

## **How Incrementalism Theory Explains the Successful Policy Making Process of the *Bolsa Família***

Márcio Calvet Neves

<http://lattes.cnpq.br/0938907697517481>

Recebido em: 04 de março de 2020

Aprovado em: 19 de agosto 2022

### **ABSTRACT**

The objective of this paper is to show how Linblom's incrementalism theory explains the policy making process of the *Bolsa Família*, the Brazilian Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) that was created in 2003. The argument is presented through an analysis of existing literature on incrementalism theory and then applying the theory to the *Bolsa Família* policy making process, from its origin until today. Variations between existing policies of the Cardoso government and President Lula's CCT were based on knowledge acquired with the ongoing policies and allowed for relevant incremental change, leading to the *Bolsa Família*'s long history of success in fighting extreme poverty. The policy process of the *Bolsa Família* empowered beneficiaries and policy transfer allowed other countries to replicate the Brazilian experience. Incrementalism theory also explains why current President Jair Bolsonaro, initially a fierce critic of the program, has now embraced it. Any changes that it will undergo will be incremental. Using the *Bolsa Família* as case study the conclusion is that incrementalism theory explains how policy evolves in polarized societies by eliminating the possibility of abrupt changes. The paper contributes to the body of work that argues that incrementalism theory is not outdated and can successfully explain contemporaneous policy making.

**Keywords:** Incrementalism theory. *Bolsa família*. Policy Making Process.

### **1. Justification**

This paper has the aim of analysing the policy making process of the *Bolsa Família* (family grant), the Brazilian Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) program created to solve extreme poverty that became a model for similar projects around the world. The main argument of the paper is that Linblom's incrementalism theory explains the program's policy making process. Although other policy concepts and frameworks are referred to in this study, the core of the paper's scope is to demonstrate how the conditions for policy change present itself and how incrementalism theory underpins relevant social policy change. It also argues that incrementalism explains how such relevant social policy change can be cemented in legislation and resist successive governments of opposing ideologies

The relevance of the paper is that it presents the theoretical background on the reasons why a policy that is created by a government of a certain ideology resists even when opposing governments with completely different beliefs come into power. This paper adds to those works that argue that incrementalism is a valuable theory to explain policy making, using the case of the *Bolsa Família* to show that policy making through a sequence of adjustments to existing policies can over time create permanent social policy change. It proposes to respond to Weiss and Woodhouse's (1992, p. 270) call that incrementalism must be freed from detractors' opinions that it is only able to implement small change.

The paper is structured as follows: it initiates with a short description of the scenario that led to creation of the *Bolsa Família*; it follows with a literature review of incrementalism theory; it then displays how the main characteristics of incrementalism theory were and continue to be present in the *Bolsa Família* policy making process; it proceeds with an opinion on why the *Bolsa Família* is a continued success and a critical step forward in the policy making process. It concludes with final remarks on how incrementalism may also explain recent and future modifications to the program that may even reduce the speed of making it reach its initial objective of completely eliminating extreme poverty, but without presenting the risk of program dissolution.

## **2. Background**

From 1995 to 2002 Brazil was governed by President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, from the Brazilian Social Democrat Party (PSDB), a centre right-wing party. Cardoso implemented a series of mainstream neoliberal reforms, such as privatizations, income tax reductions for the elite under the argument that it would stimulate productive investments and economic growth, and conservative monetary policies. The government's priority was economic stability and regaining foreign investor trust, which had been lost after more than a decade of hyperinflation and international loan defaults. This meant strict adherence to Washington Consensus policies and internal austerity programs, which initially had popular support given the trauma caused by the years of inflation and economic stagnation. It was Cardoso's success in reducing inflation when acting as Minister of Finance of his predecessor President Itamar Franco that catapulted him into an easy victory in the 1994 presential elections.

During the eight years of the Cardoso government the main opposition was the leftist Workers Party (PT). Its leader, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula) had himself run for president in 1989, 1994 and 1998, losing the last two elections to Cardoso. In 2002, with Cardoso's reforms under criticism, Lula finally was successful in his presidential bid with an electoral platform targeting the lower classes, with promises to eliminate hunger and extreme poverty. His constituents believed that such promises were credible and acting on it with rapidness would be essential for his triumph (Fenwick, 2016, p. 66). Therefore, a national policy focused at decreasing poverty levels was from day one the top priority of the incoming government.

Presidential will is not enough for an issue to be treated as a priority for all of society and other branches of government. A series of conditions are imperative for a problem to lead the agenda-setting: its magnitude needs to be evidenced; a focus event has to call attention to the issue; and, policy actors have to be knowledgeable of the reasons why the existing policies are not resolving the problem (Kingdom, 1995, p. 197, 198). All these conditions were present in 2003, the first year of Lula's government. The agenda was helped by the interest of the opposition to show that poverty was also their concern. Although the perception was that Cardoso's reforms had recuperated foreign credibility but done little for the lower classes, his allies were willing to prove that they had also left a legacy in poverty fighting (as further demonstrated in section 4.2). Additionally, a couple of focus events brought poverty to the spotlight: the first was the devaluation of the Brazilian currency in 1999, which resulted in loss of buying power for all Brazilians, including the poor (Fenwick, 2016, p. 63). The other was Lula's background, a former blue-collar worker who himself had suffered the consequences of extreme poverty as a youngster. Using the rationale that opportunities where agenda-setting windows open should not be neglected (Wu et al, 2018, p. 38), the new government pushed its program forward. Taking action on the first year of the presidential term avoided the risks of the poverty issue fading away, what could happen if people started to forget the electoral promises or simply returned to the position of accepting poverty as a natural consequence (Kingdom, 1995, p. 198). The pressure for the incoming government to face such a complex issue made the conditions ideal for all political and policy actors to act upon it, not only members of the executive and legislative branches, but also media, academics and civil society.

