

Direct or Mediated Relationships?

Civic Involvement and Social Accountability in the *Bolsa Família* Programme

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Conditional Cash Transfer (CCT) programmes are key to reducing the effects of the economic crisis among the poor in Latin America. Their implementation, however, entails two risks: an increase in political clientelism (exchange of votes for favours) and the widening of the power gap between the poor population and local authorities. In order to gain access to the programme and receive financial aid, families rely on the authorities in charge of registering beneficiaries and checking compliance with conditionalities. As a result, government actors enjoy a better power position at the local level and/or are able to ask for political support in return.

Brazil's *Bolsa Família* designed preventive procedures to reduce these risks: the eligibility criteria for beneficiary families are clear; beneficiary databases are public; municipalities are involved in identifying poor families and validating conditionalities; benefits are paid through banking institutions; and there are Social Accountability Boards to oversee and monitor the authorities responsible for these activities. Local authorities and civil society are equally represented on these boards, following the participatory management model that Brazil has applied to its social protection policy.

Apart from these measures, *Bolsa Família* strengthened direct relationships and inhibited the mediation of leaders and organisations in order to prevent political clientelism at the local level. Its designers sought to prevent the programme from being used for clientelistic purposes by eliminating any type of social intermediation (through social organisations) and political intermediation (through the participation of political parties or other political actors) in the process of selection into the programme, in the renewal of beneficiary status, in the payment of the benefit, and in the graduation processes. Information on how to register for *Bolsa Família* was disseminated through television and radio, as well as in schools. Communication with beneficiary families was established through letters and welfare services offices.

The decision to prevent intermediation had positive intended consequences. The most important outcome was the beneficiaries' awareness of the limited clientelistic use of *Bolsa Família* at the local level. A survey conducted among programme beneficiaries in two

low-income districts of São Paulo and Salvador showed that 84 per cent of respondents thought that local leaders were not trying to take advantage of the programme for political and electoral purposes. Only 2.4 per cent stated that they had heard threats about the programme being phased out if a particular candidate did not win the election. Nonetheless, this does not imply a lack of political intent in the use and distribution of *Bolsa Família* at the national level, particularly as regards the increase in the number of beneficiaries depending on the electoral calendar.

The avoidance of intermediation, however, had at least two unintended consequences. First, beneficiaries found it difficult to receive information, and to oversee and monitor the programme *from the bottom*. Because the beneficiaries lacked channels for communication and organisation, it was not possible to solve common problems collectively or to gain access to more information about other social programmes. Second, individual beneficiaries and public authorities continued to yield asymmetric power: to confront a family on its own with the governmental machinery of bureaucracy results in a growing power disparity that collective action tries to level out. Incorporating interests makes their representation more feasible and allows their voice to be heard, especially among the poor who lack other ways to access the public sphere. But *Bolsa Família's* beneficiaries face problems in being "represented" on the Social Accountability Boards because of the shortage of local groups and leaders that can perform that task.

This circumstance contributes to the depoliticisation of the organisations that formally exist for the purposes of social control and civic involvement: without effective representation and power resources, *Bolsa Família's* social control organisations have become "decorative" rather than participatory decision-making bodies.

Hence, for the positive effects of CCTs to reach the poorest population in Latin American countries, there is a need to strengthen and promote channels for civic involvement and social accountability, wherein the poor are no longer considered part of the problem but rather become engaged actors who are part of the solution.