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Validating one of the world's largest conditional cash transfer programmes

A case study on how an impact evaluation of Brazil's Bolsa Família Programme helped silence its critics and improve policy

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VALIDATING ONE OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST CONDITIONAL CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMMES

A case study on how an impact evaluation of Brazil's Bolsa Família Programme helped silence its critics and improve policy

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Executive summary

The newly elected government of Brazil moved quickly in 2003 to consolidate social policies that it believed would deliver on every citizen's social and economic rights, as promised in the country's 1988 constitution. Three cash transfer programmes were combined into one: the Bolsa Família. The Government designed the transformation to include impact evaluations as a way of better monitoring its performance and thus improving its coverage and ultimately its purpose of reducing poverty. The evaluations also were designed to demonstrate that such a controversial policy a difference.

Prior to that evaluation, there was widespread scepticism that Bolsa Família was an efficient use of public funds. Six months after the findings were made public, there was a major shift in policymakers' attitudes and commitment to increase funding and to expand coverage.

The first impact evaluation of the Bolsa Família Programme helped strengthen the management of the benefits, better target beneficiaries and promote a nascent culture of monitoring and evaluation.

Although impact evaluations were factored into the design of the results-based framework for the programme and were expected to produce an assessment of where the programme was strong and weak to direct adjustments in the service delivery, there were two ulterior political motives. First, the political leaders of the new government (supporters of the programme) wanted the evaluation to validate in Brazilian public opinion and policy debates the cash transfers in role of strengthening human capital, improving children's lives and contributing towards poverty reduction. A faction of policymakers, academics and journalists were criticising the programme with claims of public funds misspent in the hands of beneficiaries or not reaching the poorest households. Second, the impact evaluation was to also validate the integrity of the Ministry of Social Development's newly established Evaluation and Information Management Secretariat's existence by proving the usefulness and reliability of the findings.

At the time this case study was prepared, two evaluations had been conducted but only one set of findings was available, and thus our analysis focuses largely on the first

evaluation. That first impact evaluation showed that the injection of cash into poor communities helped stimulate the local economy and that the bulk of the money was spent on necessities, such as food, clothing and school supplies rather than “wasted” on things such as alcohol and illicit drugs, as the opposition argued. The fact that children’s education outcomes increased further validated the effectiveness of such a public policy mechanism as conditionalities. According to Bolsa Família managers, the evaluation revealed that although households were still in poverty, the programme helped relieve negative coping strategies and that school attendance of children actually increased.

Despite delays in nearly every stage of the process and the release of the microdata later than expected, the first impact evaluation is credited with influencing the policy process: Pockets of neglected populations were detected and coverage was expanded; the programme managers received training to overcome weaknesses in service delivery, such as bottlenecks in the distribution of benefits and poor monitoring of adherence to the conditionalities. The findings indicated that adjustments in the benefit structure that targeted the number of children in a household would be more effective and that expanding the coverage to young people aged 16–17 would help them stay in school. In addition, duplications of benefits were located with better cross-check instruments.

The impact evaluation succeeded not only in silencing the criticism of the programme but helped turn critics, particularly those in the media, into supporters advocating for the continuity of conditional cash transfers. Six months after the release of the findings, policymakers’ attitudes shifted and they increased funding to expand the programme’s coverage.

There is a risk of tainting the findings with any politically motivated evaluation. In this case, peer reviewers agreed that the impact evaluation was reliable due to its size, sampling and objective indicators and the use of independent consultants to conduct the survey. The first impact evaluation of the Bolsa Família Programme suggests that political motivations don’t necessarily lead to tarnished findings and that peer review is a good inoculation against such criticism.

Analysis of the first and, to a degree, the second impact evaluation of the Bolsa Família Programme found two lessons of relevance beyond Brazil: 1) government-commissioned evaluations can improve policy management; and 2) timing is paramount for the findings to affect policy.

The analysis indicates that it was strategically prudent to use a government department for the impact evaluation to demonstrate its own usefulness and to help the policy management – producing reliable and useful findings was in its self-preserving interest. While articulating the relevance of conditional cash transfers and validating the use of public expenditure, the evaluation process also strengthened the management and the coverage of the programme, such as avoiding duplications and false targeting and finding pockets of overlooked eligible households. According to

several actors involved in the inception of the Evaluation and Information Management Secretariat and the impact evaluation, there was a sensitivity early on that an “in-house” M&E technical team could anticipate some critical questions that the programme’s managers might not imagine due to their daily demands but would be of use to them towards improving the work they do.

For impact evaluation results to be useful, a crucial factor is its timing. Given the Brazilian management’s four-year cycle (due to electoral calendars), timing in the conduct of the impact evaluations is a challenge. For the first evaluation’s policy influence, timing was the main obstacle and findings were released later than planned. To be influentially relevant, time should be the first priority, with quality a close second. This does not suggest a trade-off but emphasises that timing has to be a driver of the process; otherwise the findings lose their usefulness in the policy process. One way to do so and not greatly compromise the quality is to provide more descriptive and partial results as the evaluation is conducted. This partial information can be communicated to different audiences through diverse formats.

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1. Introduction

Impact evaluations are fundamental for assessing a project or programme's effectiveness and efficiency, though they are not always conducted or conducted well. If done rigorously, they have the potential to advance the way social initiatives are designed and carried out and thus can make a contribution towards improving people's lives.

Three years after the launch of what has become one of the world's largest conditional cash transfer programmes, the first of four planned impact evaluations of Brazil's Bolsa Família Programme was conducted in 2006. Prior to that first evaluation, there was widespread scepticism that Bolsa Família was an efficient use of public funds. Six months after the findings were made public, there was a major shift in policymakers' attitudes and commitment to increase funding and to expand coverage.

