

Zero Hunger? Evaluating Brazilian food security policy

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The Fome Zero (Zero Hunger) policy framework was launched in 2003 with the advent of President Luiz Ignácio Lula da Silva's administration. Fome Zero was created with the purpose of alleviating poverty and ultimately eliminating hunger. The Brazilian government's strategy to improve food security attempted to integrate programs promoting agriculture, nutrition, health and education. Social protection schemes like the Bolsa Familia cash transfer were combined with a variety of programs such as support for smallholder farmers and school meals.

In recent years, Brazil has intensified its focus on transparency and the improved efficiency of public monies invested in social programs. Corruption scandals have also brought public scrutiny and renewed attention to government accountability. Concurrently, there is a growing commitment in the development and policy communities to encourage evidence-based policymaking. As the capacity of the government grows with its wealth, there is an opportunity to improve monitoring and evaluation.

Although often praised for its approach, not all components of Fome Zero have been sufficiently evaluated. Therefore, the impact of the policy platform as an integrated strategy cannot be fully understood. As a burgeoning development partner, Brazil can set an example for other nations. Furthermore, an examination of Fome Zero could provide evidence for whether integrated policy approaches to agriculture and nutrition are the most effective ways to combat hunger.

Fome Zero (Zero Hunger), introduced by President Lula Ignácio da Silva in 2003, was created to eliminate hunger in Brazil and to improve the livelihoods of the poor. Although Fome Zero incorporates many pre-existing programs, it is based on an integrated design. Fome Zero takes a systems approach to combating hunger, combining programs for education, agriculture, nutrition, and job creation into a cohesive policy framework. Zero Hunger includes programs such as food stamps, popular restaurants, technical assistance and credit for smallholder farmers, and universal school meals.

Although the Zero Hunger platform is based on “inter-setorrialidade” (inter-agency cooperation), monitoring and evaluation has not been comprehensive. Concurrently, the government has focused more on eliminating corruption and promoting transparency. The administration is beginning to discuss and initiate evaluations of the effectiveness and impact of federal government policy. Active in these new investigations are the Office of the Comptroller General (Controladoria Geral da União¹), the Tribunal de Contas da União², the Brazilian equivalent to the U.S. Office of Management and Budget, and the Ministério Público³, an entity similar to the U.S. Government Accountability Office. Annual lotteries (“sorteio municipal”) randomly select municipalities for a complete audit of all programs. The lottery is designed to discourage corruption and illegal practices using federal monies.

Furthermore, some government ministries now conduct evaluations of programs under their jurisdiction, or contract external assessments. The Ministry of Health has conducted

¹ <http://www.cgu.gov.br/english/AreaAuditoriaFiscalizacao/OQueE/>

² <http://portal2.tcu.gov.br/TCU>

³ <http://www.pgr.mpf.gov.br/>

evaluations of the public health system (Sistema Única de Saúde). The Bolsa Familia conditional cash transfer program has been rigorously evaluated, primarily due to the creation of a Secretariat of Monitoring and Evaluation within the Ministry of Social Development (MDS). MDS has published books on indicators for Fome Zero, which primarily focus on funds, outputs and beneficiaries. While these efforts are important, it must be recognized that other components of Zero Hunger, including the national school feeding program and international cooperation programs have not been thoroughly examined. Furthermore, the assessment of Fome Zero is hampered by a lack of capacity across participating agencies, limited financial support, continued preoccupation with auditing, and limited data-sharing.

