

“Bolsa Família in the Headlines: An Analysis of the Media’s Treatment of Conditional Cash Transfers in Brazil”

Summary of Preliminary Results, April 1, 2008

Study by Kathy Lindert (World Bank) and Vanina Vincensini (Consultant)¹

Summary of Main Points

- Preliminary results of a study by researchers at the World Bank finds an important contribution of the media in promoting debate about the concept and implementation of conditional cash transfers in Brazil.
- The study seeks to analyze the coverage, content and flavor of the debate in the press about the concept and implementation of conditional cash transfers in Brazil. The motives behind the study are to contribute to an understanding of the public debate (as reflected and promoted in the media) about this type of social policy instrument, given its large potential to reduce poverty and inequality and the replication of this type of instrument in many countries around the world.
- More than 6,000 articles from six newspapers (national and regional) were catalogued and analyzed by World Bank researchers to evaluate how these programs were treated by the press over a six year period. The study seeks to analyze the overall debate about these programs in the press, but does not attempt to analyze or identify specific editorial lines of specific newspapers.
- Preliminary Findings: Macro Perceptions of Conditional Cash Transfers in the Press:
 - The study highlights the important role of the media in promoting debate about the concept and implementation of conditional cash transfers in Brazil. The study finds extensive and increasing coverage and visibility of these programs, with an average of one article per day per newspaper by 2006.
 - Overall, the articles adopt a favorable tone towards the concept of conditional cash transfers (70% of all articles), though there is more criticism of the challenges faced in implementing the programs (even when favorable to the concept). Only a small share of articles were critical of both the concept and the implementation of the programs (6% overall), with the remaining share reporting without any tone (informational articles).
 - As with all flagship social programs, elections tend to bring increased scrutiny. The preliminary findings of the study do suggest increased scrutiny and criticism of conditional cash transfers in advance of all three elections observed during the study period: (a) the presidential elections of 2002 (covering the Bolsa Escola Program under the Fernando Henrique administration); (b) the municipal elections of 2004 (covering the Bolsa Família Program under the Lula administration); and (c) the presidential elections of 2006 (covering the Bolsa Família Program under the Lula administration).

¹ The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this study summary are preliminary. They are also entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the opinions of the World Bank, its Board of Directors, or the countries it represents. Moreover, these findings are the result of a research study and have no links with the World Bank’s direct engagement with the Bolsa Família Program or with the BFP itself. The findings are largely descriptive – based on the readings of texts in the press, without cross-references to the actual program developments except in a broad macro sense.

- Preliminary Findings: Press Treatment of Design and Implementation Issues:
 - The media played an important role in reporting on both the challenges and improvements to conditional cash transfer programs in Brazil. For example, the press reported extensively on the operational challenges faced by the program during the institutional transition in 2004 – and adopted a more critical tone that year. In subsequent years, the tone of press articles became more favorable as the government made improvements to the program and its systems.
 - A large share of articles focused on the issues of the registry, targeting and payments. A significant share of these articles focused on operational aspects, such as institutional roles, eligibility criteria, recertification, etc. The press also reported on the targeting accuracy of the program, and articles mentioning errors of inclusion of the non-poor were more frequent than articles reporting on errors of exclusion of the poor.
 - Both the government and the press played an important role in reporting on allegations of fraud and systems for controlling fraud in these programs. It is important to note that all transfer programs experience a certain share of errors (unintentional) and fraud (intentional). The press articles did distinguish between errors and fraud, though these terms were also sometimes used interchangeably.
 - The debate in the press highlighted the importance of the existence and monitoring of conditionalities for two reasons: (a) their structural role in reducing poverty in the long-term; and (b) their political role in reducing perceptions of assistencialismo. The tone of the articles became more favorable as monitoring of conditionalities improved.
 - A small but increasing share of articles has highlighted perceptions of the potential for “grant dependency.” Articles emphasize that conditional cash transfer programs should incorporate design features to reduce the potential for grant dependency. The main interpretations of “portas de saída” mentioned in the press refer to efforts to help promote emancipation from *poverty* not exit from the *program* (e.g., via time limits). The main examples of “portas de saída” cited in press articles include: youth/adult education/literacy programs, job training, and micro credit.
 - A small but increasing share of articles has asserted that conditional cash transfers are “assistencialista.” The main reasons offered in the articles for accusing conditional cash transfers of being “assistencialista” include: (a) perceptions that they create grant dependency; (b) perceptions of lack of monitoring of conditionalities; and (c) perceptions of clientelism. The main reasons offered in press articles for defending conditional cash transfers as not being “assistencialista” include: (a) that they represent the rights of citizens; and (b) that the existence of conditionalities reduces assistencialismo.