According to policymakers and programme managers, the evaluation revealed that although households were still in poverty, the conditional cash transfer mechanism helped relieve negative coping strategies and that school attendance of children actually increased. The evaluation findings indicated that the injection of cash into poor communities helped stimulate the local economy and that the bulk of the money was spent on necessities, such as food, clothing and school supplies, rather than "wasted" on things such as alcohol or illicit drugs, as the opposition argued. It also demonstrated that the programme strengthened vulnerable households' human capital.

The Bolsa Família Programme is an example of the institutionalisation of an evaluation system, particularly where there is no culture of such practice, as was the case in Brazil, particularly in the social policy field. Commissioned by a newly formed monitoring and evaluation unit within the same ministry that manages the programme, there was pressure to perform well. At stake was the legitimacy of the conditional cash transfer programme as well as that of the M&E unit's role in moving the government towards evidence-based policy making and for better management of public spending. Due in part to the first-round findings (other factors are also credited), the programme experienced a qualitative change in 2007. The management skills of implementing staff at the local level were considerably improved through targeted trainings. The improved management led to improved monitoring of household adherence to the conditionalities, and the conditionalities were made more effective by improving the capacity of municipal managers to better monitor them. The information quality and use of the database registry of all beneficiaries was improved (cross-checks were developed to reduce duplication of benefits), leading to its recommended use as a management tool for other programmes.

The findings also suggested how the benefit structure could be adjusted to maximise impact. Thus a restructuring in eligibility was made based on the number of children in the family, and benefit coverage was extended to adolescents aged 16–17 to help keep them in school. The impact evaluation discovered pockets of neglected populations and

geographic areas and coverage was expanded to include such vulnerable groups as indigenous people and people who were homeless. When combined with other inputs, the findings contributed to the addition of a new component to improve the labour and social inclusion of youth.

The impact evaluation not only helped to silence the criticism of the programme, particularly in the media, but it helped turn critics into supporters advocating for the continuity of conditional cash transfers and recommendations for replicating the M&E unit in other ministries.

The first impact evaluation of Bolsa Família as part of a series

Although two rounds of impact evaluations have been conducted of the Bolsa Família Programme so far (in 2006 and 2009), the findings from the second round were not available at the time this case study was researched. While this paper refers to the second round where there is information, it largely represents analysis of the first round of the impact evaluation, particularly looking at how it influenced the programme design and implementation.

2. The Bolsa Família Programme

Consolidating social protection policy

In 2003, President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva had just been elected and was committed to promoting policies that would fulfil requirements of the 1988 constitution, especially in terms of social and economic rights. What followed was a dramatic shift in the coordinating of challenges and the integrating of policies on social development and alleviating hunger. In particular, the Bolsa Escola, the Bolsa Alimentação and the Vale Gas, which were set up in 2001 as Brazil's first cash transfer programmes, were combined.¹

In another act of consolidation and gaining integrity, the Food Safety Ministry, mandated to address hunger, and a Social Assistance Ministry, responsible for monetary transfers and social assistance, were combined in 2004 as the Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger (MDS). The National Secretariat of Citizen Income (SENARC), one of four MDS secretariats (divisions), manages the Bolsa Família Programme in conjunction with the municipalities and the states, which handle the on-the-ground implementing.

Additionally, a Single Register of Social Programmes was set up: the Unified Household Registry (referred to as Cadastro Único or CadÚnico). The process required that officers in the previous two ministries and in the local government (states and municipalities managing the programmes) had to interact and work together to unify the scattered databases of beneficiaries of the several social programmes. From its inception, the Bolsa Família Programme design included a new information management system, instruments for monitoring and evaluating and producing up-to-date information on activities and outputs and on outcomes over the longer term. Computer software that enables rigorous monitoring and evaluating of policies, programmes and beneficiaries was introduced.

Creating the Bolsa Família Programme required legislative change and endorsement through a decree; its combined objectives became (MDS, 2010):

- Promote immediate poverty relief through monetary allocation
- Enforce basic rights to health care, education and social assistance, which also contribute towards reducing the intergenerational poverty cycle
- Strengthen household self-sufficiency through skills training, job search assistance, financial literacy to better manage household finances, personal documents and access to basic services such as electricity.

¹Bolsa Escola was created in 2001 and offered 15 reais per child (aged 6–15) for families whose per capita income was less than 90 reais in exchange for children attending 85 per cent of the school classes in a year. Bolsa Alimentação was also created in 2001 to reduce nutritional deficiencies and infant mortality among the poorest households. It offered 15 reais per child in exchange for prenatal exams and the vaccination of children. Vale Gas was a cash transfer with no conditions, providing 15 reais every two months to 8.5 million people whose monthly income was less than 60 reais.

The consolidated programme's implementing focus shifted from individuals to households to reinforce the role of women, who represented 92.5 per cent of the previous programmes' beneficiaries. The benefit is intended for households with a monthly per capita income of less than 120 reais (US\$69). The monetary transfer consists of a monthly allocation ranging from 20 reais to 182 reais (US\$11–\$104). The benefit is delivered only if the following conditionalities are observed (Repetto et al., 2009):

- Children must stay in school until age 17, and attendance must be at least 85 per cent among children up to age 15 and 75 per cent among those aged 15–18.
- All pregnant women must attend prenatal and antenatal care and all children must be fully immunised by age 5 and have a growth check-up until age 6.
- Parents must commit to keeping their children from working rather than going to school.

The programme provides an unconditional allocation to extremely poor households (with a per capita monthly income of 60 reais) and a variable benefit, depending on the composition of the household (number of children, teenagers up to 17 years old and pregnant women).

The Bolsa Família Programme takes a rights-based approach² and therefore is regarded as an entitlement for its targeted population. However, if a targeting error is revealed, the benefit can be eliminated, and when the conditionalities are not observed, payments can be suspended. The names of the beneficiaries are publicly listed on a website; anyone can report abuse.