Leaders have great discretionary power on deciding how to frame the problem (Hoppe, 2010, p. 87) and the way the government's priority was framed was decisive in determining the appropriate policy making process for fighting extreme poverty. The incoming government could have chosen to face the structural conditions that generated poverty but, for reasons that will be explained in section 4.3 that was not the selected option. Poverty was framed as an isolated issue, making government, media and voters ignore the features of Brazilian economy, history and culture that resulted in such unequal social conditions. The problem was simply framed as 'how to reduce extreme poverty in Brazil?', ignoring its pillars. This paper argues that incrementalism theory also helps to explain why the problem was framed in such limited scope, allowing the new government to build on the existing policies of the former neoliberal government and refraining from institutional challenges and confrontation with the powerful elites. Even so, the task that the new PT government posed for itself was not of small magnitude.

Poverty in Brazil has traces of what can be defined as a 'wicked' problem: it is extremely complex, never definitely resolved and there is rarely consensus on the most suitable alternatives for it to be eliminated (Pencheva et al., 2018, p. 2; Head, 2008, p. 101). One of the main elements of 'wicked' problems is that they tend to be symptoms of other existing problems (Head, 2008, p. 102). That is exactly the case of poverty in Brazil, a problem with various roots that are embedded in the country's structure, such as the history with slavery, the exploitation of native Brazilians by the European colonizers, an extremely unfair tax system that privileges the rich, among other factors. The knowledge of this local environment is crucial to understand why incrementalism theory explains the PT's policy choice to face the poverty issue, given that some of the other policy alternatives would necessarily lead to conflict. Another aspect that is key to comprehend the option for the approach taken is the pressure that Lula was facing to quickly take public action on its main electoral promise. Although even before coming to power the government launched the so-called Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) program, the first months of 2003 passed without the initiative efficiently leaving paper. Under this scenario, the decision to build on existing policies created by his predecessor became a natural option. Therefore, in October 2003, still during the first year of his presidency, Lula launched the Bolsa Família, a CCT that would transform poverty indicators in Brazil and influence developing countries worldwide.

Lula was a two-term president that chose his elected successor, PT's Dilma Rousseff, who during her second term suffered a questionable impeachment process that many interpret as a congressional coup. She was replaced by her right-wing vice-president Michel Temer, who governed from 2016 to 2018. In 2018, Jair Bolsonaro, leader of the extreme right and a historic critic of the *Bolsa Família*, won the elections. After almost two years in power his stance on the program has changed completely, reinforcing how incrementalism theory is a cornerstone of the program's policy process and explains its success.

### **3. Incrementalism: Literature Review**

In his ground-breaking 1959 article Charles Lindblom established the basic attributes of incrementalism theory (Lindblom, 1959). According to Lindblom, given that complex policy issues have numerous potential solutions, the policy expert must unavoidably concentrate on limited options. The core of incrementalism is what he defined as the 'method of successive limited comparisons' whereby comparisons are restricted to policies that variate only marginally to policies already implemented and all other alternatives are discarded. Policy success would be determined by limiting the analysis only to what is incrementally different between one policy and another. The minor variations between existing and new policy is what allows incremental change (Lindblom, 1959, p. 83, 84). The theory is based on permitting the analyst to gain from knowledge acquired with ongoing policies, a crucial advantage to solve complex social problems, such as widespread poverty. The policy making process is characterized as an eternal series of modifications and not as an instant change. Further, acting on adjustments would also limit the chances of negative and unforeseen outcomes, since adverse effects would be easily identified and rectified. Incremental success caused by adjustments could be followed by new variations, leading to more change and success, so that policies would gradually evolve (Lindblom, 1959, p. 86). It is immediately apparent how incrementalism appeals to polarized societies since it eliminates the possibility of abrupt changes. Thus, consensus among actors with different opinions is one of the main characteristics of the theory. Naturally, this precludes social change from occurring rapidly, but, according to Lindblom, agreement between the various policy actors would be 'the only practicable test of the policy's correctness' (Lindblom, 1959, p. 84).

Incrementalism theory has passionate supporters and strong opponents. According to Hayes (2001, p. 3), as long as it is coupled with social interest incrementalism is the ‘superior and realistic’ form of policy making, since it recognizes the limits of human nature and involves persons and institutions with diverse views and knowledges, building on compromise that is essential for gradual development. The realistic aspect of incrementalism is seen as a strongpoint by many others, such as Sager, who bluntly states that instrumentalists focus on ‘getting things done in real life situations’ through consensus, even if this means that ends need to be altered (Sager, 1995, p. 131, 132). Weiss and Woodhouse (1992, p. 256) highlight that the fragmented policy making allows complex policy problems to be solved without all solutions being contemplated, also a pragmatic advantage.

The prevailing opinion among adversaries of the theory is that it is conservative, inefficient to implement rapid social change or substantial reform, serving to explain the preservation of status quo and benefit the constituted elites (Braybrooke, 1998, p. 312). The focus on consensus is instead reframed as a bargaining process in which the most powerful and organized groups prevail. Pal (2011, p. 37, 38) diminishes incrementalism as a form of policy making ‘at the margins’ where each small step needs to be negotiated and stresses that the consensus that it requires is not present in modern and polarized democracies of the current era. It would be an outdated theory in times of conflict.

