"Equal Before the Law," But Not in Practice: Brazil's Social Inequality Crisis – Harvard Political Review

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"All persons are equal before the law, without any distinction whatsoever, Brazilians and foreigners residing in the country, being ensured of inviolability of the right to life, to liberty, to equality, to security and to property […]"
The 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution, Article 5

The country that pledges the right to equality at the beginning of its constitution is one of the most socially unequal in the world. In Brazil, the land of Bossa Nova, Carnival, and Samba, there is not much to celebrate with regards to the distribution of wealth among its socially, financially, and ethnically diverse population. According to a 2019 United Nations report, about 1% of the wealthiest Brazilians possess 28.3%, or nearly a third, of the country's income, resulting in the second-highest income concentration in the world.

Brazil's social inequality crisis did not emerge overnight. Similar to various other countries, its many disparities are a result of a historical accumulation of exclusionary political and social institutions that hamper the adequate distribution of wealth and opportunities for all citizens. In a conversation with the HPR, Brazilian economist and Johns Hopkins University professor Filipe Campante elaborated on the impact of Brazilian history on its current inequitable reality. Brazil's historical realities — such as being the last nation in the Americas to abolish slavery in 1888, or even the late recognition of illiterate people's right to vote in 1988 — have contributed to the present brazen social contrast between classes. "History drives and reproduces Brazilian political inequality that only feeds economic and social inequality," Campante said.

According to the economist, Brazilian institutions have tended to "protect people at the top of the economic pyramid and make the bottom-level population extremely vulnerable." Campante referenced the exaggerated risks to which the poorest Brazilian countrymen are subjected, such as job informality, unemployment, and criminality. Conversely, in the present structure, the richest segment of the population enjoys countless and unreasonable privileges, such as the various tax benefits offered to big corporations and affluent individuals.

Furthermore, Campante argues that the magnitude of inequality is what is frightening and unique to Brazil. "In economic sciences, there is much debate about tradeoffs between inequality versus economic growth. In Brazil, the inequality is so big that it promotes zero efficiency for economic development," he said. The professor laments the persistent number of Brazilians in extreme poverty, which Campante considers as "a waste of human potential because they are citizens with talents not able to be developed, with unattainable aspirations," those who could really contribute to the economic expansion.

However, despite this nocuous historical and institutional background, Campante claims that "the past really conditions the present but it does not limit the nation's future." For Campante, far beyond discovering who the good and bad players are in this tangle of inequality propagation, Brazilian society, in general, must rethink what development project it desires. The inequality can surely be lessened because "political choices and policies are designed in the present and not in the past, so Brazil is not doomed to failure due to its former experiences." Despite all the possibilities, it is definitely time for Brazilian society to decide which path it aims to follow, a decision that will be primarily made through the next presidential election in 2022.

This inequitable present-day reality begs the question of which institutional factors are the most responsible for exacerbating the stark disparity between the most affluent and indigent in the nation. Perhaps more importantly, these questions may suggest possible solutions to these societal defects plaguing Brazilian people. Roberto Dutra, a professor of sociology at Universidade Estadual do Norte Fluminense, commented on the greatest institutional weaknesses he recognizes in Brazil.

Dutra comments that in terms of Brazil's economy, the country presents a precarious and unstable job market, especially with regard to the service sector. Running alongside this instability is a present tendency of "reprimarization" — a term concerning the decay of industrial and technological activities and a greater focus on the exportation of commodities, notably oil and agricultural goods. Concerning the educational reality, Dutra states that Brazil demonstrates a precariousness of basic education, which is essential for socio-economic growth. Additionally, Dutra emphasized the lack of access to justice in the country. Many Brazilians, for instance, are not even aware of their civil rights and do not know how to access the judicial system to safeguard them. Finally, Dutra posits that Brazil possesses a huge political inequality because "few citizens have access to political engagement," especially when it comes to being elected into offices, like as a city councilor. According to the professor, the majority of politicians win elections more because of influence peddling and corruption than through prominence and the coherence of projects, creating "multiple circular casualties that result in a Brazilian dichotomous conjecture."