The programme is implemented at the local level: municipal officers find eligible families, enrol them and then closely monitor each family and their adherence to the conditionalities. Thus difficulties in access to services are identified, and more intensive assistance is deployed when non-compliance is the result of a deeper vulnerability. Prior to the consolidating of the three programmes, different local officers monitored each of the three programmes; each programme had its own eligibility and condition criteria as well. There was no coordination among them to avoid duplication of benefits or detect oversights.

Background: Give a fish or teach people to fish, and other issues

Cash transfer controversies

At the time the Bolsa Família Programme was created, two years after the first cash transfer was set up in Brazil, the concept remained controversial.

² Although many authors argue that this is not the case in the implementation of the programme (see Soares, 2012).

The Bolsa Família Programme brought about profound political discussions in public opinion among the main actors. On one side, conservative sectors and media groups, such as O Globo,³ regularly criticised the programme, calling it too expensive and arguing that it generated negative incentives to labour among beneficiaries; they believed that cash transfers for poverty alleviation should be less a priority in public spending than other objectives, such as investment in infrastructure. The concept of cash transfer itself was fought over because of its focus on financial assistance rather than on training (the “give a fish or teach people to fish” argument) and caused mistrust of the beneficiaries to spend the money as intended.

From the other side of the political spectrum, another criticism took issue with the design of the programme, calling it “second best”, ranking behind more universal initiatives that are better adapted to human rights-based social policies and approaches. The more universal “citizen income” perspective is deeply embedded in traditional sectors of public administration and is sustained by a group of officers from the former Social Assistance Ministry and some sectors of academia. Another criticism, in the same line, attacked the setting of conditionalities. Social rights, the critics argued, shouldn’t be tied to any kind of requirement.

In spite of the broad coalition against the programme, there was also wide-ranging support for it. The coalition of support included economists who advocated for human capital strengthening to promoters of minimum-income initiatives. Backed by this influential support, the Lula administration was able to launch the programme.

No M&E culture

Brazil has a thriving social science community, based mainly in universities and producing many scholarly journals and conducting public discussions. However, this does not mean that it regularly influences policy, or that it wants to. Brazil’s social science community has not traditionally aimed to influence policy. It by and large sees its purpose as simply contributing knowledge. Only recently has there been a shift in which some researchers and institutions have initiated policy-oriented investigations. This has in turn opened a greater focus on public policy as a natural and desirable outcome of research, particularly evaluations. Still, researchers do not always set out to influence policy, which might thus limit or affect the design of their evaluations. Prior to 2003, the policy community complained about the lack of social indicators, taking the position that such a gap violated the fulfilment of the rights established in the 1988 constitution because the real impact of public interventions was not being measured. Upon taking office, President Lula emphasised the need for a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of public policy.

³O Globo advocated strongly for a greater allocation of resources in infrastructure initiatives instead of to the Bolsa Família Programme.

To create an M&E culture to help in the implementing of the social programmes and policies, the fulfilment of their goals and the optimizing of public resources, the Evaluation and Information Management Secretariat (SAGI) was established within the MDS. Additionally, it was set up with authority equal to the four MDS secretariats to underscore its importance. A Ministerial Order, signed in 2006, instituted its objective “to analyse the processes, products and results related to programmes and actions developed or funded by” the MDS and thus better support day-to-day management and decision-making and identify possible issues early on (MDS, 2010). The SAGI mandate includes assessing the MDS policies and distributing the information, both internally and externally. SAGI interacts with media, international organisations, financial organisations and academia.

SAGI consists of four departments: monitoring, evaluation, information and communications. The evaluation department supervises the studies of the 21 programmes that the MDS implements, and the communication department disperses the results. The evaluations entail five types: assessing the reach, observing the design, scrutinizing the implementation, evaluating the cost-effectiveness and assessing results and impacts.

Impact evaluations were a central feature of Bolsa Família’s design. Four such evaluations were planned, although with no time frame. The management of the conditionalities was – and remains – a central aspect of the programme and was one of the main issues surveyed in the first two evaluations.

The monitoring is based on a series of complex data-gathering procedures and data sources. The development of the system involved the creation of a database, based on the CadÚnico registry, called the Information System for Physical and Financial Monitoring of Social Assistance Actions and the Review System of the Continuous Cash Benefit Programmes.

Over its first seven years, the MDS budget increased by enormous dimensions, reflecting the government’s commitment to the development of social protection policy in the country: from 6 billion reais in 2003 to 40 billion reais in 2010. Brazil’s Bolsa Família Programme also grew and is now one of the largest, if not largest, conditional cash transfer programmes in the world and the largest in Latin America, reaching more than 12.4 million households – up from 4 million at its inception (as of March 2010, this covered 48.7 million beneficiaries, or 25.4% of Brazil’s population).

3. Bolsa Família's first impact evaluation and what it revealed

An independent but institutionalised evaluation

The Bolsa Família impact evaluations had to be independent (conducted by an outside entity) and institutionalised (managed by the government) in order to fulfil the broad political objective of generating reliable data that could be used to increase the programme's legitimacy. The newly created SAGI commissioned an outside entity to conduct the evaluation and monitored the process.

The two first rounds of impact evaluation involved three main actors: the SAGI technical team, the SENARC officers representing Bolsa Família management and external consultants to conduct the evaluation.

The SAGI technical team operated as an intermediary between the SENARC officers and the consultants, translating the SENARC demands and ensuring that the results would not be politically tainted. The SAGI team's in-depth knowledge of the MDS programmes and interventions, together with their understanding of the technical and methodological instruments required for conducting an impact evaluation, proved extremely useful in terms of settling on definitions, the indicators to be observed, the methodology to be used, how the results should be used for policy change and what results to disseminate and through which channels.