The main features of incrementalism are easily identifiable by proponents and critics of the theory: no matter on which side of the debate a person is on it is difficult to avoid framing incrementalism as conservative policy making, since it certainly avoids institutional challenges and depends on policy continuity (Braybrooke, 1998, p. 328). As per favouring powerful elites, Weiss and Woodhouse (1992, p. 262) argue that such is a general characteristic of the social-political reality of modern liberal democracies and not specifically of incrementalism. Corroborating their opinion even Pal acknowledges that Lindblom did not disregard that powerful elites would have the upper hand in policy making and resist substantial social change. However, Lindblom believed that incrementalism would allow social change to be ‘smuggled’ in the process of adjustments (Pal, 2011, p. 35).

Drifting from the mainstream arguments of the debate on incrementalism, an interesting perspective on the possibility of it backing social change is presented by Goss

(2006, p. 146), according to whom the theory encourages public participation in the policy making process, given that people are only inclined to participate if they see that their involvement leads to change, even if incremental. Small changes to existing policies would thus gradually lead to more public participation, allowing for more social change.

The next section will demonstrate how a social policy developed using as basis the existing policy of an opposing government is able to produce substantial change by instituting administrative efficiencies, adjusting the program's budget and number of beneficiaries. It will do so by identifying the core features of incrementalism theory that were present in the *Bolsa Família* policy making process: (i) building on existing policies; (ii) limiting alternative policy solutions; (iii) using consensus for the policy success; and (iv) acknowledging that the problem can never be definitely resolved.

#### **4. How incrementalism theory explains the *Bolsa Família* Policy making Process**

##### ***4.1 Policy making Based on Incremental Changes to Existing Policies***

When the Lula government took power in January 2003 various CCTs were already in place. The main program for poverty alleviation was overseen by the Ministry of Education. The *Bolsa Escola* (education grant) was a CCT created in 1997 (Law 9,533/97), which linked the grant to school attendance. Cardoso's program initially provided R\$ 15 for each child attending school if the parent earned less than half the minimum wage, limiting overall grant to R\$ 45 per family. Funds were transferred from the federal government to municipalities that had a poverty rate lower than their state average. It improved school attendance and reduced child labour (Fenwick, 2016, p. 64) and its achievements made other ministries of the Cardoso government implement similar initiatives. The *Bolsa Alimentação*, created by the Ministry of Health, was aimed at pregnant and lactating women and families with young children (up to 6 years old). Amounts paid were in the *Bolsa Escola* range and conditional on mothers attending prenatal care and children following the yearly vaccination calendar. The other CCT was the *Auxílio Gás*, administered by the Minister of Mines and Energy, which paid R\$ 7.50 for families to buy cooking gas. When Cardoso left the government in December 2002 the situation was as follows: *Bolsa Escola* was being paid to 5.1 million families and total government expense with CCTs totalled USD 0.8 billion (Fenwick, 2016, p. 63). The PT government would consolidate all CCTs into a single program called *Bolsa Família* and

implement changes to the existing policies so that already by 2006, the end of Lula's first term, the new program would reach 11.1 million families and total CCT budget was expanded to US 2.2 billion (Melo, 2008, p. 163), providing grants to almost 100 percent of Brazilian families below the poverty line (Fenwick, 2016, p. 69).

Why did the new government decide to use CCT policies developed by a historic opponent (the PSDB party), who's chosen candidate had lost the election primarily because Cardoso was accused of ignoring the poor? There were certainly other possible public policies to address the poverty issue (see section 4.3 below), so why was the incrementalist approach to policy making taken? There are two fundamental reasons: in first place, the new government was pressed to promote and deliver on its electoral promise to fight poverty. In second, it was clear that the existing CCTs had potential and there was a lot of space for improvement. The programs had overlaps and administrative confusion to the point where one family received various benefits, while another in the same financial condition received none (Soares, 2011, p. 56). The solution to consolidate the existing programs was only natural. Thus, in October 2003 the *Bolsa Família* was launched. The core objectives are to reduce extreme poverty and eliminate hunger, but also securing access to health and education. There is a short-term objective, which is the fight against poverty and malnutrition, but it is also an inter-generational initiative which believes that by fostering education and preventive health the children of the poor will be provided with better conditions to grow and overcome poverty in the future (Coutinho, 2014, p. 45; Bither-Terry, 2014, p. 144). These underlying objectives are fundamentally the same of the CCTs existing under Cardoso.

The main changes to the existing policies were of administrative nature. If before the various CCTs were managed by three different ministries (Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Mines and Energy), leading to duplication of efforts, different registers and making beneficiaries face the bureaucratic hurdles repeatedly, the new program was led only by the newly created Ministry of Social Development, staffed with skilled servants (Hunter and Sugiyama, 2014, p. 833). Unification reduced costs and allowed for better management of conditionalities (Hall, 2006, p. 697). As Fenwick (2016, p. 68, 69) states, the *Bolsa Família* was designed to have 'one application method, one responsible local office, one payment and one federal registry' and its efficiency was proven in numbers, with the administrative cost of delivering the grant to a family estimated at only 6% of the disbursement.

