento a Atividades Produtivas. *Busca ativa* thus involved the practice of connecting CadÚnico families and individuals with complementary social services offered by other agencies, such as education, health, work, and nutritional assistance. In this way, the social assistance sector served as the entryway into locating other rights-based social welfare benefits provided by the government. From the point of view of SEPPIR, connecting MDS programmes to quilombos was important for addressing the systemic exclusion of these communities from governmental services. In this way, progressive administrations could address intersectional inequality.

### 3.2 General implications

Brazil's CCT programme has been widely studied by social scientists to assess the programme's impact, both intended and unintended.<sup>13</sup> Since the programme's goals focused on 'income' and the human development of children, most policy evaluations have examined those aspects. Impact evaluations have often focused on poverty outcomes for beneficiaries versus non-beneficiaries, with outcomes for children, and then mothers, most often reported. The potential for gender empowerment of adult women, while not an explicit aim of the programme, has only more recently been taken up by scholars. Overall, most impact evaluation research has not provided disaggregated data for Afro-Brazilian (black and brown) Bolsa beneficiaries.<sup>14</sup> Thus, the benefits that these groups experienced were only identified in so much as Afro-descendants are over-represented among the most economically vulnerable. With this significant omission in mind, general aggregated outcomes are briefly reported below.

First, the Bolsa Família was widely credited with having lowered poverty rates. Bolsa Família, together with the non-contributory pension programme, BPC, produced a 58 per cent decline in extreme poverty, a 30 per cent decline in poverty, and a 41 per cent decline in inequality between 2004 and 2014 (World Bank 2020). Since poverty is unevenly distributed geographically, the programme's impacts had been the most profound in areas with large poor populations. This is

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<sup>12</sup> Norma Operacional Básica do Sistema Único de Assistência Social (NOB-SUAS/2012).

<sup>13</sup> Bolsa Família has been the subject of thousands of studies across many fields of study. For an overview of political science research on Bolsa Família and its electoral consequences, see Layton (2018).

<sup>14</sup> Some scholars are responding to this gap in knowledge about the distinct experiences of indigenous people and Afro-Brazilians who receive cash transfers (de Micheli 2018; Delgado and Tavares 2021; Mariano and Carloto 2013; Mitchell-Walthour and dos Santos 2021), but there is still much to be uncovered.

particularly true for the arid north-east, which has long faced underdevelopment and the highest rates of poverty.<sup>15</sup> In some municipalities, programme participation was nearly universal. Economic research also suggests that the CCT programme contributed to wider economic gains for the local community, as the grants fuelled greater spending at local businesses. Survey research shows that beneficiaries generally utilized the grants, as intended, to ameliorate the effects of poverty. Beneficiaries used funds to meet basic needs, including food, clothing, school supplies for children, and basic household durable goods (Cedplar and MDS 2007; Lavinás et al. 2012; MDS 2012). The regularity of payments was important because it allowed participants to plan for the future—something that is otherwise difficult for them to do because their incomes are uncertain as workers in the informal economy (Campara and Viera 2016: 999; Rego and Pinzani 2014). At the same time, there is little evidence that the programme depressed entry into the paid workforce (de Brauw et al. 2015a; MDS 2012, 31). Researchers have instead found that programme beneficiaries were more likely to be in the workforce than non-beneficiaries (Passos et al. 2021: 97).

When it comes to the human development aims of the programme, the Bolsa produced tangible improvements related to education and health outcomes for children and their families. For instance, childhood school enrolment, which had been uneven in the late 1990s, reached near universal levels. The Bolsa was credited with contributing to regular school participation, particularly among girls (de Brauw et al. 2015b). While school enrolment increased greatly, especially at preschool and elementary levels, learning outcomes have still lagged (Wampler et al. 2020: 217–21). Researchers also credit the programme’s healthcare conditionalities with producing a wide range of health benefits, including reductions in infant and maternal mortality (Bartholo et al. 2017: 16; IBASE 2008; Rasella et al. 2013, 2021). Part of the reason for this is the expanded rates of women’s healthcare utilization that was spurred by the grant (Bartholo et al. 2017: 16). For children, nutritional improvements were also noted (IBASE 2008).

