

Meghan Edwards
Mosaic
Columbus, OH
Brazil: Factor 15: Human Rights

When thousands of tourists headed to South America for the 2016 Summer Olympics, most of them stayed in the heart of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil's beautiful city of white beaches and hang gliding. They may have flown in through São Paulo, Brazil's wealthiest city, where stock brokers thrive in high rise buildings, and cultural monuments and churches abound in a city larger than New York. In these cities, however, the Olympic guests most likely didn't venture into the dilapidated slum neighborhoods on the outskirts of the cities, the *favelas*. And unless they were in for a long stay, they probably didn't see the Northeastern or Amazonian regions of Brazil, where they would have found abundant rural poverty and a culture and lifestyle very different from that of the developed city. Not that any of this is indicative of a bad tourist- Brazil is simply an extremely large, diverse, and divided nation. The North American Congress on Latin America quotes sociologist Jessie de Souza summarizing the effect of human rights issues in Brazil: "What distinguishes Brazil from the United States, Germany, and France, whom we admire so much" isn't the level of corruption, but "the fact that we accept maintaining a third of the population in subhuman conditions"(Pitts). In recent decades, the scourge of income inequality has produced a host of social and economic challenges, as well as political battles that the country will need to fight for many years to come.

Brazil is often imagined as a country crisscrossed with vibrant rivers, but in the northeastern states of Bahia, Alagoas, and Pernambuco (as well six other states in the region) a visitor is more likely to find tumbleweed than colorful birds. Once thought to be too arid for growing crops, the northeast (north of the agricultural heartland and east of the Amazon) has built an economy on soybeans and cattle (Rural Poverty). The prevalence of a farming economy in an arid landscape means that recent drought has hit the region hard, even with 72% of Brazil's water sources being devoted to irrigation (Glickhouse). With a population of under 3 million, Salvador, Bahia is the largest city in the northeast; the rest of the region is almost entirely rural.

In recent years, the privatization of industry in the northeast has allowed for significant economic growth, but the wealth has not reached the majority of rural Brazilian families. The average *nordestino* family is large, but lives in a relatively small home, often without access to basic sanitation (Cassel). *Nordestinos* are typically subsistence farmers, but the development of rural Brazilian land by foreign companies and farms has led to much of the land being bought away from farming families, reducing them to sharecroppers or simply putting them out of work (Cassel).

The majority of these families are Afro-Brazilians, descended from the millions of slaves brought into the region during the Atlantic Slave trade in the 16th through 19th centuries, or indigenous families ("Rural Poverty"). As such, northeastern cuisine has both heavy African and Native Brazilian influences, with staple foods different from those in the southern regions of the country. The main staple food of the region is *mandioca*, or cassava flour, which contains twice the calories of potatoes but is low in proteins and nutritious fats. Most northeastern meals also include kidney beans, dried meat, and sweet potatoes ("Regional Diet"). The diet of northeastern Brazil can be classified as a Regional Basic Diet, meaning that it consists largely of the staple foods mentioned above, and does not have the nutritional variety found in more varied diets with many different kinds of food. The northeastern Brazilian RBD diet has been extensively studied and found to be multi deficient in many essential proteins and amino acids ("Regional Diet"). While many of the same traditional dishes from the northeast are enjoyed in the southern cities, more prosperous families in other regions of Brazil are able to supplement their diet with fish, beef, and fruits and vegetables bought in supermarkets.

It is written into the Brazilian constitution that healthcare is the responsibility of the peoples' government. In 1998 a Sistema Única de Saude, or Universal Health System, was established. In 2013, Brazil spent only 9.3% of its GDP on health care, 48.2% of which was federally funded (Khan). However, the Brazilian population has continued to grow, and the population is split into two very distinct economic groups, the wealthiest of which live in centrally located cities with good transportation. Meanwhile the poor, particularly the rural poor who live far from cities and large hospitals, have difficulty accessing the healthcare that is provided to them at no cost. It doesn't help that Brazil has struggled to find doctors who are willing to work in the impoverished rural regions- 90% of Brazil is made up of communities with fewer than 50,000 people, yet only 8% of doctors work in areas with such a low population (Gomes). Even in Brazil's wealthiest city, São Paulo, patients wait months to get an X-ray, and so about 25% of the Brazilian population now chooses to pay for private health insurance (Khazan). As a result, Brazil finds itself once again with a widening gap in the quality of life for its citizens.