Dutra proposes some incremental reforms to combat the perpetuation of inequality in the country. They are composed of upgrading the industry and labor system, ameliorating basic education, and boosting citizens' political participation and knowledge about their rights and duties. "Incremental reforms considered radical but gradual are the best solutions, and they were used by phenomenal economic advances in countries like South Korea," Dutra claims. According to the professor, in less than 30 years, South Korea was able to progress expressively, transforming from an agrarian country to a nation with high-tech industries and establishing itself as the cradle of well-known companies including LG, Hyundai, and Samsung. "Brazil can achieve this stage of development, but it needs self-sufficient institutional projects, which, as in Korea, could survive even with administration changes," Dutra added.

Considering these views, this article aims to investigate some of the Brazilian institutional imperfections in order to identify what steps can be taken to ensure a more equitable nation, one which reflects the idealistic Brazil the country's constitution once guaranteed. The three elements that will be examined are the unequal national labor system, the disproportionate access to education, and the complex and unfair tax system that fails to redistribute wealth efficiently among the Brazilian social classes.

The Unequal Labor System

It would be remiss to diagnose fundamental reasons for Brazil's social inequality without first examining the country's labor regimes. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the unemployment rate in Brazil had only increased continuously since 2012, but in 2021, the country reached the regrettable percentage of 14.4% — equaling approximately 15 million jobless people. To accompany this statistic, nearly 40% of the labor force, approximately 34.2 million people, find themselves fettered in the informal economy. In other words, a significant percentage of Brazilian workers are without a formal contract, legal entity registration, or any regular remuneration.

Race and gender are two additional categories for which Brazilian workplace inequality is exacerbated. According to a study led by the Brazilian Federal Institute of Geography and Statistic, White workers have 74% higher income on average compared to Black and Brown people, an official ethnic category used in Brazilian censuses to refer to mixed-race residents. This is a startling percentage because, according to the

same institute, the Brazilian population is composed of 54%, or a majority of, Black residents. The survey also revealed that earnings differentiation is further pronounced when examining the occupations and salaries of women, who are commonly concentrated in domestic activities such as child and household care. For instance, the average Brazilian Black woman currently receives approximately 44.4% of the average income of White men, who are the top occupants of the country's wage scale.

To better comprehend this scenario, HPR spoke with João Renda Leal Fernandes, labor judge at the Regional Labor Court in Rio de Janeiro, and former visiting researcher at Harvard Law School. Fernandes argued that "Brazil has a great challenge to include a social protection system for a range of still excluded workers." Even though the legislation granting labor rights in the country dates back to the 1940s, over the years a "trend of precariousness in labor relations" has been evident. The judge added that the last profound change in the Brazilian labor legislation — the 2017 Brazilian Labor Reform — only brought more laxity to employment contracts and fostered the loss of historically acquired workers' rights, causing more volatility of hiring and thus employee instability.

Under the vindication of more contractual freedom and labor modernization, the 2017 reform was mostly deleterious to the employees and reinforced patriarchal traditions in the social environment. In the case of collective labor agreements — those negotiated directly between labor unions and companies — Fernandes contended that the reform made it possible to renounce infra-constitutional workers' rights (those rights prescribed in laws below the constitution according to the laws hierarchy). This possibility of suppressing rights, according to Fernandes, is a patent and unreasonable "social regression in Brazil."

Another example of this social regression/employment instability is the new form of labor contract created in 2017, titled the Intermittent Labor Contract. The intermittent or sporadic contract allows a company to hire an employee to work occasionally and pay them for the period of execution of that activity. The hired worker stays at the mercy of the employer, awaiting their call to perform the activity without payment for the period that they remain inactive. For Fernandes, this new modality has brought unpredictability to a substantial population of Brazilian workers and is especially hazardous for Brazilian women, who work on average 7.5 hours more than men owing to their household duties. "For instance, when a woman with children, even newborns, is hired as an intermittent worker, she ends up being dependent on her contractor," Fernandes said. Rather than organize her family life and household responsibilities around a reliable schedule, this system of work forces women to stay on call for inconsistent job opportunities. "What about her children?" Fernandes asked. "Will they be left alone unpredictably when the employer decides to call her to execute her activities?"