Beyond tangible benefits to the human development of children, there is growing scholarship on the programme’s other agency-enhancing spillover effects. The documentation requirements associated with registration in the CadÚnico created an immediate demand for basic identity documents for adults and children (Hunter and Sugiyama 2018). Brazil has historically lagged middle-income country peers on documentation, particularly birth registration, with 20.3 per cent ‘under-registered’ (i.e., unregistered births) in 2002 (IBGE 2015, as cited in Escóssia 2020: 2). Residents who reside far from notary public offices, those in remote rural areas, the poor, and Afro-Brazilians were particularly rendered invisible by the state (Escóssia 2020). Without basic documents, children were ineligible for cash grants but also for a range of other guaranteed services (e.g., schooling, healthcare). Adults without documentation were also unable to realize full citizenship, resulting in poor access to state services, constitutionally guaranteed benefits, and voting rights (DaMatta 2002). The Bolsa Família thus served as an important catalyst for creating demand for documentation as well as spurring government agencies into action to facilitate their acquisition (Hunter and Sugiyama 2018).

Scholars have increasingly debated the extent to which the Bolsa contributed gains for adult women beneficiaries. For policy practitioners, the choice of favouring women reflected practical realities of Brazilian social structures, where large numbers of women-headed households have primary custody of children. Further, mothers were thought to be better custodians of resources for their children. Feminist scholars cautioned that such policy designs produced gendered stereotyping of women’s maternal and care roles, potentially undermining opportunities for women to engage in paid labour or deterring male partners from undertaking more household and

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<sup>15</sup> About half of Bolsa beneficiaries reside in the north-east; a third of all beneficiaries live in rural areas (World Bank 2020).

care work (Delgado and Tavares 2021; Martínez-Franzoni and Voorend 2012; Molyneux 2006). Research on the potential gender-empowering effects of the programme is nascent, yet suggestive. Bartholo et al.'s (2017) comprehensive review of the Bolsa's effects on women's lives finds that women experienced more choices, contributing to greater autonomy. Hunter et al. (2020) argue that the Bolsa contributed to three dimensions of women's empowerment, including increased economic independence, enhanced bodily autonomy, and psychosocial growth.

### **3.3 Implications for addressing racial inequality**

How poor indigenous and Afro-Brazilians experience social policy should be investigated in its own right. Intersecting vulnerabilities associated with race, ethnicity, colour, and gender should be analysed to determine whether programme participation further entrenches marginalization or contributes to greater inclusion. Research to date has not consistently employed black feminist theoretical frameworks on intersectoral inequalities (Crenshaw 1991) and 'secondary marginalization' (Cohen 1999). For these reasons, caution is in order, as generally positive outcomes reported in aggregate terms may not apply uniformly for groups. In other countries welfare assistance has been racialized with negative rhetorical frames that depict beneficiaries as undeserving. Racialized depictions of poor black women as 'welfare queens' in the United States, for instance, have contributed to stereotyping and stigmatization of recipients of public assistance (Hancock 2004; Soss et al. 2005). What do we know in the context of Brazil?