However, ever since Brazil's democracy stabilized with the election of Luis Inácio Lula Da Silva in 2002 (whose election marked the first transition from one elected party to another after Brazil's military dictatorship ended in 1985) the country has been taking steps to ensure that Brazilians still have incentive to seek medical care and education, despite the challenges of the system (Pio). Lula's party in particular, the Brazilian Worker's Party, has been responsible for initiating some of Brazil's most famously progressive income redistribution programs. In the year, 2000, Lula launched O Projeto Fome Zero, or "The Zero Hunger Project" which included and spawned several other programs to fight malnutrition and food insecurity in Brazil ("Projeto"). Each initiative not only fought hunger, but aimed to stop its causes such as poor education and healthcare. For example, regular health-care checkups and schooling are a condition of the Bolsa Familia program, started 13 years ago by the Brazilian Worker's Party ("Bolsa"). It is estimated that 25% of Brazilians benefit from Bolsa Familia (or "Family Scholarship"), which uses tax money to provide a living wage to the poor- on the condition that they send any children they have to public school and are present at regular health checks (Illingworth). The service is offered to the "extremely poor"- those who earn less than 70 reais per capita per month, and the "poor"- who earn 70-140 reais per capita per month (Nobrega). The World Bank, one financial supporter of the program, quotes beneficiary Dinalva Pereira de Moura, saying, "The Bolsa Família helps me buy food. Sometimes I can even buy fruit for the children. My children know that when we receive the money, they will have more to eat, and that makes them happier. And they don't skip school, because they know that the money depends on their going" ("Bolsa"). The program is entirely covered by government tax income, and yet only draws 0.5% of the country's GDP each year. Now seen as a success untouchable by any party in Brazilian politics, Bolsa Familia has been the inspiration for similar programs in countries around the globe, and communities ranging from South Africa, to Indonesia, to Bangladesh (Illingworth). Around the same time as Bolsa Familia was being implemented, Brazil also launched a National School Feeding Program, partly funded by the World Food Programme, to provide free school meals for children in the poorest northeastern regions. Between 1992 and 2012, these programs helped drop hunger from 22.8 million to 13.6 ("Brazil").

Through many of these same social programs that have fought malnutrition such as Bolsa Familia and Projeto Fome Zero, Brazil's rates of income inequality have slowly declined. Brazil's GINI coefficient, a number used to measure income inequality in a country, has steadily improved since 2001: between 2001 and 2013, the poorest 10 percent of the population saw an increase in income nearly three times the increase that the wealthiest 10 percent saw (Pitts). However, research suggests that this improvement is in some ways superficial, or at the very least, only one of many factors affecting *social* inequality, which has continued to worsen (deVogel). The northern rural areas of Brazil still suffer from low wages and poor farm production, due to a host of social barriers that affect income equality. Solving these issues would help redistribute Brazil's growing wealth and improve access to land for families who need it for food production.

In any country with the size and diversity of Brazil, a certain extent of income inequality is going to exist. Brazil is home to indigenous groups, farmers, artists, doctors, business moguls, oil tradesmen, lawyers, and sports executives. It is the nature of the world economy that these groups will not make the same amount of money. The trouble with economic inequality in Brazil, as in other growing capitalist countries such as the United States or many other Western nations, is that the extreme level of inequality allows wealthy business owners to hold an inordinate amount of power over the poorest citizens, if they are not sufficiently protected by legislation. An example of this phenomenon in Brazil is the controversy over land distribution (Wallace). Land distribution plays an enormous role in economic inequality in Brazil in that, as of 2006, 40% of the poorest rural landowners own only one percent of the land (Ortiz). In the United States, a quick English language search will produce countless websites designed to help foreign investors buy farms in Brazil. The commercial sale of farmland in Brazil is excellent for the country's GDP- it provides an influx of wealth to real estate companies and businesses in cities, and the export of crops is part of what makes port cities like Rio and São Paulo so successful. Not as much profit makes it back to the rural Brazilians working the farms, however, and in the meantime, commercial farms take up land that could be used for growing nutritious food for subsistence families and instead uses it for exported items such as cocoa and corn. Most families end up working as sharecroppers, evicted from their own land. The MST, or Landless Workers' Movement, estimated in 2003 that roughly 4 million rural Brazilian families had no land to farm, while 7 million other families lived in poverty as sharecroppers or migrant workers (Cassel). This type of inequality doesn't relate directly to income, at least not with neat numbers like the inequality found in Brazilian cities. But it is still economic inequality, in that rural Brazilians are trapped in a system which repeatedly rewards large, rapidly expanding farm owners while providing little opportunity for the farmers and sharecroppers to advance.