Despite the present-day difficulties faced by a majority of Brazilian workers, Fernandes said he was optimistic about the country's future labor force, but only if several significant alterations are made, particularly those which promote equality for women and Black people in the labor force. According to the judge, one very positive social achievement in the past few years, unlike the Labor Reform, was a piece of legislation passed in 2013 focusing on domestic maids, a well-populated class of workers/laborers in Brazil who fulfill various roles including house cleaning, babysitting, and cooking. This new legislation, called "PEC das domésticas" guaranteed many labor rights and benefits to domestic maids. In the spirit of such a piece of legislation, Fernandes argued that Brazil must be more attentive to workers' claims when enacting new statutes targeting a more inclusive labor market for all people. Furthermore, Fernandes expressed a desire to see more people of marginalized identities occupying political positions, taking on executive officer roles, and earning more equitable wages in the next several years.

The Disproportionate Access to Education

Brazil's labor system, however, is not the only aspect of national infrastructure which actively reinforces the country's social, racial, and gender inequality. The country also presents a dichotomous educational reality, which can prove disastrous to opportunities for individuals, particularly young people, to broaden their socioeconomic horizons and build generational wealth. After all, education is internationally recognized for being one of, if not the most, successful avenues through which an individual can break the cycle of poverty and attain greater financial and societal freedom. However, if the majority of educational programs are confined to the elite, it becomes very challenging for those who most need upward mobility to accomplish these socioeconomic shifts.

Particularly for Brazil, in stride with many other developing nations, education seems to be structured to exclude young people living in poverty, especially those located in areas commonly referred to as the "slums." According to the Brazilian Geography and Statistic Institute, in 2019, 40% of Brazilians over 25 years old did not have primary education, and 6.8% of the national population (11 million people) aged 15 and over were still illiterate. Furthermore, the institute found that illiteracy was around 2.5 times higher among Black Brazilians compared to their White counterparts, as the left-side graph indicates below. Varying levels of access to higher education also reflect concerning disparities in educational opportunity, with only 25.2% of young Brazilians aged between 18 and 24 currently attending or having already completed a collegiate degree. A deeper dive into disparate levels of education reveal the racial undertones — while only 18.3% of Black youth are enrolled in college, this percentage is nearly doubled at 36.1% for their White counterparts.

As illustrated by the right-side graphic above, educational access also differs among the five geopolitical regions in the country. While the south and southeast regions of the country, which historically possess more developed urban areas, display better levels of literacy; the Northeast area, one of the neediest regions in the country, houses half of all illiterate countrymen, with around 6.2 million people. This educational disparity is also visible within large cities, where the most educated people live a few miles from the neediest population.

Seeking to understand these educational abysses within the Brazilian metropolises, HPR spoke with Renan Ferreirinha, Harvard '17, current Secretary of Education for the city of Rio de Janeiro, home of nearly seven million Brazilians. Ferreirinha reaffirmed the importance of education for social change and detailed his administration's commitment to it. "I have an irreducible defense for prioritizing education, especially public education," he commented. Curiously, Rio has the largest municipal network of public schools in Latin America, which expresses the great challenge the Secretary has at hand. "Education should be the most potent tool to fight inequality, but, in Brazil, oftentimes, it ends up being a promoter of disparities."