There is reason to believe that Bolsa Família's policy design may have expanded access to income for Afro-Brazilians without contributing to racialized stigmatization. Its universal design and eligibility—open to all eligible participants based on means testing—appears to have reduced the risk of low uptake among brown and black groups. Data from the Brazilian census is suggestive in this regard. In 2016, black and brown people represented 76 per cent of those in the bottom income decile, whereas white people made up 23.3 per cent in this category (IBGE 2016: table 3.1). That same year, the Ministry of Social Development reported that 74 per cent of Bolsa recipients were black or brown (de Micheli 2018: 56). The close coverage in terms of racial composition suggests that Afro-Brazilians embraced programme utilization. Mitchell-Walthour and dos Santos (2021) report that black and brown Bolsa beneficiaries in São Paulo and Salvador were more likely to perceive class-based discrimination than race-based discrimination, suggesting that participation in Brazil's CCT programme may be less racially stigmatizing than participation in a food security programme (SNAP) utilized by black and brown women interviewed in the United States. This finding is important because social policy should reduce stigma, not reinforce it, if it is to build agency. The feeling that comes with agency—that one can make choices and impact one's community—is important individually, communally, and politically. Drawing on public opinion surveys from 2009 and 2014, de Micheli (2018) finds that Bolsa Família grants mobilized Afro-Brazilian participants when compared with their white counterparts. Given that Afro-Brazilians' baseline propensity to participate in elections is lower than that of white Brazilians, this finding is important (2018: 65). While national studies on how Afro-Brazilians interpreted their engagement with Bolsa Família are not available, qualitative research provides a possible explanation. Mariano and Carloto's (2013) qualitative study in two cities, Uberlândia and Londrina, finds that Bolsa Família exerted more influence in the daily lives of black women than those of white women.

While the Bolsa Família programme was nationally designed and implemented, the MDS still took steps to employ an intersectoral lens to vulnerability in ways that contributed to better outreach to

black communities.<sup>16</sup> Changes to the CadÚnico questionnaire, largely spurred by internal advocacy by technocrats, allowed registrants to self-identify racially and by community. Importantly, data on communities allowed the MDS to identify eligible families who resided in quilombos. The *busca activa* philosophy of identifying the hardest to reach groups was important for expanding the number of *quilombolas* (the term used to describe residents of these communities). In 2006, 6,391 families were registered in the CadÚnico to determine eligibility for social programmes; 4,150 families received Bolsa Família grants, with plans to eventually expand that coverage to 33,500 families and increase the availability of CRAS centres (Jaccoud 2009: 155, 206). Work with these communities exemplifies the diverse experiences and contexts in which national policy must adapt to identify the neediest and hardest to reach.

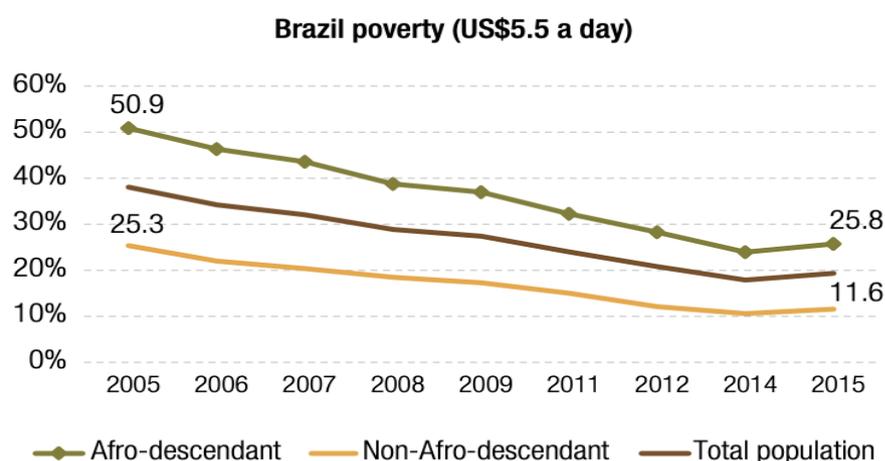
Throughout much of the period 1990–2015, Brazil broadened access to social benefits in ways that elevated the quality of life of Afro-Brazilians. Andrews (2014: 487) credits advances in education, health, earnings, and social and economic policies over a 20-year period for producing dramatic improvements—fertility, infant mortality, life expectancy, primary and middle school enrolment, median years of schooling, individual earnings, household income, and poverty—in wellbeing for most Brazilians, but especially for black and brown Brazilians. Economists have credited the BPC, Bolsa Família, and rural pension with elevating incomes (Jaccoud 2009). Most social policies have not focused on racial equity. However, means-tested programmes lifted incomes for Afro-Brazilians by virtue of their relative social and economic disadvantage. Disentangling which policy specifically contributed to improved social outcomes is difficult. In some cases, such as Bolsa Família, the explicit aim of cross-sectoral promotion of healthcare and educational utilization shows the snowball effects that come from engagement with various complementary services. If we focus on poverty alone, we know these strategies contributed to gains for Afro-Brazilians. In 1995, poverty among Afro-descendants was over 50 per cent (Andrews 2014: 846). By 2015, an estimated 26 per cent of Afro-descendants were poor by the US\$5.50/day measure (Freire et. al. 2018). Both Afro-descendants and all others made gains between 2005 and 2015, yet the racial gap persists (see Figure 1). Drawing on the same data, researchers estimate that the annualized poverty decrease from 2005 to 2015 was –6.6 per cent for Afro-descendants and –7.5 per cent for non-Afro-descendants (Freire et. Al. 2018: 71).<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> There is debate as to whether individualized benefits are appropriate models in communal settings like quilombos (Jaccoud 2009: 115).