Evidence-based Policymaking

Evidence-based policymaking has grown in importance along with the push to increase accountability in both nationally-based social protection programs and for programs sponsored by development agencies. The increased focus on government accountability, especially in relation to social spending, has encouraged more rigor in assessment. The role of monitoring and evaluation for federal programs has expanded beyond financial audits to include social outcomes and cost effectiveness. The motivation of policymakers to focus on monitoring and evaluation is spurred by public scrutiny. Impact evaluations of conditional cash transfer programs in Latin America (Mexico's Progres⁴, Nicaragua's Red de Proteccion Social⁵, and

⁴ Skoufias, E. 2005. Progres^a and its Impacts on the Welfare of Rural Households in Mexico. Research Report 139, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

⁵ Maluccio, J. and Flores, R. 2005. Impact Evaluation of a Conditional Cash Transfer Program: the Nicaraguan Red de Proteccion Social. Research Report, International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

Brazil's Bolsa Familia⁶) revealed positive outcomes, influencing policymakers across the Americas and around the world. The proliferation of conditional cash transfer programs can in part be attributed to the documentation of their impacts. These influences even moved south to north, as in the case of New York City, which adopted a program modeled after Latin American cash transfer schemes. Countries such as Mexico have created independent evaluation offices to assess the performance of social protection programs.

However, governments struggle with the public nature of evaluations. In the case of Mexico's independent evaluation office (CONEVAL);

“All evaluations are made public, and their presentation...has caused intensive debate and, most of the time, criticism and discrediting of government action in the media. The process of publication has commonly generated tension and confrontation with other government offices responsible for different programs, especially since the media still tend to highlight whatever negative element arises from the analysis, while ignoring any positive impact.” (Szekely 2011)

The potential political repercussions of negative evaluations present a formidable obstacle to adopting more rigorous monitoring and evaluation practices. The United States Government, for example, has debated the use of evaluation at the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC). While transparency is highly encouraged, obtaining public funds for evaluations is difficult. MCC has achieved a tangible step forward, as it posts large-scale impact evaluations on the agency website for general access. The U.S. government's flagship initiative for food security, Feed the Future, is undergoing consultations with research institutions to develop a strategic approach for evaluation, and will no doubt grapple with the same questions.

⁶ Hoddinott, J. 2010. Bolsa Familia Evaluation. International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

Conclusive, integrated data on the impacts of policy platforms such as Fome Zero would represent an advance towards evidence-based policymaking. Such evidence could influence policy design, point to improvements in existing policy, and strengthen requests for continued or increased funding for programs. Evaluations may also call attention to important policy issues. Research or evidence can be used purposefully and effectively as a tool for achieving better results. Political obstacles inevitably arise, but a middle ground exists between accepting what is politically feasible and incorporating what has been proven to work.

Therefore, inconsistencies in capacity could be ameliorated by a government-wide policy supporting monitoring and evaluation. Without institutional guidance or standards it is difficult to assess which programs are most cost-effective or have the greatest impact because they are not measured with comparable tools. For example, one cannot compare an impact evaluation of one program with another that is measured by the per capita spent for each beneficiary. “Variability in standards of certainty required by decision makers in judging the efficacy and effectiveness of interventions is a major barrier to rational public policy” (Habicht Victora Vaughan 1999).

Evidence-based policymaking is espoused by many, including prominent economists like Esther Duflo. Many advocate that impact evaluation, and particularly randomized control trials, should be the standard. While these methods may be ideal for larger government programs, other methodologies should not be discounted. Impact evaluations utilizing rigorous methods can be more costly and time-consuming than other types of evaluations. Often, qualitative methods may reveal information not explained by quantitative indicators. Forcing a choice between impact evaluation and the “storytelling” of program success creates a false dichotomy.

The toolbox for monitoring and evaluation is much broader than experimental studies or case studies, and governments should support the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods.

The Ministry for Social Development (MDS)

The Ministry of Social Development, as the coordinating institution of Fome Zero, is responsible for monitoring and evaluation. The Secretariat of Evaluation and Information Management (SAGI) was created as the internal evaluation unit within MDS. SAGI also has funds to contract external evaluations. A recent impact evaluation of the Bolsa Familia cash transfer program, for example, was conducted by the International Food Policy Institute (IFPRI). SAGI is an important step in the government's efforts to increase transparency. SAGI's website allows citizens to consult existing data and other information about government social programs. However, much of the data accessible to the average citizen is calculated in terms of inputs and outputs, funds spent and number of beneficiaries rather than the effects of the intervention. While public access in itself is a significant improvement in terms of transparency, it does not reveal the effectiveness of government policies.