The now single CCT was also reframed as an intergovernmental effort between federal government and municipalities, whereby federal technocrats examined poverty maps to determine the amount of grants that could be allocated to each location using targets established in conjunction with the World Bank (Bither-Terry, 2014, p. 149). Any municipality was eligible, as long as it established social control agencies to follow-up on the conditionalities, such as confirming children school attendance and that mothers followed prenatal care (Coutinho, 2014, p. 49). The municipal authorities assumed responsibility for registering the beneficiaries in a unified public IT cadastre (*Cadastro Único*), which needs to be updated at least every two years. From then on, the Brazilian government had access to the poverty status of all beneficiaries. Government showed a strong reliance on artificial intelligence and Big Data at a stage when such concepts were rare in the public sector. By using technology to acquire knowledge of its citizens and provide tailored and targeted assistance it anticipated what today is an important focus of academic work (Pencheva et al., 2018, p. 2). Another crucial incremental change related to technology was the payment mechanism: once enrolled in the program the beneficiary could receive the grant through electronic debit cards in any ATM or branch of the *Caixa Econômica Federal* (or simply, *Caixa*), a federal public bank with more than 3200 branches nation-wide (Exame, 2016), without any dependency on the local authorities. The payment process eliminated clientelism and decreased chances of corruption, extremely common in Brazilian social assistance programs until that point.

The incremental changes made clear that there was policy continuity between opposing governments (Melo, 2008, p. 162), resulting in a type of criticism that normally would be expected against governments that choose to follow such approach, especially in the case of a flagship program advertised as the main distinction between the new government and its predecessor. According to Morton (2014, p. 929), neither Lula, or even his chosen successor Dilma Rousseff, were successful in diverting from Cardoso's neoliberal agenda that underpinned the original CCTs, based on the logic that the beneficiary would use the grant to develop his or her own entrepreneurial goals. Others highlighted that the *Bolsa Família* simply adhered to World Bank safety nets for poverty, far from producing needed structural change to a highly unequal country such as Brazil (Hall, 2006, p. 696 and 703). On the other hand, the program was also criticized by part of the middle class, under the belief that it encouraged beneficiaries to live-off of the grants and abandon employment quests. Regarding this point, empirical research has

demonstrated that it has no impact on workforce participation, although in some situations it can lead beneficiaries to complement their work with informal arrangements instead of formal employment so that they are allowed to continue receiving grants (de Brauw et al., 2015).

Since its inception gradual change was implemented to increase the amounts of the grants and the threshold to request enrolment in the program. In October 2019 the threshold for enrolment was that the family have a per capita income below R\$ 178 per month. The amount of the benefit generally ranged from R\$ 89 to R\$ 372 per month, depending on various variables, such as poverty level and number of children in the family. It may exceed the R\$ 372 ceiling if the family has many children, so that a surplus is paid until the family reaches an income level of at least R\$ 89 per capita (Caixa, 2019).

#### ***4.2 Policy making Based on Consensus***

In a study on national insights and policy styles of representative democracies Howlett and Tosun (2018, p. 383) pointed-out that Brazil is a participatory democracy where the president has immense power, but policy is characterized by constant interaction with regional leaders, constraining the president's capability to push forward policies singlehandedly. Thus, consensus, a cornerstone of incrementalist theory, is an absolute necessity for congressional approval and building on existing programs of an opposing government had numerous advantages. One of them was to facilitate approval of the *Bolsa Família* by the Brazilian Congress, since in 2003 both the incoming PT party and the recently-turned-opposition PSDB party of former President Cardoso wanted to advertise paternity of the new and expanded CCT. An analysis of the discussions that took place in the House of Representatives on December 18, 2003, when the *Bolsa Família* law was taken to vote, shows how consensus was reached by building on the political interests of both parties. Representative Luiza Erundina, from the Brazilian Socialist Party – PSB, an ally of the PT, voted highlighting that the program was just a new method to manage and execute CCTs that already existed, bridging agreement with the PSDB opponents (*Diário da Câmara dos Deputados*, 2003, p. 68497). Accordingly, Representatives Walter Feldman and Wilson Santos, from Cardoso's PSDB, voted in favour arguing that that, in essence, these were just improvements to a network of social assistance that was developed by their party during the Cardoso governments (*Diário da*

*Câmara dos Deputados*, p. 68499 and p. 68559). The legislative amendments to the original text coming from both sides of the House added important provisions, such as the requirement that the *Bolsa Família* be paid preferentially to the women of the household (a strategy copied from microcredit programs in Asia) and the impossibility of reducing the amount of the grant (*Diário da Câmara dos Deputados*, p. 68483 and p. 68558). The congressional discussions show how political consensus was reached by parties of competing ideologies, although each one had their own reasons for pushing the law forward.

Consensus was not only fundamental for policy congressional approval, but beforehand played an integral part on the policy design. Soares (2011, p. 55) underlines how the *Bolsa Família* was shaped by the influence of different interest groups with competing opinions on how to tackle poverty. He separates the competing views into four different approaches: one focused on human development; another on education; a third constituted by the advocates of an unrestricted basic income to all Brazilians; and a fourth group comprising those who prioritized combatting starvation. The final design of the *Bolsa Família* is a consensus reached through deliberation backed by these diverse visions of social policy, not coincidentally an approach totally in line with what is suggested to be the best course of action to solve wicked problems (Head, 2008, p. 102).

#### ***4.3 Policy making Based on Limitation of Alternatives***

The PT government could have chosen to follow a more comparative analysis route of policy making (Dodd, 2013) given that the poverty issue was being or had been addressed by other countries. To exemplify a couple of alternatives, a more thorough examination of microcredit solutions could have been pursued. The Grameen Bank's action in Bangladesh was already a successful case in extreme poverty reduction with efficient government spending. The programs were targeted at extremely poor women, allowing families excluded from the financial system access to credit with low public subsidy and jointly allowing the beneficiaries entry into social programs such as literacy training and entrepreneurial development (Hashemi et al., 1996). Although there were conflicting views as to if such loans actually resulted in empowerment of the poor (Karim, 2008), this alternative would be in line with the neoliberal visions that were predominant in 2003, by allowing the needy to have access to funds without questioning the origin of

their deprivation (Baruah, 2010). Another alternative could have been to fight poverty addressing structural changes to the highly regressive Brazilian tax system, where the rich pay very few taxes on income and property, while the poor comparatively are subject to a high tax burden given that the system relies heavily on goods and services taxes. This form of taxation is constantly accused as being the main reason for inequality, with effective income tax rates for the top 0.01% earners at approximately 6% of their income, primarily because of tax planning that allows them to receive most income as tax free dividends (Morgan, 2018). The government could have opted to fight poverty by executing changes to the system that would approximate Brazil to countries with highly distributive tax policies such as Australia or the Scandinavian nations (Stewart, 2018).