As a result of this broken system, over 13.8 million Brazilian families are dependent on programs like Bolsa Familia (Nobrega). Many of them move to cities such as Rio de Janeiro or São Paulo- living in favelas until they can afford better housing- where they are then faced with another major contributor to income inequality: race. Wealth in Brazil has historically been controlled mainly by European elite and, later, their light-skinned descendants- it is a lingering effect of the slave trade which continues to affect the United States as well (Pitts). This gap in income is more easily measureable than the economic gap in rural areas. In 2012, a BBC report found that the average income of a white worker in Brazil's largest cities was 712.65 USD per month, while Afro Brazilians earned 399.81 USD in the same time (Ali). In the United States in 2011, the median white family's income was 55,412 USD and the median black family's income was 32,339 USD ("Distribution"). In Brazil, the income gap is most visible when one compares the livelihoods in large Southeastern cities where the majority light-skinned populations live, and in rural areas where descendants of African slaves and indigenous families live.

Brazil's government is aware of the gap in income, and has been working hard to close it. In terms of racial economic inequality, a new social quota law approved by President Dilma Rouseff requires 25% of spots in universities and technical schools to be given to students from public schools, who are primarily darker-skinned (Ali). This law itself reveals the socioeconomic inequalities: Brazilian private schools, which are expensive but provide good education, are mostly populated by European-descended students, while the free, lower quality education is left to those with dark skin. In the last two decades, Brazil has taken huge strides in improving access to public education, but the growth has been stagnating since 2013. Nearly one in five Brazilians are still functionally illiterate, and until 2016, education was mandatory only through the age of 14 (Nes). Brazil's education system is as divided as its income, with the poorer classes attending crowded and under-supplied public schools while wealthier families pay to attend small private schools. For higher education, federally funded universities exist and are generally of high quality, but competition to enter them is fierce. Many students who do not perform as well on their vestibular, or admission exams, end up in private colleges of unreliable quality. While controversial like most affirmative action, the law approved by Rouseff helps open the door for the lower classes to skilled jobs that require a university degree, gives them a better understanding of markets to manage their

produce, and perhaps even offers the legal knowledge necessary to fight for their land rights. It's no secret that access to education makes a huge difference- according to one Harvard study, "over a third of overall inequality in Brazil can be accounted for by differences across five groups of households, sorted by the education of the head" (Ferreira).

By regulating the distribution of arable land between family farmers and commercial ones, and continuing to support income redistribution programs like Bolsa Familia, Brazil can reduce inequality in two regions by giving urban families access to a living wage and the education they need to continue earning, as well as giving rural farmers access to land on which to grow their own food. A major barrier to rural families accessing food is simply that the profits and the produce do not make it to their hands before they have been sold to multinational companies in wealthier areas. To prevent this, Brazil created the PAA, or Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos, as a part of Luis Da Silva's Zero Hunger program ("Brazil's"). The PAA allocates funds for the Brazilian government to buy food from large farms and redistribute it to families struggling to access nutrition, as well as families involved in other social programs. It is successful enough to have inspired PAA Africa, a similar food purchasing program creating better economic equality in hunger-stricken countries such as Ethiopia and Niger. Arnaldo Campos, Brazil's national secretary of Food Security and Nutrition, described the program as one that allows "for the strengthening of agriculture, boosting local economies, the promotion of food security and the enhancement of regional food habits, while strengthening the public food and nutrition equipment" ("Brazil's"). Since the establishment of the PAA in 2003, there has also been an increase in the diversity of crops grown by family farmers, leading to better access to more nutritious foods.

In recent months, federal programs like Bolsa Familia and the PAA have been threatened by a problem that Brazil has struggled against since its adoption of democracy- corruption. Impeached President Dilma Rouseff, along with dozens of other members of her party and politicians from other parties as well, were implicated in a historically massive corruption scandal involving Petrobras, an off shore oil company and a major driver of the Brazilian economy. (Rouseff herself has not been convicted in the Petrobras scandal, but was impeached under accusations of mishandling finances during her term.) (Segal). The scandal, along with her impeachment, created massive political upheaval in Brazil, accompanied by large protests and calls for governmental reform (Pitts). In order for successful programs like Bolsa Familia to survive, and in order to start regulating agribusinesses, the government will need to work hard to regain the trust of its people, and the people will need to continue to educate themselves on their elected representatives and vote carefully to ensure that the reduction of corruption does not automatically mean a total loss of government regulation that has historically been very important to the economy of Brazil. Brazilian voters need to demand that large farm corporations be held more responsible for the people working on the land they occupy, and that the system of land distribution is adjusted to allow more families to gain title to their own crops.