Objectives and underlying agendas

The formal objectives of the evaluation were to: i) analyse the performance of municipal agents responsible for on-the-ground management of the programme, ii) analyse the role of Bolsa Família's social control functions, iii) analyse the use and application of the Bolsa Família registry, iv) evaluate the decentralisation policies and v) analyse the impacts of the programme.

With the evaluation findings, the MDS commissioners wanted to influence attitudes about the programme and consequent social and political commitments, to improve management procedures for division of responsibility between levels of government and the targeting of beneficiaries, step to re-evaluate the value of the transfer and management of conditionalities.

There was also an underlying political agenda, which was to validate the programme. When the Lula administration officials required the evaluations from inception, they indeed wanted the programme's management to be based on results. Additionally, they were hoping to prove a positive link between the health- and education-related conditionalities and good social results to silence critics of conditional cash transfers. The World Bank, as the primary donor of the programme's funding at its inception stage, funded both impact evaluations. According to interviewed informants, the World Bank officers did not have an intrusive role in the design or use of the impact evaluation. The World Bank established legal restrictions for the tendering of the

institutional partner to conduct the evaluation, introducing suggestions on how the survey was to be conducted and which indicators were to be used. At the time of the second evaluation, the World Bank was no longer funding the programme, and the previous conditions it had requested were ignored.

Consultants raise skill levels

SAGI and SENARC staff first outlined the scope of the evaluation in April 2006, looking for an independent partner to conduct the research. For both evaluations, the hiring of consultants was by open and public tender. The selection of the consulting institution for the second round, however, was based on the budget proposed by each applicant, which appears to have led to underbidding.

The Regional Planning Development Centre of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (CEDEPLAR/UFGM) through the Research Development Foundation (FUNDEP) was hired for the first round evaluation. Although it was the first impact evaluation for them, the organisation had sufficient methodological and practical expertise. The institute hired international consultants to guide them and engaged in an intensive internal training process.

For the second round, a consortium formed by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) and a Sao Paulo-based survey consultancy firm, Datametrika (Consultoria, Pesquisa and Telemarketing), was hired. The hiring of Datametrika was criticised by academics because of their lack of experience in comparison with CEDEPLAR, which also bid. Datametrika had feeble know-how on impact evaluation techniques and methods because it specialised in political surveys and political marketing. According to a bidding committee member, the decision to hire them was due to their bid being the lowest. In the end, however, it appears the association with IFPRI raised Datametrika's skill levels along with the international visibility of the results, fostering comparison with cases from abroad. In addition, the participation of IFPRI, which took the responsibility of communicating the preliminary results to the media, gave a public perception of independence of the research from government influence (as opposed to the first round) that greatly improved the legitimacy of the results.

The first round of the evaluation was conducted from December 2004 to October 2006. SAGI coordinated the survey and the consultant research institute, CEDEPLAR, carried it out. The first round's formal objectives evaluated the:

- **Domestic consumption:** current spending on food, housing, clothing, transport, health, education, children's goods, adults' goods and miscellaneous expenses
- **Nutrition:** anthropometric measurements
- **Education:** school attendance, school progress and evasion
- **Labour:** adult child labour, search for work and occupational transitions
- **Health:** status, consultations, vaccination, use of health service

- **Social situation:** variables linked to living conditions, including participation in associations, political participation, level of confidence in various spheres of government, number of meals the family eats per day, use of time (time women spend for work, family duties and leisure and time children spend for school and leisure) and the decision making process in the domestic environment.

The approach was a quasi-experimental longitudinal design, since which families included in the Bolsa Família were selected in a non-random manner. Propensity score matching was used to allow comparisons between families receiving the Bolsa Família subsidy and families not included in the programme. Three pairing techniques (nearest neighbour matching, with and without replacement and radius matching) tested the robustness of the results. The comparative analysis was made between three groups: i) the treatment group of beneficiaries, ii) comparison group 1, composed of households receiving some other public social benefit and iii) comparison group 2, composed of households not registered in any kind of public social benefit. The sample for each of these groups was defined so as to represent the three regions of Brazil: the North-East, the South and the South-East together, and the North and Centre-West together. 15,426 families from 269 municipalities corresponding to 23 states were interviewed (Paes-Sousa and Vaitsman, 2008).

The second round was conducted between February 2009 and November 2010, aiming to return to the same households as in the first round. This time, the specific objectives included an evaluation of Bolsa Família's impact in relation to the data collected in the first round (in particular, nutrition spending, consumed nutrition item diversification, anthropometric measurement for children younger than 7 years and household spending in education, health care, clothing, among others), assuming the distinction between short- and long-term impacts. The methodology used and the sample selected was the same as in the first round. However, not all households were traceable; 74 per cent, or 11,433 families, from the first round sample were reached, allowing a sufficient comparison over time (Tapajós and Quiroga, 2010).

Human capital improvements and other findings

The main findings of the first round of the evaluation involved the analysis of households' spending patterns on children's health and education to assess Bolsa Família's impact on poor children's human capital improvement and general social well-being and a series of labour indicators. The study found that Bolsa Família increased poor household's spending in child health, child education, child clothing and food, as well as greater labour market participation of Bolsa Família beneficiaries in relation to those who don't receive any kind of social policy benefit but a decrease in female beneficiaries' labour market participation, reflecting a negative incentive due to an income substitution effect or greater time allotted to domestic (especially child care) activities. However, the evaluation showed that the negative incentives were not created by the programme.