However, both described options were discarded and in retrospect there seemed to have grounds for the government's pragmatic decision. As Wilder (2017) states, 'forcing a fit' to resolve domestic issues may not be the most efficient path forward, especially in the situation herein depicted, where the government was pressed to provide results quickly. Microfinance solutions would likely be viewed by the leftist supporters that elected Lula as an even greater surrender to the mainstream neoliberal answers for poverty reduction, based on self-help. On the other hand, deep structural tax reform would face fierce opposition from business, politicians and media, which could lead to a great battle for congressional approval. Neves (2019), when examining the resistance against dividend taxation, the main policy that leads to the increased inequality and income concentration at the top, argues that the instrumental, structural and ideational powers of the Brazilian elites are able to avoid that sound proposals reach a plenary vote in Congress. Therefore, the gradual approach of building on existing distributional policies was more realistic, another quality of incrementalism and a strategy backed by the teachings of academics such as Campbell (2002, p. 33), who prescribes that policies need not only to be economically feasible and supported by the State's administrative capacities, but also not be seen as a substantial threat to powerful interest groups and coalitions.

#### ***4.4 Policy making that does not aim to solve problem all at once***

Incrementalism theory states that complex problems are never solved with a single shot. Fittingly, the *Bolsa Família* decreased poverty levels but did not eliminate it

completely. There is still a long way to go before definitely resolving the issue (Bither-Terry, 2014, p. 155; Hall, 2006, p. 706). It was never envisioned as a structural solution with capacity to eliminate the social problem on a permanent basis (Hunter and Sugiyama, 2014, p. 841) and thus it depends on new steps to consistently and gradually produce positive social change. However, its success has allowed it to be maintained by governments of different ideologies, each of which continue to add on to the policy.

Not only Lula's chosen successor, President Dilma Rousseff, who increased funds allocated to the CCT, but also the political opponents that succeeded her. First, Michel Temer, who became president in 2016 after the controversial impeachment of President Dilma. Although during his short term Constitutional Amendment No. 95 was approved, limiting government expenses during a twenty-year period and reducing space for *Bolsa Família* expansion, he left government in 2018 preserving the level of investments (Lima, 2018). A surprising outcome given the expectation that the neoliberal coalition that backed the impeachment would reduce the program's reach.

The current President, Jair Bolsonaro, who as a candidate was a fierce critic of the *Bolsa Família*, kept the CCT and enacted Provisional Measure No. 898, dated October 15, 2019, which created a Christmas bonus for those on the grant. Although the government has consistently announced that it will relaunch the program with a new name and that it will reach more families, it is expected that the CCT will mostly keep the format that has been gradually developed by the prior governments.

Incrementalism theory also explains Bolsonaro's back and forth movements. Cancellation of the program when he assumed office was never on the table, but during his first year in government he was able to negatively limit its scope without substantially changing its structure. At the end of 2019 total amount of beneficiaries was calculated at 13.1 million people, a 10% reduction when compared to December 2018, and in February 2020 the number of potential beneficiaries waiting to be approved for the program was estimated at 1.7 million people and the budget for 2020 had been reduced by 12% (Rossi, 2020). The *Bolsa Família* is a program with high turnover, where families leave and enter the program monthly. By taking more time to accept new entrants the new government cut the number of beneficiaries and began to slowly implement its objective to reduce its budget, aligning the CCT with the austerity measures and less social assistance that were campaigned (Roubicek, 2020). However, COVID-19 switched the direction of the

incremental changes. Pressured by public opinion and cornered by Congress, Bolsonaro approved a temporary R\$ 600,00 monthly payment, not only to those that were already on the *Bolsa Família*, but to all others that lost income by virtue of the crisis and were part of the informal economy. The emergency CCT had immediate impact on Bolsonaro's approval ratings so that now any decrease in the *Bolsa Família* benefits is impossible. It may change its name, but its policy is permanent.

What this proves is that incrementalism theory does not assure the direction in which policy will move, but that changes will not be abrupt, as demonstrated by the fact that Bolsonaro has kept and should continue to keep the program's general structure.

## **5. Bolsa Família: a step forward for policy making**

The advancements that *Bolsa Família* evidences to the policy making process can be split into three major topics: (i) a step forward on providing evidence that incrementalism is a valid theory to explain the policy making process; (ii) a step forward in the process of empowering the beneficiaries of social public policy; (iii) a step forward in using policy transfer in the policy making process of CCTs.