For Ferreirinha, the school is an excellent institution for the instruction and formation of the individual, not only in terms of knowledge, but also in terms of social interaction, psychological support, and adequate nutrition. "For many of our [Rio's] children, the only decent meal they have a day is at school," he commented. Therefore, being such an important space of human development, schools must be kept in full operation by devoted politicians. Ferreirinha argues that the guarantee of educational opportunities for all should be an undoubtful premise for Brazilian statesmen, and "the policies need to go beyond rhetoric." Instead, he argues, "decisions are needed to prioritize education in fact and not only in the prism of ideas and intentions."

With respect to the challenge of making overall society concerned about the importance of education, Ferrerinha says that this happens because "education is not an open fracture" that bothers citizens on a daily basis. "If the person suffers urban violence," he explained, "or does not have access to a good hospital, he becomes angry easily because this is a problem he witnesses." When it comes to education issues, there is a totally different approach. "Nobody wakes up in the morning thinking that if he had more knowledge, he would have more opportunities, or if he knew all the mathematical operations, he could perform a better job." Ferrerinha argues that concerning education, the impact can only be seen in the long run, since "it is one of the best tools to enable social inclusion and equality, better wages, et cetera."

According to Ferreirinha, Rio still has a rich educational network with incredible projects, such as those promoting the recognition of the indigenous population, the importance of African ancestry, and the care of nature. However, they have needed to be better managed for a long time. Ferrerinha states that his administration — which started in January 2021 — soon sought to create audits and metrics to assess the performance of these social-educational projects and initiatives to identify what is working and what is not. Ferreirinha continues to advocate for more resources and better management in the field of education, especially in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ferrerinha said that Rio was one of the main cities that prioritized educational professionals for vaccination and provided them with the best protection materials, allowing schools to operate as safely as possible. However, Ferrerinha warns that he has always been against the early re-opening of businesses and schools during the apex of the pandemic, a position that was disputed by many Brazilian government officials. During

his time serving as a deputy for the Rio de Janeiro State in 2020, Ferreinha voted against the premature opening of the entire city. The problem, he explained, is that “Brazil had twice as much time with schools closed” compared to countries around the globe. “Schools must be open before our bars and pubs, that must be the logic.” Ferreirinha stated, “We do not have the right to fail with our children.” With closed schools, many young Brazilians who would otherwise be in the classroom found themselves with open doors to job informality, crime, and teenage pregnancy.

For all Brazilian regions to have better access to education, it may be useful for the government to observe successful practices abroad or even in specific Brazilian areas. As Ferreirinha explains, in several Brazilian states, such as Ceara, Espírito Santo, there is a salutary tradition of forming experienced educational managers and school principals, which could be implemented nationwide. Likewise, in Scandinavian countries, there is the political custom of having hyper-qualified teachers with at least a master’s degree and high salaries in public schools. Thus, Brazil could use those effective practices in order to boost the educational system, the Secretary argues.

In the words of Ferrerinha, “No path is more promising than that of knowledge.” For this reason, his largest dream is to see Brazil as a reference in the educational field, with children mastering the necessary skills of the 21st century — creativity, innovation, critical thinking, group work, and entrepreneurship. “Brazil is a country of creative and resilient people,” Ferrerinha stated. “We need to equip ourselves with this ability to keep fighting inequality.”

To comprehend the disparity in education empirically, the HPR spoke with a law student from Rio. Gabriella Batista dos Santos, LL.B candidate at Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and a volunteer teacher at Mais Nós, a social organization that provides free course preparation for students seeking to pursue a college degree, regretted the educational chasm she witnesses in Rio. The organization is located in one of the poorest regions of Rio de Janeiro, a neighborhood usually referred to as a “favela,” one of the greatest portraits of Brazilian socioeconomic inequality. This neighborhood, named Complexo do Alemão, is a highly violent region in the city with a percentage of one and a half gunfights per day, according to Amnesty International.

In her experience as a writing teacher for the course — which welcomed more than 40 young students in the last two years — Batista dos Santos said that she met “incredible people with a lot of potential who were truly able to go to great universities, but who could not keep their studies.” Batista dos Santos cited reasons including criminality, little to no internet access, and an obligation to work and support their households as key explainers of their inability to continue their education. A law student herself and one of the first people in her family to be accepted to a prestigious university, Batista dos Santos recognizes the advantages of education and even inspired her mother and grandmother to enroll in college shortly after her acceptance.