The final results of the second evaluation had not been released at the time of this case study. Some preliminary results were publicly disseminated through a press release by the IFPRI, shows that the beneficiaries were “better off in 2009 than they were in 2005 because of the programme”. The main conclusions are that because of Bolsa Familia support (IFPRI, 2010):

- Children received their vaccinations on schedule.
- School attendance rose by 4.4 per cent.
- The number of school drop-outs reduced between 2004 and 2005 (in a comparison with children not enrolled in the programme).
- Pregnant women had 1.5 more prenatal visits.

4. Making the case for conditional cash transfers

Communicating the impact

Final results from the first evaluation were presented to both the MDS in internal meetings and through “mini-briefs” with implementing officers to analyse the programme and to external audiences (media, academia, among others) mainly in open seminars to publicise the impact.

Which results were communicated, when and the format to deliver them was a debated issue. Some information was very sensitive, and there were concerns it could be easily misunderstood or manipulated by the media or the political opposition. Thus, in some cases, SAGI and MDS officials decided that some results were not to be made public, in particular the information about vaccination levels and the nutrition contribution⁴ of the programme. According to some actors, these negative results were delayed they didn't contribute to the underlying objective of increasing the programme's legitimacy. The bulk of the results did show a positive impact, and these details were emphasised. The information was largely disseminated through the media, through the MDS website and through seminars that targeted the media or a broader audience (the academic community, representatives of donor and UN agencies, international organisations and public or civil society groups, including those that focus on increasing government accountability). Additionally, the researchers conducted a press conference and were available for interviews with both mass and specialised media.

An important feature of the communication process was that the SAGI staff's analytical skills and capacity to translate investigation results into policy recommendations, rather than simply delivering the results grew through the evaluation process. In previous unrelated evaluations, the data were analysed by the consultants and directly communicated to the MDS (it was jointly received by SENARC, SAGI, the Executive Secretary and the Cabinet of Ministers). This approach strengthened the SAGI's role and input in the design of the second evaluation.

SAGI generated three kinds of publications for communicating the results of the first round evaluation. The first was an executive summary (5–10 pages) containing the questions asked in the investigation, the methodology used and the results. The second type consisted of documents that contained a deeper description of the processes involved and a detailed analysis of the results, incorporating some preliminary conclusions. Finally, more technical publications with the participation of researchers and political/social actors highlighted the debates over the chosen methodology, the hypotheses on the possible impact of the results in the policy change and personal opinions of academics, programme managers and several politicians about the results. The main findings also were relayed through newspapers, TV and radio.

⁴The way in which the programme improved the nutritional status of children enrolled.

At the time of the evaluation, SAGI wanted to strengthen its relationship with academia and to bring together researchers, decision makers and programme implementers to foster evidence-based policymaking. With the findings from the first evaluation, SAGI organised seminars at MDS, with policymakers and researchers. The SAGI officers also participated in scholarly seminars and promoted the participation of other MDS employees in them. SAGI presented the impact evaluation analysis during the international Rosani Cunha conference for successful experiences in implementing of social policies, thus building on the link between subnational policymakers (the subject of the research) and social scientists (the researchers).

In the final stage of the evaluation cycle, SAGI provided the Social Information Consortium (CIS) with the microdata. All information identifying respondents was removed to protect the beneficiaries of the programme. CIS published the microdata on its website for use by Brazil's academic community as well as by foreign social researchers. As noted, however, not all the microdata was provided to the CIS, such as the health outcomes.

Regarding the validation of SAGI's usefulness as a managing mechanism, many of the actors involved in the impact evaluation process explained that SENARC was at first distant and suspicious of the potential use of the evaluation results. SENARC, the implementing agency, did not participate in the design of the first evaluation; it received the results through SAGI once they were available. However, as the first outcomes were made available, SENARC officers started to understand more clearly the implication for strengthening the programme's on-the-ground performance. They became increasingly involved in the process of interpreting what each result meant and the implications in terms of policy change. For the second evaluation, SENARC was thus more involved from the outset in the design of the evaluation and in the determining the survey questions – illustrating a great institutional learning curve. It is likely the second phase will have a greater policy influence potential than the first one. The complex nature of the policy process also meant that there were multiple entry points. The political coalitions were broad and heterogeneous on both sides of the argument for and against the conditional cash transfer programme. SAGI's level of prominence within MDS enabled the technical team to directly dialogue with policymakers, which allowed greater influence in the lower levels of the programme's management. At the same time and in some perspectives, it put the technical team in a position to hinder their policy influence potential because both rounds of impact evaluation were perceived as a self-assessment without independence because SAGI commissioned and monitored the process. This then, to those critics, tainted the official results that were publicly disseminated.

Reactions from academics and others

Some academics and international organisation officers challenged the methodology chosen for the impact evaluations due to its modelling and quasi-experimental method, as the programme was not randomly assigned an experimental design was not possible.

Another methodological difficulty pointed out was the lack of continuity between the samples of the first and the second rounds. This was an obstacle to the rigorous comparison over time, although the majority of households (74%) were sampled. Some specialists criticised the disproportionate effort in the design of the methodology in comparison with the time spent organising the fieldwork, and they also complained that there had been too much emphasis on the design of the methodology. Even if the methodology is perfect, they argued, it wouldn't translate into reliable data if the data collection was not reliable. This could happen, for instance, if the operators are not well trained, if the fieldwork is not organised in a way that permitted coverage of every household intended by the methodology and if the data-entry process is not precise. This could affect the translation of the formal methodological decisions into reliable data. Additionally, a few academics argued that it would have been possible to obtain very similar results but at a much lower cost by processing the national household survey. Their criticisms apparently had little resonance. The approach, according to one Institute of Applied Economic Research/researcher, did not affect the credibility of the results. In fact, the Brazilian Evaluation Agency states on its website that Bolsa Família evaluation system and methodology are an example to follow.