### ***5.1 A Step Forward in Explaining the Policy Making Process with Incrementalism Theory***

The main contribution of the *Bolsa Família* to the policy making process was to present evidence that incrementalism may produce significant social change, contrary to what its critics argue. By building on existing policy but changing its administration and increasing its budget consistently over time the *Bolsa Família* resulted in consistent social change without confrontation with powerful political and economic actors. In the process it also showed how incrementalism may be a valid policy approach to use in the Brazilian social policy environment, which leaves little room for radical change given that many expenses are allocated in the Constitution, so that transformation with stability becomes a preferred policy route (Melo, 2008, p. 179). The political, social and constitutional environment were essential for the decision to build on the existing policies by creating innovative controls to improve the technical qualities of ongoing policies and effectively make a difference, although the core rationale of the existing policies developed by the

previous government were fully followed. The partnership between federal and municipal governments, the integrated data-base of poor citizens, the direct payment to beneficiaries through bank debit cards, the efficient management of conditionalities and the disclosure of the policy process to the beneficiaries (Coutinho, 2014, p. 55) were all improvements to existing policies that made a positive difference in the policy process. Lastly, as time goes by and new governments come into power the *Bolsa Família* case shows how incrementalism theory explains successful policy making in highly polarized societies. The program that was created by a left-wing government is now prioritized by one from the extreme right. Incrementalism explains not only why initially Bolsonaro refrained from enacting any abrupt changes to the program, but also its change in course due to social and political backlash reinforced by the events of COVID-19.

### ***5.2 A Step Forward in the Process of Empowering Beneficiaries of Social Public Policies***

According to Hunter and Sugiyama (2014) the *Bolsa Família* has made possible for low income individuals to regain dignity, self-confidence and sense of belonging. The policy process of the design of the conditionalities, based on a consensus reached between different interest groups, resulted in a non-punitive mechanism that allows for social inclusion and a feeling of empowerment. If a family does not abide by the conditionalities it can lose the monthly grant, but only if there is consistent non-compliance and after social assistance workers first attempt to help the family surpass the reasons that precluded it from following the requirements. Until then they continue receiving payments. One of original reasons for the success of the program was that applicants were immediately entitled to the benefits and poverty status and conditionalities were checked only later, giving the beneficiaries decision-making and participatory power (Morton, 2014, p. 926). This is very different from the poverty solutions in which the charitable nature prevails, such as those usually provided by international donors and NGOs, which end-up impacting negatively on self-determination, sense of citizenship and even local infrastructure, by transmitting to beneficiaries the idea that they are not legally entitled to basic rights and should instead rely and be thankful for charity (Farmer, 2008, p. 10; Pfeifer, 2013, Ferguson 2010, p. 179).

Through public campaigns where government makes beneficiaries aware that they are part of a State that is always present and that the *Bolsa Família* is merely providing them their constitutional right and not poverty-relief for second-class citizens the public becomes part of the policy making process. This also allow citizen reaction when new entries are congested, as is now the case. Such campaigns also give publicity to citizens about the responsibility of each government agency and the absence of local authorities' discretionary power, raising beneficiary engagement, an essential tool to solve 'wicked' problems (Head, 2008, p. 109). The direct payment to the beneficiary's bank account practically eliminated political manipulation and clientelism, an outstanding fact in a country plagued by corruption (Bither-Terry, 2014, p. 149; Sugiyama and Hunter, 2013, p. 55, 56). The ability for the poor to have cash in hand to spend in housing, clothing and food without depending on local authorities is crucial for emancipation and a highlight of the policy process (Morton, 2014, p. 927).

### ***5.3 A Step Forward in Using Policy Transfer in the Policy making Process of CCTs***

Policy transfer is a form of policy making that is a solid indication of the original policy's accomplishments. Morton (2014, p. 925), citing Ballard (2013), states that at least 41 countries had imitated the *Bolsa Família* by 2013. According to Leite et al. (2015), thanks to the work of policy analysts and politicians in the PT's Ministry of Social Development the *Bolsa Família* policy transfer to Africa became a flagship for cooperation in policy making between developing countries of the southern hemisphere, strengthening the partnership between Brazil and countries in Africa. From 2008 to 2013 the number of education related CCTs in Africa more than doubled while CCTs without conditionalities increased from 21 to 37 countries (The Economist, 2015). Howlett et al. (2018) examined the diffusion of the *Bolsa Família* to the Philippines, concluding that both domestic and international policy actors played a crucial part in the policy process, in line with studies that have concluded that policy transfer only takes place with the participation of politicians and public servants that took part in implementing similar projects in other jurisdictions (Fawcett Paul and Marsh David, 2012, p. 184). These cases of policy transfer evidence that the steps forward in the policy making process surpassed Brazilian boundaries.

## 6. Conclusion

Data and empirical studies on the *Bolsa Família* leave little doubt regarding its success. Evaluation from the International Food Policy Research Institute showed that the *Bolsa Família* was responsible for longer gestations, stronger newborns, increased immunization, a soar in school presence and reduction in inequality (Soares, 2011, p. 59). It was a crucial factor in reducing the number of poor in Brazil from 61 million to 39 million from 2003 to 2009 and in 2013 only 21.4% of the population lived in poverty, compared to approximately one third of the population in 1999 (Fenwick, 2016, p. 56). In October 2013 the program was awarded for its Outstanding Achievement in Social Security, by the International Social Security Association (IPEA, 2013). In 2015 the *Bolsa Família* had reached approximately 14 million families, reduced poverty by 28% since 2003 and its annual cost was estimated at R\$ 27 billion, which at only 0.5% of GDP was considered very low for the magnitude of the improvements (Solow, 2016; The Economist, 2015). *Bolsa Família* is still one of the largest CCT programs in the world, positively impacting the daily lives of approximately 50 million Brazilians (Caixa 2019) to the point of researchers stating that the physical difference between the underprivileged raised during the program and those raised before its enactment is visually flagrant (Morton, 2014, p. 926, 927). The *Bolsa Família* was built on ongoing policies to which it made incremental changes. It is a policy with proven success in making progress to resolve the problem that it was intended to solve, which is the existence of extreme poverty in Brazil. In the process of its design and approval it took steps forward in the policy making process to the point that its strength will allow it to survive recent strikes to its core objective.