Despite the apparent willingness to conduct evaluations, MDS has been cautious regarding the release of evaluation results. For example, the complete Bolsa Familia evaluation report is not currently available to the public. Results may also be utilized for political ends. The Bolsa Familia results were released in a press conference directly prior to the 2010 presidential election. During this period, SAGI also consulted agencies involved in Fome Zero to gather indicators to show results at the termination of Lula's presidency. Unfortunately, as some agencies involved did not have sufficient support or capacity, their proposed indicators were primarily measures of program output rather than impact.

One example of a Fome Zero program with innovative components that has not been rigorously evaluated is the National School Feeding Program. In 2009, new school feeding legislation was passed to improve food security for schoolchildren as well as for smallholder farmers who are vendors to the program. However, this potential advance has not been evaluated for impact. On the other hand, in the case of the school meals program it may not be possible to conduct a rigorous impact evaluation. The school feeding program is decentralized, and there is a lack of federal control over municipal management which makes monitoring difficult. It is also a challenge to pinpoint the exact nutritional and educational impacts of school feeding, as children do not eat all their meals at school. The economic outcomes of buying locally from smallholder farmers are also not easily assessed. Furthermore, the program's universal coverage does not facilitate randomized design, as there are no readily identifiable control groups.

Regardless, any well-designed evaluation of the school feeding program would contribute valuable evidence as to the effectiveness of national school meals programs that link local agriculture to nutrition, also known as "homegrown school feeding". While food for education programs and other donor-sponsored initiatives have been more carefully assessed⁷, developing a body of research on homegrown school feeding is necessary to better understand the potential benefits of the model.

⁷ Adelman, S.W., Gilligan, D.O. and Lehrer, K. 2007. How Effective are Food for Education Programs? International Food Policy Research Institute, Washington, D.C.

Implications for Policy

Disparities among government agencies in capacity and the use of monitoring and evaluation makes assessment of the Fome Zero policy framework difficult. A handful of Ministries including MDS and the Ministry of Health have significant research budgets to fund monitoring and evaluation, while others have neither the funding nor the expertise on staff. There should be a well-defined national strategy to integrate evaluations into a system. Such a systemic approach would require a strategy to coordinate and provide funding for all ministries to either fund external evaluations, build internal evaluation capacity or conduct assessments themselves. A national strategy, supported by improved internal capacity would increase the prospects of evaluation dissemination and improve the ultimate objectives to improve food security and support local agriculture.

Fome Zero can learn from a different type of consultation process like the one Feed the Future is currently undergoing. Organizing meetings with stakeholders and researchers to discuss evaluation challenges before programs are implemented can help ensure evaluability and stakeholder buy-in. Additionally, it helps avoid the reliance on evaluating only those programs that are more visible or popular politically. Furthermore, avoiding reliance on one methodology is important to mapping the full picture of policy impact. While mixed methods and the incorporation of both quantitative and qualitative studies is not always done in a coherent way, it is important to use a variety of complementary methodologies integrated into a national strategy for evaluation. These steps may help develop more effective policy, and would be useful in the budgeting process by providing objective justifications for funding social

protection programs. Additionally, such a strategy would help reconcile competing pressures for accountability.

A national strategic approach to evaluation will ultimately strengthen comprehensive food security platforms, such as Feed the Future or Fome Zero. While integrated, government-led public policy approaches appear to be more efficient than disparate individual programs, the evidence has not yet been shown. Cost analyses, especially in terms of cost-effectiveness could be useful in determining whether Feed the Future or Fome Zero are preferable to their predecessors. Moreover, in the case that these inter-sectoral, collaborative approaches are found to be more effective, is it the complementarity that improves outcomes, or some other component such as innovative design or integration at the program level? Is integration at the program level more influential in determining outcomes? Comprehensive evaluations that address these types essential questions can allow decision-makers to better deliberate on and design integrated policy models for food security.

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