<sup>17</sup> Does not include indigenous category.

Figure 1: Brazil poverty rate by race



Source: reproduced from Freire et al. (2018: 145) under Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO; based on CEDLAS and World Bank data.

Closing income inequality between black and non-black groups remains stubbornly difficult. Research based on national household surveys (the National Household Sample Survey, or PNAD) from 1986 to 2019 shows that income inequality between white and black groups in Brazil is largely unchanged; while incomes have risen in these decades, the large gap between white and afro-descendant groups still means that the average incomes of white people is at least twice that of black people (Osorio 2021). As the next section addresses, the pandemic and current federal politics have created great uncertainties for vulnerable Brazilians, rendering their ability to rely on state support uncertain.

#### 4 Inclusion amid the coronavirus pandemic? Continuity and an uncertain landscape

The coronavirus pandemic, which has ravaged the population's health and the country's economy, has had enormous consequences for Brazil's vulnerable groups. Afro-descendants are more likely to work in informal sectors that lack health protections and unemployment benefits. Black and brown women are over-represented in the informal sector and thus experience more employment instability and hazards, while simultaneously encountering additional care work for children and elders. Indigenous communities have also been extremely hard hit by COVID-19, with high rates of infection and mortality (ECLAC and German Agency for International Cooperation 2021). All of this is to say that the coronavirus pandemic has magnified the intensity of the country's structural inequality (ECLAC 2021b).

Social protection systems are most needed during times like these, when unemployment is high and the vulnerable must rely on a public assistance for survival. Yet Brazil's COVID crisis has coincided with a period of great uncertainty in the social welfare model. President Jair Bolsonaro, a far right-wing politician, started his presidency in 2018 with welfare retrenchment. Pre-pandemic, access to Bolsa Família was already on the decline under President Bolsonaro's government. In June 2019, the government slowed the admittance of new applicants and cancelled payments for

enrolled recipients, resulting in 1 million fewer beneficiaries (The Economist 2020).<sup>18</sup> When the global pandemic reached Brazil in March 2020, President Bolsonaro contributed to the crisis by denying its severity. He chose to focus on the economic consequences, neglecting much of the healthcare infrastructure and undermining its response to COVID-19 (Ortega and Orsini 2020). The government's focus on income support, while neglecting other key health areas—such as testing, vaccination acquisition, and disease mitigation measures—reflected both neglect and experimentation. Chief among them was the decision to move Bolsa Família beneficiaries into a new emergency aid programme.