This paper argued that the *Bolsa Família* policy process is explained by incrementalism theory, which means that it is constantly and gradually evolving. It is a critical step forward for Brazil not only in the results that it continues to deliver, but also in proving that incrementalism allows policy making to advance independently of the government that is in power, especially in politically polarized countries. Its impact is not limited to Brazil, given that other countries instituted similar CCTs, proving that the sometimes-criticized small steps of incrementalism can lead to an overall leap ahead in the public policy process. Regardless of the direction of the next developments, incrementalism theory will be able to explain the policy making process of future

adjustments to the *Bolsa Família*, a program that will outlast present and future governments. It may even change its name, but its essence will remain in policy.

## References

Baruah, B., 2010. NGOs in Microfinance: Learning from the Past, Accepting Limitations, and Moving Forward: NGOs in microfinance. *Geogr. Compass* 4, 979–992. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2010.00362.x>

Bither-Terry, R., 2014. Reducing Poverty Intensity: What Alternative Poverty Measures Reveal About the Impact of Brazil’s *Bolsa Família*. *Lat. Am. Polit. Soc.* 56, 143–158.

Braybrooke, D., 1998. Scale, Combination, Opposition: A Rethinking of Incrementalism, in: *Moral Objectives, Rules, and the Forms of Social Change*. University of Toronto Press, pp. 311–330.

Caixa, 2019. Caixa Econômica Federal. Last viewed 17 October 2019. Available at <http://www.caixa.gov.br/programas-sociais/bolsa-familia/Paginas/default.aspx>

Campbell, J.L., 2002. Ideas, Politics, and Public Policy. *Annu. Rev. Sociol.* 21.

Coutinho, D.R., 2014. Targeting Within Universalism? The “*Bolsa Família*” Program and the Social Assistance Field in Brazil. *Verfass. Recht Übersee Law Polit. Afr. Asia Lat. Am.* 47, 43–61.

de Brauw, A., Gilligan, D.O., Hoddinott, J., Roy, S., 2015. *Bolsa Família* and Household Labor Supply. *Econ. Dev. Cult. Change* 63, 423–457. <https://doi.org/10.1086/680092>

Diário da Câmara dos Deputados, 2003. 18 December 2003, Year LVIII, No. 217, Brasília – DF.

Dodds, A., 2013, ‘Chapter 1’, in *Comparative public policy*, Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–14. ISBN: 9780230319424

Exame, 2016. Os 15 bancos que têm mais agências no Brasil, last viewed 17 October 2019, available at <https://exame.abril.com.br/revista-exame/os-15-bancos-que-tem-mais-agencias-no-brasil/>

Farmer, P., 2008. Challenging Orthodoxies: The Road Ahead for Health and Human Rights. *Health Hum. Rights* 10, 5. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20460084>

Fawcett Paul, Marsh David, 2012. Policy Transfer and Policy Success: The Case of the Gateway Review Process (2001–10). *Gov. Oppos.* 47, 162.

Ferguson, J., 2010. The Uses of Neoliberalism. *Antipode* 41, 166–184. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2009.00721.x>

Fenwick, T.B., 2016. Avoiding Governors and the Success of CCTs in Brazil, in: *Avoiding Governors, Federalism, Democracy, and Poverty Alleviation in Brazil and Argentina*. University of Notre Dame Press, pp. 55–84.

Goss, K.A., 2006. Changing the Calculation: Policy Incrementalism and Political Participation, in: *Disarmed, The Missing Movement for Gun Control in America*. Princeton University Press, pp. 145–175.

Hall, A., 2006. From Fome Zero to Bolsa Família: Social Policies and Poverty Alleviation under Lula. *J. Lat. Am. Stud.* 38, 689–709.

Hashemi, S.M., Schuler, S.R., Riley, A.P., 1996. Rural credit programs and women's empowerment in Bangladesh. *World Dev.* 24, 635–653. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X\(95\)00159-A](https://doi.org/10.1016/0305-750X(95)00159-A)

Hayes, M.T., 2001. Needed: A Realistic Theory of Policy Change, in: *The Limits of Policy Change, Incrementalism, Worldview, and the Rule of Law*. Georgetown University Press, pp. 1–6.

Head, B., 2008. Wicked Problems in Public Policy [online]. *Public Policy*, Vol. 3, No. 2, 2008: 101-118. Availability: <<https://search-informit-com-au.ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/documentSummary;dn=662880306504754;res=IELFSC>> ISSN: 1833-2110.

Hoppe, R., 2010. Analysing policy problems: a problem-structuring approach, in: *The Governance of Problems, Puzzling, Powering and Participation*. Bristol University Press, pp. 59–90. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt9qgx59.8>

Howlett, M., Ramesh, M., Saguin, K., Howlett, M., Ramesh, M., Saguin, K., 2018. Diffusion of CCTs from Latin America to Asia: the Philippine 4Ps case. *Rev. Adm. Pública* 52, 264–284. <https://doi.org/10.1590/0034-761220170020>

Hunter, W., Sugiyama, N.B., 2014. Transforming Subjects into Citizens: Insights from Brazil's Bolsa Família. *Perspect. Polit.* 12, 829–844.