The law student argued that increasing educational access for underprivileged Brazilians, including inhabitants of the Complexo do Alemão, is as crucial for the academic community as it is for the disenfranchised individuals themselves. Some of her students who were accepted into renowned universities, she added, exemplify this reasoning. Due to their plural and distinct experiences, these students were able to contribute singular insights to university research and return to their communities to promote desperately needed social improvements. Batista dos Santos said that unfortunately, success stories of educational access and achievement remain exceptions to the Complexo do Alemão environment. She emphasized that young people from these communities composed of majority Black residents are exposed to a host of tribulations that thwart their attendance at school. “The Black individual coming from the favelas is always silenced and forgotten,” Batista dos Santos said. “He or she is faced with an accumulation of barriers that prevent him/her from succeeding and seeking to change the status quo.”

Complexo do Alemão is no stranger to crime and violence. Batista dos Santos’s students are often unable to physically attend class due to shootings occurring outside their homes or occurrences of domestic violence within their households. These tragic realities, Batista dos Santos said, prove the existence of a social mechanism which actively hinders the neediest people from attending school, securing stable jobs, and fostering social and financial transformation within their communities, eerily reflective of the structure of Black slavery, which lasted for centuries within the country. One of the manifestations of this mechanism, which for Batista dos Santos is one of the greatest difficulties in broadening educational access, is the inequitable public safety policies and police customs in poor communities. According to the latest Brazilian Yearbook of Public Security published in 2019, Black people represented 75% of Brazilian deaths in police actions in the country. Batista dos Santos argued that, over the years, the government has reinforced rather than challenged racially-motivated police brutality through “false public security policies responsible for the death of more and more Black people from the ghetto.”

Against the backdrop of these societal inequities, Batista dos Santos said the most promising solution towards improving educational opportunity in the country’s most destitute communities is to improve public safety policy and to invest in secondary public schools. These measures, she added, would at least begin to bridge the country’s current educational abyss between wealthy and underprivileged classes. Batista dos Santos concluded that her biggest desire is to see her students graduating and becoming respected professionals committed to changing Brazil, transforming the reality of the favelas, and empowering the underprivileged children who live in these neighborhoods. “I would like to see young people from the favelas having a chance to freely dream as White and rich kids do today,” she said. “Nowadays, it seems that they just care about surviving amidst the violent chaos in which they live.”

The Complex and Unfair Tax System

Notwithstanding each issue explored above, perhaps the apex of the inequality in Brazil lies in another institutional issue, one which, in theory, should cure or at least mitigate the country’s massive income disparity. This factor is the Brazilian tax system. Complex, obsolete, maladjusted, and unfair, it keeps resources centralized in the hands of the richest citizens and corporations rather than working to redistribute capital to those who most desperately need it.

The complexity and inaccessibility of the Brazilian tax system frequently discourage foreign investors in two key ways. First, due to the extraordinary time and money spent on tax compliance or fulfilling all tax obligations — including submitting a tax return within a stipulated period and correctly stating income and deductions — as specified by the law. This intricacy makes Brazilians spend an average of 1,501 hours a year trying to comply with their tax obligations. According to the OECD rank, Brazil is home to one of the least efficient tax systems in the globe, ranked the fifth hardest country to pay taxes. Second, this intricacy causes a giant degree of litigation between taxpayers and the tax authority, with an amount equivalent to 75% of the national GDP involved in tax claims in Brazil.

Furthermore, the country continues to operate under a predominantly regressive model based on consumption taxation, or indirect taxes. In such a regressive or indirect model, according to the Economic Times, “there is an inverse relationship between the tax rate and taxable income. The rate of taxation decreases as the income of taxpayers increases,” causing a disproportionate collection of taxes from poor people rather than their affluent counterparts.