General Objectives of the Study

- Preliminary results of a study by researchers at the World Bank finds an important contribution of the media in promoting debate about the concept and implementation of conditional cash transfers in Brazil.
- “Conditional cash transfers” have represented an important instrument for social policy at the federal level since they were first launched under the Government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso in 2001 (e.g., the Bolsa Escola, Bolsa Alimentação Programs) and then consolidated under the Government of President Lula in 2003 under the flagship “Bolsa Família Program.”
- The objectives of the study are to understand what is the coverage, content and “flavor” of the debate in the press regarding the evolution of conditional cash transfer programs in Brazil. The study seeks to understand the nature of this debate in the press at two levels: (a) the “macro level,” looking at overall coverage, visibility and tone of the media’s treatment of these programs; and (b) the “micro level,” examining the media’s treatment of “hot-button” topics related to the design and implementation of the programs (such as coverage, targeting, registry, payments, fraud and fraud control, conditionalities, and grant dependency and graduation).
- The motives behind the study are to contribute to an understanding of the public debate (as reflected and promoted in the media) about this type of social policy instrument, given its large potential to reduce poverty and inequality and the replication of this type of instrument in many countries around the world.
- More than 6,000 articles from six newspapers (national and regional) were catalogued and analyzed by World Bank researchers to evaluate how these programs were treated by the press over a six year period (covering the pre-reform programs of Bolsa Escola, Bolsa Alimentação, Vale Gas, and Cartão Alimentação from 2001-03, and the Bolsa Família program from 2004-06).
- The study seeks to analyze the overall debate about these programs in the press, but does not attempt to analyze or identify specific editorial lines of specific newspapers.
- The media analysis is one of three studies in a trilogy of World Bank research to document the experience of conditional cash transfers in Brazil. The other two studies in this trilogy include: (a) an already-published technical paper on the operational aspects of the Bolsa Família program; and (b) a forthcoming technical paper on the impacts of conditional cash transfers over the past decade in Brazil.²

Basic Methodology

- The study catalogued 6,531 articles over the period from 2001-06. Of these, 1,991 articles were specifically focused on the discussion of conditional cash transfer programs, and 4,540 articles mentioned the programs but in the context of other focus topics (“mere mention articles”).

² (a) Lindert, Kathy et. al. , (May 2007). “The Nuts and Bolts of Brazil’s Bolsa Família Program: Implementing Conditional Cash Transfers in a Decentralized Context.” Social Protection Working Paper No. 0709, the World Bank; (b) de la Brière, Bénédicte, et. al., (forthcoming 2008). “Bolsa Família’s Quiet Revolution: A Survey of the Impacts of Conditional Cash Transfers in Brazil.” Forthcoming Social Protection Working Paper, the World Bank.

- For each article, the study classified the tone of the article as what would be the reader would “take away” from the overall article (headline plus text) in terms of its tone vis-a-vis (a) favorability or criticism of the overall concept of conditional cash transfers as an instrument for social policy; and (b) favorability or criticism of the implementation of these programs. In doing so, the authors established four categories of tone: (a) “no tone” articles in which the article was for information only, with no tone expressed towards either the concept or implementation of conditional cash transfers; (b) “favorable” articles in which the overall text was favorable to both the concept and the implementation of these programs; (c) “ambiguous” articles in which the article was favorable to the concept of these social policy instruments but critical of challenges in implementation of the actual programs; and (d) “critical” articles in which the overall text was critical of both the concept and implementation of these programs.
- For each article, the study also classified a series of other variables including basic identification variables (date, size and weight of the article, nature of the article, specific program mentioned, etc.), context variables, and variable related to the design and implementation of the program (coverage, value of the transfer, funding, registry/targeting/payments, fraud and fraud controls, conditionalities, grant dependency and graduation strategies, and perceptions of assistentialism).