IPEA, 2013. Brasil recebe prêmio internacional por Bolsa Família. Last viewed 28 February 2020. Available at [http://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/index.php?option=com\\_acymailing&ctrl=archive&task=view&listid=10-avisos-de-pauta&mailid=655-brasil-recebe-premio-internacional-por-bolsa-familia](http://www.ipea.gov.br/portal/index.php?option=com_acymailing&ctrl=archive&task=view&listid=10-avisos-de-pauta&mailid=655-brasil-recebe-premio-internacional-por-bolsa-familia)

Karim, L., 2008. Demystifying Micro-Credit: The Grameen Bank, NGOs, and Neoliberalism in Bangladesh. *Cult. Dyn.* 20, 5–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0921374007088053>

Kingdon, JM, 1995. 'Chapter 9 - Wrapping Things Up', in *Agendas, Alternatives and Public Policies*, Harper Collins, pp. 196–208.

Leite, I.C., Pomeroy, M., Suyama, B., 2015. Brazilian South–South Development Cooperation: The Case of the Ministry of Social Development in Africa. *J. Int. Dev.* 27, 1446–1461. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3191>

Lima, B., 2018. Correio Braziliense. Temer volta atrás e recompõe R\$ 15 bilhões do Bolsa Família. Last viewed 15 October 2019. [https://www.correio braziliense.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2018/09/04/interna\\_politica,704043/temer-volta-atras-e-recompoes-r-15-bi-do-bolsa-familia.shtml](https://www.correio braziliense.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2018/09/04/interna_politica,704043/temer-volta-atras-e-recompoes-r-15-bi-do-bolsa-familia.shtml)

Lindblom, C.E., 1959. The Science of “Muddling Through.” *Public Adm. Rev.* 19, 79. <https://doi.org/10.2307/973677>

Melo, M.A., 2008. Unexpected Successes, Unanticipated Failures: Social Policy from Cardoso to Lula, in: Kingstone, P.R., Power, T.J. (Eds.), *Democratic Brazil Revisited*. University of Pittsburgh Press, pp. 161–184. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt6wr9x1.13>

Morgan, M., 2018. Falling Inequality beneath Extreme and Persistent Concentration: New Evidence for Brazil Combining National Accounts, Surveys and Fiscal Data, 2001-2015. 78.

Morton, G.D., 2014. Protest Before the Protests: The Unheard Politics of a Welfare Panic in Brazil. *Anthropol. Q.* 87, 925–933.

Neves, M. C., 2019, MNEs should back the end of Brazil’s income tax exemption on dividends, *International Tax Review*. <https://www.internationaltaxreview.com/article/b1jfpqrmgdjgt2/mnes-should-back-the-end-of-brazils-income-tax-exemption-on-dividends>.

Pal, L.A., 2011. Assessing incrementalism: Formative assumptions, contemporary realities. *Policy Soc.* 30, 29–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2010.12.004>

Pencheva, I., Esteve, M., Mikhaylov, S.J., 2018. Big Data and AI – A transformational shift for government: So, what next for research? *Public Policy Adm.* 095207671878053. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0952076718780537>

Pfeiffer, J., 2013. *The Struggle for a Public Sector: Pefpar in Mozambique. When People Come First: Critical Studies in Global Health*. Princeton University Press. Retrieved 26 May 2019 from <https://www.universitypressscholarship.com/view/10.23943/princeton/9780691157382.001.0001/upso-9780691157382-chapter-009>.

Rossi, M., 2020. Ministério Público Federal cobra do Governo Bolsonaro redução da fila do Bolsa Família. *El País*. Last viewed 20 February 2020. <https://brasil.elpais.com/brasil/2020-02-14/ministerio-publico-federal-cobra-do-governo-bolsonaro-providencias-para-reduzir-fila-do-bolsa-familia.html>.

Roubicek, M., 2020. A fila do Bolsa Família e a redução de beneficiários

Nexo. Last viewed 25 February 2020. <https://www.nexojornal.com.br/expresso/2020/02/23/A-fila-do-Bolsa-Fam%C3%ADlia.-E-a-redu%C3%A7%C3%A3o-de-benefici%C3%A1rios>

Sager, T., 1995. Dialogical incrementalism: competing rationalities and the cultivation of the synoptic/incremental distinction. *J. Archit. Plan. Res.* 12, 121–140.

Soares, F.V., 2011. Brazil’s Bolsa Família: A Review. *Econ. Polit. Wkly.* 46, 55–60.

Solow A., 2016. Bolsa Família: a evolução do Programa desde 2003, last viewed 15 October 2019. <https://terraoeconomico.com.br/bolsa-familia-evolucao-do-programa-desde-2003/>.

Stewart M, 2018. International/OECD – Redistribution between rich and poor countries. *Bulletin for International Taxation*, 2018 (Volume 72), No. 4/5, published online: 24 March 2018.

Sugiyama, N.B., Hunter, W., 2013. Whither Clientelism? Good Governance and Brazil’s “Bolsa Família” Program. *Comp. Polit.* 46, 43–62.

The Economist, 2015. Helping the Poorest of the Poor. Last viewed 15 October 2019. <https://www.economist.com/international/2015/01/13/helping-the-poorest-of-the-poor>.

Weiss, A., Woodhouse, E., 1992. Reframing Incrementalism: A Constructive Response to the Critics. *Policy Sci.* 25, 255–273.

Wilder, M., 2017. Comparative Public Policy: Origins, Themes, New Directions: *Comparative Public Policy. Policy Stud. J.* 45, S47–S66. <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12200>

Wu, X, Ramesh, M, Howlett, M & Fritzen, 2018. The Public Policy Primer: Managing the Policy Process, pp. 1–75, accessed from <<https://ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00006a&AN=melb.b7211136&site=eds-live&scope=site>>.