Even if the methodology assured the best comparison groups possible, the quasi-experimental methodology used in both rounds of the Bolsa Família impact evaluation was severely criticised by some academics. Romulo Paes Sousa, the SAGI Executive Secretary at the time of the evaluation and the current MDS Vice-Minister, believes that the final results of both evaluations helped change opponents' opinions on the methodology used. Either way, political economy reasons wouldn't have permitted the development of an experimental design. Leaving people out of the programme without solid arguments outside the technical reasons was not a possibility at the time. Another overall criticism of the evaluation was the time span between its implementation and the delivery of findings. There were technical impediments with the data recollection, the data entry and the publishing process, and each step took more time than intended. Once the findings were collated, some of the results were delayed in their public release because, they did not show a positive performance of the programme. But even those that did show positive impact were slow in being distributed, and thus their use and impact was lessened because they (some of them) were no longer needed due to policy decisions having already been made.

Use of the findings lead to better coverage and efficiency

No policy change is due to only one factor,⁵ but it is highly probable, given the agreement of the most of the actors involved in the policymaking processes, that the first evaluation results contributed to some of the adjustments to the Bolsa Família Programme made within six months of their release:

⁵ In fact, the policy influence that evidence from impact evaluations can achieve is ultimately determined by numerous factors. For more information, refer to Weyrauch and Díaz Langou (2011).

- **Conditionality:** The system to monitor the adherence to conditionalities was constructed in 2005 but was made more effective only in 2007 after several seminars in which municipal officers were trained to better manage it and stay faithful to the objectives of the programme. Additionally, the information quality and use of data in the CadÚnico registry was improved in 2007, also through expanded trainings. Content was improved by using the information gathered and identifying internal inconsistencies. Thus, since 2007, there has been a better monitoring of household adherence to the Bolsa Família's conditionalities. Some actors attribute this to the demonstration through the evaluation and other studies of the programme that the requisites in health and education led to a better situation for children. However, other actors argue that this was a maturation process of the Bolsa Família Programme and had nothing to do with the evaluation results. The fact that in the first years of the programme, the conditionalities were not as rigorously controlled was due to the work overload of the SENARC and subnational policy managers and not to any political decision. It was only a matter of time, they argued, before changes were made. However, it seems likely that the evaluations certainly helped pinpoint weaknesses and urged changes.
- **Territorial access and reach:** The process of conducting the impact evaluation provided SAGI (through CEDEPLAR) with a greater knowledge of the territory in which the programme was implemented and the population it reached. This knowledge was deeper than what SENARC officers were previously aware of because the programme's management is decentralised to the states and municipalities. This fact, combined with the evaluation results that revealed there was a vast universe of eligible families left out of the Bolsa Família benefit (exclusion errors), led to a strategy to reach those who had been excluded. This was the case, for instance, with certain vulnerable groups, such as indigenous populations, people who were homeless and the families of prison convicts.
- **Extension of eligibility age:** In 2008, the age of the eligible population was extended to include teenagers aged 16–17 years. Because of the evaluation findings, a further adjustment was made to the fixed amount provided to the families, which was reduced while the variable income (per child) was augmented. The findings showed that the conditional cash transfer was an effective instrument for keeping adolescents in school, so the decision to increase its coverage was justified. Also, the findings showed differences in the positive impact of the programme in relation to the size of the family; it showed a need to discriminate the kind of help provided to each family in relation to the number of children.

Some actors argued that this was a direct result of the findings of the programme's impact evaluation. Other actors, however, argued that this was a prior commitment of the Lula administration with pro-youth policies and that, in any case, the successful evaluation of other pro-youth initiatives had greater influence in this decision. The different viewpoints are equally strong, and there

is no way of knowing with certainty if the change was the result of the evaluation findings.

- **National Plan for Extreme Poverty Eradication:** The plan was a response of the newly elected President Dilma Rousseff's government to the 2008 international crisis and was constructed around the launching of a new social initiative: *Brasil sem Miséria*. The initiative aims to integrate traditional and new social programmes (the *Bolsa Família* will have a central role) and mobilise the whole of society in the fight against poverty. Some actors have argued that it was the SAGI impact evaluation and other *Bolsa Família* evaluation findings showing the population excluded from the national social assistance scheme and thus constituted the main evidence for the design of the national plan.
- **Pro-jovem programme:** This programme promotes the social inclusion of young people aged 18–29 years who have never completed their formal education and are thus not well positioned for inclusion in the labour market. The programme offers basic education, skills training, employment advice and participation in public work. It was launched in September 2007 through the unifying of all government youth programmes. Here again, some actors argue that the evaluation together with other studies, and especially the data from household surveys, influenced Lula's insistence on the programme. However, as in the case of the extension of the age, other actors give greater importance to Lula's campaign promises and his general commitment to youth. It's quite likely that the evaluation was an additional argument to the pre-existing commitment. Campaign promises typically are not all fulfilled, but the evaluation findings may provided for the government to follow through on its promises.
- **Training initiatives for local programme managers:** As *Bolsa Família* grew in importance and coverage, there were training sessions designed for local implementers. Some of the actors involved in the training explained that the content was determined by the evaluation's findings. For example, the training looked at the bottlenecks in the programme's distribution of benefits at the local level and the monitoring of adherence to the conditionalities.
- **Nutrition and vaccination components:** The only aspect in which there was no impact in nutrition and vaccination. Whilst, these results were not communicated to the public, they were, nonetheless, communicated within the MDS to the political authorities and to the programme managers. At the time of this case study, no modification had been made to the programme based on these results. Many actors argue that this is because the lack of impact were due to the lack of access to the Brazilian health system and had nothing to do with either the *Bolsa Família* Programme design or the monitoring of adherence to the conditionalities.