Preliminary Findings

- Preliminary results suggest an important contribution of the media in promoting debate about the concept and implementation of conditional cash transfers in Brazil.
- **Coverage.** The media provided extensive coverage of conditional transfer programs in the printed press. With over six thousand articles in six years, coverage increased substantially such that by 2006, the six newspapers in the sample each averaged one article per day in each paper.
- **Tone of Coverage.**
 - The overall tone of the media towards conditional cash transfers was favorable, with close to 70% of all articles endorsing the concept of conditional cash transfers as an instrument of social policy (and this share remained fairly constant over the two study periods, from 2001-03 and 2004-06). Of these, about one third were critical of the implementation of the programs, even if they were favorable to the concept of the instrument.
 - Only 6% of articles published in the sample of newspapers were critical of both the concept and the implementation of conditional cash transfer programs during the study period. The remaining 25% of articles had no expressed tone.
 - As with all flagship social programs, elections tend to bring increased scrutiny. The preliminary findings of the study do suggest increased scrutiny and criticism of conditional cash transfers in advance of all three elections observed during the study period: (a) the presidential elections of 2002 (covering the Bolsa Escola Program under the Fernando Henrique administration); (b) the municipal elections of 2004 (covering the Bolsa Família Program under the Lula administration); and (c) the presidential elections of 2006 (covering the Bolsa Família Program under the Lula administration).
- **Debate about Design and Implementation: Hot-Button Topics**

- Overall, the media paid the most attention to the issues of coverage, targeting/registry and payments (each at 44% of all articles), followed by the issues of fraud and fraud controls (25%) and conditionalities (24%). The issues of grant dependency and graduation represented a small overall share of debate in the press, though attention to these issues has increased substantially over time, rising from just 2% of articles in 2001 to 22% by 2006. This contrasts with decreasing attention to the issues of the registry, targeting and payments (falling from half of all articles in the early years to just one third of all articles by 2006). This is an expected evolution of the debate about transfer programs, where initial attention focuses on “how people enter the program” and then later turns to the issue of helping the poor graduate from poverty so that they would not need to rely on transfers (a “second-generation” issue).
- **Cadastral (Registry, Targeting and Payments).**
 - The media played an important role in reporting on operational issues of institutional responsibilities for the cadastral, eligibility criteria, registry operations, recertification, and payments (averaging 44% of all articles over the six year period).
 - The tone of treatment of these issues fluctuated, becoming more critical in 2004 when the program faced intense scrutiny and criticism for perceived weaknesses in the registry, and then became more favorable as the government took steps to improve the registry in 2005 and 2006 (e.g., the introduction of the oversight network, recertification, and the introduction of cross-checks into the registry). These results highlight the important role of the media in reporting on both the challenges and improvements to the program.
 - In terms of targeting, transfer programs typically experience two types of errors: (a) errors of inclusion of the non-poor (due to measurement error or intentional fraud); and (b) errors of exclusion of the poor (due to measurement error or characteristics that make certain sub-populations particularly hard to reach). The preliminary results of the study suggest that the press has paid more attention to errors of inclusion of the non-poor than to the errors of exclusion of the poor.
- **Fraud and Fraud Controls**
 - Both the press and the government played important roles in reporting on fraud and fraud controls of conditional cash transfer programs. Overall, about a quarter of all articles reported on these topics.
 - The tone and frequency varied over time, increasing in frequency and criticism in 2004, when the program faced intense scrutiny and criticism for perceived weaknesses in oversight and controls, and then became more favorable as the government took steps to improve oversight in 2005 and 2006 (e.g., the introduction of the oversight network, improvements in monitoring of conditionalities). These results highlight the important role of the media in reporting on both the challenges and improvements to the registry.
 - It is important to note that all programs have some degree of fraud and errors, and technicians generally distinguish between fraud (intentional)

and errors (unintentional, administrative) in their monitoring of such programs. The preliminary results of the study suggest that the press also make such a distinction, though the terms are also often used interchangeably. The debate could benefit from increased awareness about the different types of fraud errors measured and monitored (training on the topic of fraud and fraud controls).