Unlike consumption taxation, income and wealth taxes conceptually generate a more progressive structure — the one where the average tax burden increases according to the income ladder, demanding more from the richest segments. However, this apparently fairer kind of taxes on income and wealth does not constitute the main source of revenue in Brazil, representing only 22% of the total tax collections in Brazil — approximately half of the 40% average for OECD countries.

João Rafael L. Gândara de Carvalho, a longtime tax lawyer associate at the law firm Pinheiro Neto Advogados, elaborated on such important concerns regarding the tax system. For Carvalho, regressive consumption taxes is an urgent issue, because it overcharges the poorest citizens, many of whom spend almost all of their money in the consumption of goods and services. “It is not that the richest are not taxed in Brazil,” Carvalho explained. “Indeed, they are a lot, but as they do not spend virtually all their wealth on consumption, they end up not being as impacted by the collection of taxes on consumption as the poorest classes are.”

Carvalho also clarified that the country’s extensive overall tax burden — which at present-day is the highest among all the BRICS countries (an acronym for emerging nations Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) — is not the largest problem at hand, arguing that what may really be fundamental for a more egalitarian society is how the collected wealth is being managed. In other words, the question of how the government

is redistributing all of the collected funds to Brazilian society and its various populations is essential. One possible way the government could reallocate money is through improvements in social capital, such as education and health.

For Carvalho, the tax system's complexity and lack of transparency only favor the maintenance of this unequal status quo. The country's poorest residents usually have little comprehension of how much tax is imposed on each product, thus they remain unaware of the disproportionate amount they pay in consumption taxation compared to their wealthier counterparts. As explained by Carvalho, there exists "a false impression for the neediest people that they do not pay much taxes here, which is totally unreal."

Following this logic, increased fiscal clarity and simplicity may encourage citizens to question the need for this high tax burden and even lead them to demand fairer taxation from authorities. "Transparency and simplicity are mandatory for a more conscious and fairer society," he concluded.

Despite the country's many initiatives to rethink its present system, Carvalho said there has always been a lack of political harmony among governmental levels including federal, state, and municipalities regarding the collection of taxes. Currently, there are a number of reform proposals being discussed among members of the Brazilian parliament, some of which may be very positive. However, without key revisions towards clearer and more general rules, it will be difficult to reform the national norms which often generate more distortions in the system, and thus promote structural inefficiency and inequality.

The Last Few Years and the Expectation for the Future

All these unfavorable institutional circumstances are responsible for propagating inequality in the country. However, it is necessary to recognize recent efforts to combat the issue, including efficient public initiatives to confront systemic inequality in the country. Also necessary is the question of whether these projects can be used by future generations as starting points to mitigate the problem.

There may be no one better to answer this query than Ricardo Paes de Barros, Ph.D. in Economics from the University of Chicago and former Under-Secretary of the National Secretariat for Strategic Affairs between 2011 and 2015.

Paes de Barros was one of the technical creators of a large social program to reduce poverty in Brazil, called Bolsa Família — in English, Family Allowance — formed during the Lula administration, which lasted between 2003 and 2010. Bolsa Família is a federal assistance program that provides direct income transfers to poor households throughout the country, seeking to guarantee these families access to food, education, and health.

In 2008, the newspaper The Economist defined Bolsa Família as an "anti-poverty scheme invented in Latin America [that] is winning converts worldwide." In 2006, the Center for Political Studies of the Getulio Vargas Foundation published a study showing that there was a sharp reduction in the number of people in poverty in Brazil between 2003 and 2005, with many individuals attributing this reduction to the program. In 2020, the cash-transfer program aided more than 13 million Brazilian families and paid an average of $34 per month, in a country where the minimum wage is $190 per month.

When asked what institutional weaknesses Brazil faced in the last few years despite the creation of such an incredible assistance program, Paes de Barros said that though Brazil was on a path to reduce poverty until 2012, the country went astray from that date onwards. This downward trend is especially visible in the imbalance between wages and productivity among Brazilians.