- Validating the government monitoring and evaluating department:** The underlying objective of legitimising SAGI within the MDS was not directly attributed to the first evaluation findings. Stakeholders, ranging from SAGI, SENARC, and the Executive Secretary to outside the MDS agree that the process of validation that SAGI has undergone since its inception has undoubtedly achieved its legitimisation. As they point out, the legitimacy of SAGI was built up through a continuous process of institutionalisation that involved increasing budgetary allocation, investment in infrastructure and human resources and the development of a culture of data use. The investment in human resources involved the recruiting of graduates from social and human sciences, demographics, statistics, social work and information technology to construct a multidisciplinary team (Vaitsman et al., 2006). But the use of the evaluation finding from within MDS certainly contributed to that process. However, the excessive caution exerted by MDS officers in the release of the findings was one of the major obstacles to the impact they could have had on the policy process.
- Budgeting commitment expands due to findings:** The coalitions for and against Bolsa Família were diverse in terms of their internal composition. In this context, the evaluation, which was commissioned and conducted by a pro-Bolsa Família Programme coalition, was used strategically to disarm the arguments against the programme. For example, an important issue was the alleged negative incentives to labour participation that the programme would create. The evaluation showed that these incentives were not created by the programme, indeed Bolsa Família Programme's beneficiaries showed greater labour market participation). These results, along with the results that showed a decrease in inequality and poverty, proved the value of the cash transfer programme.

One of the main consequences of Bolsa Família's greater legitimacy set an increased budget allocation to the programme. According to a former manager, the evaluation results helped the MDS gain preponderance in the budgetary debate and "the Treasury Ministry was no longer able to disregard a concrete reality that had been proven" that the programme was achieving its objective to alleviate poverty. Overall, general opinion towards the programme shifted. Most of the original opponents to the implementation of the programme began advocating for its continuation.

By the end of the Lula's term in office, Bolsa Família was his political party's shining achievement (Draibe, 2006). But it was believed that "the Bolsa Família was not owned by the Labour Party or by Lula, it was owned by every Brazilian" (Lopes, 2011), underscoring how the greatest legitimisation is that which leads to ownership.

A diverse group of stakeholders agree that the evaluation results unquestionably contributed to the greater legitimacy of the Bolsa Família Programme. The evaluation findings corroborated what had been suggested by other impact evaluations in terms

of poverty reduction, inequality decrease, the absence of labour market participation negative incentives and good results in children's education. None of those results were new, since they all had been previously indicated by other evaluations. However, given the scope and size of the sample, the evaluation gave greater weight and relevance to the findings.

5. Policy fine-tuning and two useful lessons

"The main risk of an impact evaluation is to produce a useless answer," stated Romulo Paes de Sousa, former SAGI Executive Director, now MDS Executive Secretary and the champion for the creation of SAGI and for the MDS to conduct the impact evaluations. De Sousa argued that there is intrinsic risk for the sustainability of impact evaluations from within the government because of their cost and the time span they require. But because of the value they might add as evaluations designed with a clear policy influence goal in mind, they have greater potential than other evaluations to be ultimately useful and improve policies. De Sousa explained that the impact evaluation was designed under this paradigm.

The impact evaluation's use and policy fine-tuning

The Bolsa Família Programme's first impact evaluation proved extremely useful in adjusting the policies and streamlining the management. On-the-ground managers received targeted training to overcome gaps in finding beneficiaries and monitoring the system and the compliance with the conditionalities. Eligibility criteria were adjusted to include older adolescents. Pockets of overlooked eligible beneficiaries were discovered and the programme coverage expanded to reach them. More thorough cross-checks of data were adopted and duplicates of benefits were reduced.

Perhaps the strongest achievement of the evaluations was that the results indicated the benefits were used as intended, as reflected in increased school attendance records and household spending on basic necessities, helped turn the critics into supporters – "The vocal opposition to the Bolsa Família Programme was greatly eradicated by 2007. This was mainly due to the impact evaluation," Marcia Lopes, MDS Minister in 2010, pointed out.

This view was supported by Clarissa Teixeira, researcher with the Institute of Applied Economic Research, "The impact evaluations of the Bolsa Família in general showed good results and portrayed the programme as a successful intervention, which increased its legitimacy."

The M&E unit responsible for the evaluations –SAGI- has been proposed to be copied in other ministries and a practice of M&E is taking root partly because of its performance with the Bolsa Família evaluations.

According to many actors involved, the underlying objectives to validate the programme and the government department's merits in M&E ultimately did not negatively influence the design or conduct of the evaluation. It is perceived to have been well executed and the findings of quality. The primary critique is that the "censoring" of negative results that were not released to the public. Its other main weakness was its timing, due to delays of each step for various technical reasons. Although the negative results on nutrition and vaccination of children in the sample were distributed internally to relevant departments, the delay of their release caused it to miss policy-influencing windows of opportunity that could have led to prompt adjustments.

The impact evaluation findings showed that evidence has a currency. By proving that public funds were reaching the poor and that they were using it for basic necessities and that they were adhering to the conditionalities it turned the sceptics into supporters. That the budget was expanded is indication of that impact. "The Bolsa Familia impact evaluation increased the legitimacy of the programme, and this was evidenced in a greater budgetary allocation," stated Monica Rodrigues, SAGI Director of Training and Dissemination.

Lesson 1: Articulating with programme managers and improving the policymaking process

After the first evaluation, the Bolsa Familia managers (from SENARC) became more involved in the entire evaluation process, especially early in the second round discussion stage. They were moved by the positive feedback that the first round generated in technical and political terms. This experience determined a difference in the kind of information sought at each step. The first evaluation constituted itself almost as a baseline. The goal was also to determine what information would be useful in the future, with a second, more in-depth survey in mind. The second evaluation showed, then, a greater strength in its methodology aspects and engaged more time and thought in the design of the questionnaires. Following the managers' increased awareness questions were added to better inform policy decisions; for instance, would it be better to expand coverage or to spend more money on each family?