- The main types of fraud and errors reported by the press include: perceptions of clientelistic fraud, errors of inclusion of the non-poor, and duplicated benefits. Other lesser-mentioned types included official errors, errors of exclusion, and fraudulent interception of the beneficiary cards.
- The main informants of fraud in media reports were government sources (33%), followed by complaints that were registered by society via hotline numbers (0 800 numbers, another important channel for program transparency). The press also played an important investigative role in promoting debate on the issues of fraud and fraud controls, accounting for about the source of information in about a quarter of articles reporting on these topics.

○ **Conditionalities**

- The debate about the importance of conditionalities was also important in the press. Overall, about a quarter of all articles in the sample treated this theme.
- Of these articles, a significant and increasing share affirmed that respondents believe that both the existence and monitoring of conditionalities is an important aspect of the program (with half of articles covering the theme of conditionalities confirming their importance by 2004-06).
- The study found that two reasons were highlighted as primarily justifying the importance of conditionalities: (a) their structural role in reducing poverty and promoting human capital in the long run; and (b) their political role in reducing perceptions of assistencialismo.
- Press articles paid more attention to education conditionalities than health conditionalities.
- Press articles also paid increasing attention to the issues of monitoring, compliance and enforcement of conditionalities over time. The tone of media articles was less favorable in 2004, when accompaniment of compliance with conditionalities lapsed during the program and institutional transitions, and improved in 2005-06 as monitoring and enforcement of conditionalities improved.

○ **Dependency and Graduation**

- A small but increasing share of media articles has highlighted the potential for conditional cash transfers to create “grant dependency” and the need for a graduation strategy (“portas de saída”). This is an expected evolution of the debate about transfer programs, where initial attention focuses on “how people enter the program” and then later turns to the issue of helping the poor graduate from poverty so that they would not need to rely on transfers (a “second-generation” issue).

- Most mention of these issues in the press neither suggests that these programs inherently create or avoid grant dependency, but rather suggest that the programs should incorporate design features to avoid creating grant dependency (poverty traps).
- Interestingly, the main interpretations of “portas de saída” (exit doors) cited in the press refer to emancipation from *poverty* and not exit from the *program* (e.g., via time limits for beneficiaries). The main examples of “exit doors” cited in these press articles include: youth/adult education and literacy programs, job training programs, and micro credit.
- **Perceptions of Assistencialismo**
 - A small but increasing share of media articles has included the debate as to whether or not conditional cash transfers are “assistencialista.” While only 4% of articles mentioned this term in 2001, mention of “assistencialismo” increased to 20% of articles by 2006.
 - Overall, 80% of these instances accused the program of being “assistencialista” and about 30% of articles refuted this notion, defending that the program was not “assistencialista” (over the six year period).
 - The main sources accusing the programs of “assistencialismo” were journalists (the press) and politicians. The main defenders of the programs as “not assistencialista” were politicians and program managers.
 - The main reasons offered in press articles for accusing conditional cash transfers of being “assistencialista” included: (a) perceptions that they create welfare dependency; (b) perceptions of a lack of monitoring of conditionalities; and (c) perceptions of clientelism.
 - The main reasons offered in press articles for defending the conditional cash transfers as “not being assistencialista” included: (a) that they represent the rights of citizens; and (b) that the existence of conditionalities prevents assistencialismo.
 - The main tools suggested in press articles to reduce the “assistencialist potential” of conditional cash transfers included: (a) tools to help promote exit from poverty (portas de saída); (b) investments in education; and (c) monitoring of conditionalities.