"In an attempt to reorganize ourselves, we lost our way," Paes de Barros said. The economist referred to the instability arising from several political and social changes like former president Dilma Rousseff's impeachment procedure in 2016, the then-vice president Michel Temer's entry into power, the 2018 Bolsonaro victory, and finally, a terrible and unpredictable pandemic that took the lives of hundreds of thousands of Brazilians. All these historical events, Paes de Barros argued, contributed to Brazil's loss of direction and focus on fighting economic disparity.

"If we are not constantly and fiercely trying to reduce [inequality and poverty], we don't win the fight," Paes de Barros said. "It is not by standing still that it will disappear" from Brazil. The economist underscored that even in an economic recession such as the one resulting from the pandemic, there is no reason to accept inequality. "If you want to reduce inequality, you need bold public policies for that," even in a time of the global pandemic, Paes de Barros said.

In a panel at the 2021 Brazil Conference at Harvard and MIT, Paes de Barros raised the problem of lacking political projects on how to correctly use capital to improve the population's life in Brazil. However, he warns that when it comes to inequality, it goes beyond that. "Before the project, there must be a commitment in Brazilian civil society; but there does not seem to be a clear will from our society today" to solve this inequality quandary, Paes de Barros said. Thus, it is quite impossible to make bold public policies become true without any clear intention from Brazilian society towards reducing poverty. In other words, without a collective agreement and commitment to lessen poverty, governmental projects will have little to no impact.

In addition, Paes de Barros highlighted that the fight against inequality and poverty in a large country like Brazil must begin locally. That is, there must be a capillarity (adaptability and extension) in the public policies concerning this topic to make the change in each diverse community. Such an extensive project, Paes de Barros argued, calls for "the joint participation of state, federal and municipal governments and civil society," yet this collaboration has not been seen in the last few years. This capillarity is essential for the government to understand what the indigent population needs; this is a key feature to any successful program of diminishing inequality.

Paes de Barros said that the program Brasil sem Miséria, Brazil without Misery, an extension of the Bolsa Família program created during Dilma's administration in 2011, could implement this capillary collaboration between federal and state level, but it failed to progress past the municipal level, hindering its ability to reduce poverty on a national scale. Nevertheless, the infrastructure provided by both Bolsa Família and especially Brasil sem Miséria is still a powerful tool for the next generation's programs. "In theory, we already had 250,000 local agents in the communities, we also had the Reference Centers for Social Assistance at the local level," Paes de Barros said.

In this regard, it is worth mentioning that, during this long investigation and after the conversation with Paes de Barros, the current President Jair Bolsonaro's administration, with the approval of the Congress, replaced Bolsa Família with another cash-transfer program entitled "Auxílio Brasil." This newly deployed policy promises to assist more households and raise families' payments; however, it has been receiving harsh criticism on its cost, prompting the government to increase further its budget prediction to support it. For the time being, it is not clear whether this program will be able to decrease inequality in the country, although the expertise and network inherited from the program conceived by Paes de Barros are already serving as a step towards its success.

Indeed, as the economist emphasizes, any institutional problem, such as those described in this piece, may only be ameliorated when civil society — as a collectivity made up of common citizens and organizations independent from the government — becomes more attentive to the unequal status quo and supports political projects that really mitigate such a problem. As mentioned earlier, there must be a conjoint commitment towards reducing the economic disparity in the social environment — one that involves not only politicians but also the polity.

Although the interviewees of this article were diverse in background and identity, all agreed that, in any given field, there must be a genuine desire from Brazilian civil society to overcome inequality. This desire can be reflected in many aspects of everyday life, whether it is by denouncing daily inequalities through various outlets and platforms, researching and ascertaining whether some candidate has fulfilled his campaign promises, engaging in local residents' associations, or even casting one's ballot for the next presidential candidate. If the people of Brazil remain steadfast to this shared goal, the visionary society described in the constitution may someday become a reality.