Economic inequality is an issue that exists almost entirely at a legislative level, and it can appear difficult for individuals to make any difference. But every Brazilian, of any income, can support legislation that gives funding to urban schools accessible to impoverished children, and every Brazilian can demand that rural land be used, not just for flour and cocoa to be exported, but for nutritious cattle and soybeans and other crops to be eaten at home. The United States is often said to still be working out the details of how our people are meant to interact with our government, still solving the mystery of the great democratic experiment. Brazil is, by contrast, an even younger democracy, with only a few decades of representation under its belt. It is up to the people now to decide how they will work with their government to solve the issue of hunger and the economy. Hopefully they can find a way to create a more balanced economy that is better for all, as poor families pull themselves out of poverty, no longer need to rely on government programs, and are able to lead healthier, more productive lives.

Works Cited

- Ali, Raiesa. "Income Inequality and Poverty: A Comparison of Brazil and Honduras." COHA. Council On Hemispheric Affairs, 01 July 2015. Web. 17 Mar. 2016.
- "Bolsa Família: Changing the Lives of Millions in Brazil." News & Broadcast -. World Bank, 2015. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.
- "Brazil- A Champion in the Fight Against Hunger." World Food Programme. WFP, 24 June 2014. Web. 15 July 2016.
- "Brazil's Food Purchase Programme (PAA): 10 Years." Purchase From Africans for Africa. PAA Africa, 02 July 2013. Web. 20 June 2016.
- Cassel, Amanda, and Raj Patel. "Agricultural Trade Liberalization and Brazil's Rural Poor." Global Policy Forum, Aug. 2003. Web. 12 Mar. 2016.
- De Vogel, Nadine. "The Facts on Brazilian Income Inequality." ICCO Cooperation. N.p., 26 Feb. 2014. Web. 8 July 2016.
- "Distribution of Household Income by Race." Infoplease. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 July 2016.
- Ferreira, Francisco H.G, Phillippe G. Leite, and Julie A. Litchfield. "The Rise and Fall of Brazilian Inequality." ReVista. Harvard, n.d. Web. 14 July 2016.
- Glickhouse, Rachel. "Historic Drought Takes Toll on Agriculture." ASCOA, 18 Feb. 2015. Web. 17 Mar. 2016.
- Gomes, Pablo. "The Brazilian "More Doctors" Dilemma." World Socialist Web Site. International Committee of the Fourth International, 4 Apr. 2016. Web. 10 July 2016.
- Illingworth, Sarah. "Bolsa Família: The Program Helping 50M Brazilians to Exit Poverty." The Huffington Post. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 10 June 2015. Web. 15 June 2016.
- "Projeto Fome Zero." Instituto Lula. N.p., 07 July 2011. Web. 18 July 2016.
- Khan, Tamar. "Universal Health Care: How Others Do It." Financial Mail, 25 Feb. 2016. Web. 13 Mar. 2016.
- Khazan, Olga. "What the US Can Learn from Brazil's Healthcare Mess." The Atlantic. Atlantic Media Company, 8 May 2014. Web. 28 Feb. 2016.
- Nes, Cynthia F. "The Brazilian Educational System." The Brazil Business. 12 Aug. 2015. Web. 14 Mar. 2016.
- Nobrega, Camila. "Bolsa-Família: Template for Poverty Reduction or Recipe for Dependency?" The Guardian. Guardian News and Media, 05 Nov. 2013. Web. 22 June 2016.
- Ortiz, Fabíola. "Brazil at Risk of Agrarian Counter-Reform." Inter Press Service. N.p., 27 Apr. 2011. Web. 10 July 2016.
- Pio, Carlos. "Brazil: Political and Economic Lessons from Democratic Transitions." Council on Foreign Relations. N.p., 18 June 2013. Web. 24 June 2016.
- Pitts, Bryan. "Who's Protesting in Brazil and Why?" NACLA. NACLA, 9 Apr. 2015. Web. 1 Mar. 2016.
- "A Regional Diet from Northeast Brazil as a Dietary Model of Experimental Malnutrition." PubMed.gov. US National Library of Medicine. Web. 15 Mar. 2016.

"Rural Poverty in Brazil." Rural Poverty Portal. Web. 12 Mar. 2016.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. "No More Angel Babies on the Alto Do Cruzeiro." Natural History. NaturalHistoryMag.com. Web. 15 Mar. 2016.

Segal, David. "Petrobras Oil Scandal Leaves Brazilians Lamenting a Lost Dream." The New York Times, 7 Aug. 2015. Web. 15 July 2016.

Wallace, Scott. "Land Policy: Sector Results Profile." World Bank. 2 Apr. 2014. Web. 10 Mar. 2016.