Like previous federal cash assistance programmes, the Auxílio Emergencial (Emergency Aid or AE) was largely framed in terms of economic vulnerability. The aim was pandemic support for informal and poor households and employment retention for the formal sector.<sup>19</sup> Auxílio Emergencial was massive in scale: it reached about 38.6 per cent of all households and cost 4 per cent of GDP in 2020. The infusion of funds succeeded in cushioning the financial blow of the pandemic; poverty fell to 4.4 per cent and inequality fell to 0.51 on the Gini index, lower than pre-pandemic levels (Al Masri et al. 2021: 27). But the scale of AE made it a temporary measure;<sup>20</sup> once cash aid dried up due to fiscal constraints, poverty would rise. The federal government would formally end Bolsa Família payments in November 2021. In its place, a 'new' cash transfer programme called Auxílio Brasil (Brazil Aid) would provide monthly cash grants to means-tested eligible families. Critics accuse the government of electioneering ahead of the October 2022 presidential election by rebranding cash transfers for political purposes. Notably, the government intends to monitor but not enforce conditionalities. The roll-out of Auxílio Brasil has been mired in uncertainty related to its fiscal feasibility, due to constitutional spending limits. Changes to cash transfers have come under heavy criticism by policy-makers from previous administrations, who charge that these modifications are ungrounded in research and broader technocratic debates.<sup>21</sup> Given that research on Bolsa Família suggests that beneficiaries experienced gains associated with education and health conditionalities, and that administrative procedures such as *busca ativa* expanded access, there is reason for concern. Previous officials who worked within the Lula and Dilma Rousseff administrations argue that they moved the needle on 'racial inclusion'. But as Mesquita (2021) argues, the administrative reforms that opened the door for anti-racism policy largely stalled after 2016 due to budgetary pressures and ministerial reorganizing during Dilma's administration, and came to a standstill after her impeachment and the rise of right-wing presidents Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro. President Bolsonaro's well-documented racism towards indigenous, black and brown Brazilians<sup>22</sup> means advocates for racial inclusion lost space within the federal apparatus. The next presidential elections thus carry great weight for the prospects of ethnically inclusive reforms.

This paper has argued that Brazil's social protection and poverty alleviation strategies have largely reflected continuity in approach—one that focuses on income and class-based exclusion. For

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<sup>18</sup> In June 2020, the government estimated that 700,000 families were on the waiting list Bolsa Família but that number is likely an underestimate (The Economist 2020).

<sup>19</sup> To qualify, individuals had to be 18 years of age, hold an informal job be unemployed, not hold another welfare benefit expect for Bolsa Família, and have a monthly per capita income of R\$3,135 or US\$608 (Al Masri et al. 2021). Only two members per household could receive the aid.

<sup>20</sup> EA payments ended in December 2020 and a scaled down version was renewed for the second quarter of 2021. For background, see UNICEF (2021).

<sup>21</sup> For example, Tereza Campello former Minister of the Ministry of Social Development, has been an outspoken critic of changes to Bolsa Família (Hessel 2021).

<sup>22</sup> See for example, Phillips (2020).

nearly a century, policy-makers focused on inclusion in terms of class and employment. The persistence of the ‘racial democracy’ myth makes it difficult for policy-makers to implement social programmes that explicitly correct for racial discrimination by targeting indigenous, black, and brown citizens. Instead, Brazil’s major poverty alleviation programmes are defined and promoted in universal terms. Advocates for black and brown Brazilians would like to see more explicit policy framing that acknowledges the reality of racism in Brazil, as they argue that class is an insufficient proxy for colour-based discrimination (dos Santos, personal communication, 2022). So even though poverty relief programmes have practically reached millions of economically vulnerable Afro-Brazilians and *busca ativa* strategies made some inroads with quilombo communities, advocates understandably call for more to be done. The question is how. This analysis argues that there are advantages to pursuing universal social policy alongside racially inclusive administrative procedures.

A comparative perspective on social protection systems from around the world offers important lessons. For social programmes to further human development *and* advance agency, their participants need to feel empowered by them (Hunter and Sugiyama 2014). When social policies are stigmatizing for low-income populations, they can dampen programme uptake and political participation (Verba et al. 1995). Research on the comparative welfare state illuminates the challenges that emerge when means-tested programmes become associated with specific ethnic groups, fuelling negative ethnic stereotypes (Soss et al. 2005). Also important, research on means-testing programmes in the US shows that patronizing policy design and punitive oversight measures further dampen political participation (Bruch et al. 2010). Narrowly defined social programmes also appear to risk broader political support, which is essential for their political viability. In the last two decades, Brazil’s universal poverty alleviation strategies have largely avoided many of these problems. Should Brazil’s future political leaders seek to advance both racial inclusion and reductions of poverty, they should keep these lessons in mind.

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