SAGI staff, regarded as highly technical, were recruited with the objective that they could negotiate, commission and monitor the production of evaluations. Given their technical expertise, the SAGI officers often act as if part of a research institution and give more importance to academic rigor than to considering the needs of programme managers. Thus another lesson is the importance of programme managers participating in the design and conduct of an evaluation because their presence will improve the effectiveness or impact of the evaluation and thus the impact on policy. The evaluation should engage with programme managers from the outset so that its findings feed into the policy process more easily.

The impact evaluation was conducted with a methodology that was heavily criticised by some econometric researchers but overall was perceived as legitimate by the relevant

actors in the policy debate. Internal communication of the results allowed a dialogue between the consultants, SAGI and the policy implementers, which facilitated policy influence. The fact that SENARC participated in the production of the recommendations for the next evaluations indicates that the findings were perceived as having significant potential for impact.

The whole research process, and especially the communication of the results, was articulated to gain the policy influence sought and to provide the Bolsa Familia managers with useful information for improving the use of public funds and impacting the levels of poverty. In addition, according to several actors involved in the inception of SAGI and the evaluation, because of SAGI's "independence" of the daily operations of the programme, but the proximity of being in the same ministry, allowed it a sensitivity and familiarity to its needs. It could operate with a long-term strategic vision and anticipate some key needs or issues of programme managers in the future. Thus it could generate a deeper analytical point of view.

SAGI's capacity enabled it to commission and to technically negotiate with the evaluation consultants the terms of the hiring and the evaluation process. Its institutional position also allowed it to act as a moderator between the sometimes conflicting positions of SENARC, the implementing agency and the consultants. SAGI led the discussions and negotiations and was responsible for achieving consensus. This process has led to an important lesson. The fact that both evaluation rounds were commissioned from within the government and from the same ministry as where the policy to be evaluated and the managers are located suggests that the use of the evaluation findings should be relevant. It was in their interest to prove how well the programme worked by generating adequate and provocative but reliable evidence that would stand up to criticism.

Lesson 2: Evaluation timing and working against irrelevance

SAGI was responsible for communicating the evaluation findings. But its communication strategy was designed to also fulfil its underlying policy influence objective, which was to validate its role as a technically rigorous and politically useful agency within the government. Showing this would be valuable and constructive in the managing of the Bolsa Família Programme in particular and social policy in general. Thus it wanted to present rigorous analysis, which took some time to finalise. The way in which the messages that emanate from the impact evaluation are conveyed determines the degree of perceived objectivity and independence and – ultimately – the evaluation's policy influence potential. SAGI's communications section worked with the evaluation section to define and decide which channels and which messages to be conveyed to the external audiences. For the internal communication, only the evaluations section communicated with SENARC. Given the proximity of SAGI to the programme implementer (MDS in general and SENARC in particular) greater influence was gained in terms of direct dialogue with the managers, but in the more public debate, its perception of objectivity and independence was compromised.

Certain institutions (such as the Institute of Applied Economic Research, or IPEA, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, the Inter-American Development Bank, the World Bank, UN agencies (such as UNICEF, UNESCO and the Food and Agriculture Organisation) and local universities and research centres) helped translate the Bolsa Família evaluation findings into concrete policy recommendations. They also helped put forth the policy influence objective of legitimising the programme in Brazilian social protection public debates.

For the evaluation's results to be useful, a crucial factor was its timing. Given the Brazilian management's four-year cycle (due to electoral calendars), timing in the conduction of impact evaluations is certainly a challenge. Thus time was a major obstacle in the evaluation's ability to influence policy.

The first evaluation process was delayed due to several factors that created a relevant gap both between the decision to conduct it and the formulation of the evaluation and its conclusion. Consequently, many of the questions in the evaluation had great initial relevance but lost their significance because decisions had to be made before the findings were released.

Thus, a second major lesson of the impact evaluation's experience is that the process should provide results faster so that they better responded to the government's policymaking schedule. For an impact evaluation to be influential, time should be the first priority, with quality a close second priority. This does not suggest a trade-off, but that timing has to be a driver of the process; otherwise the findings lose their usefulness in the policy process. One way to do so and not compromise quality is to provide more descriptive and partial results as the evaluation is conducted. This partial information can be communicated to different audiences through a range of formats. What was particularly effective with the Bolsa Família Programme impact evaluations was the targeting of the same information through different formats to reach different audiences. Because there were diverse audiences for the evaluation results (policymakers, programme managers, journalists, scholars, etc.), the various formats of communicating the results allowed the tailoring of different messages according to the audience with a greater degree of specificity and detail (Weyrauch & Diaz Langou, 2011). The excessive caution exerted by MDS officers in the release of the nutrition and vaccination findings was one of the major obstacles in the impact they could have had on the policy process.

Conclusions

Analysis of the first and, to a degree, second impact evaluation of the Bolsa Família Programme offers two particular lessons of relevance beyond Brazil: 1) government-commissioned evaluations can improve policy management; and 2) timing on the release of findings is paramount. The first impact evaluation of the Bolsa Família Programme suggests that political motivations don't necessarily lead to tainted findings or conclusions.

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The Centre for Implementation of Public Policy for Equity and Growth (CIPPEC) is an independent, non-partisan and non-profit organisation that works for a fair, democratic and efficient State that provides a better life for its citizens. Accordingly, CIPPEC concentrates its efforts in analysing and promoting public policies that foster equity and growth in Argentina. Its main challenge is to translate into concrete actions the best ideas that come from the areas of social development, economic development, strengthening of the institutions and public management through the programmes of education, health, social protection, fiscal policy, international insertion, justice and transparency, local development, and government politics and management (www.cippec.org).