

## Global Perspective: Public Housing a Comparison of America's Projects and Brazil's Favelas

### **I: Intro**

For decades now the question on how to close the poverty gap has been an issue in many developed and developing nations. Poverty, as defined by the Merriam Webster Dictionary is, "the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions" (Webster Online Dictionary). This social issue is of such high importance that the United Nations, an international organization, tracks data on what each country does and how effective their programs are. Each country tries to come up with the solution that best fits its own needs; however most fixes are temporary and do not close the poverty gap but rather widen it.

In an effort to address poverty in the United States, the Americas, and globally, one can apply the same global concepts applied by those in the business sector. Globalization, as seen by Rhacel Salazar Parreñas has the ability to damage a nation and marginalize a group of people. Her research focused primarily on migrant Pilipino/a workers migrating to Los Angeles and Rome. Rhacel's findings validate Raphael Kaplinsky's view that globalization can have a positive impact on international fronts. The Philippines, a country Rhacel studied closely, lacked the access to global markets and overall globalization efforts current countries in the Americas are experiencing. In these countries, globalization is reducing poverty and increasing employment.

### **II: Globalization of Welfare Systems**

Poverty, and the way in which a nation responds to poverty, is a global issue. Globalization as defined by Raphael Kaplinsky is **a complex and multidimensional process in which the barriers to cross-border flows are being reduced** (Kaplinsky). The way in which a nation addresses poverty is defining of said country's priorities. Some nations decide to address poverty through religious welfare, other nations approach poverty through cultural welfare, and there are nations, like the United States of

America, that choose a hybrid of the two, and address poverty through various components, including ethical and economic welfare.

Globalization has many effects, however, research shows that there is a direct correlation between globalization and reduced poverty (Collier and Dollar). In their research Paul Collier and David Dollar found that as countries become more integrated see significant changes in their economic opportunities (Collier and Dollar). This can be said for many factors, in the case of addressing poverty through welfare programs, globalization and integration can help the United States of America become more efficient in the way in which it addresses poverty through welfare programs.

Globalization provides an international lens on how countries address specific challenges. The United States of America is a global leader in the charge against poverty, greenhouse emissions, and the economy, however, much can be learned from neighboring countries in the Americas. If the United States took a moment to address welfare and poverty from a global perspective, the people receiving public services would benefit immensely.

### **III: Welfare in the Americas**

In the United States, welfare programs have been created to aid families out of poverty, unfortunately, these programs are loosely managed and have very little requirements to enter in. Individual programs make cheating the program simple because there are no national guidelines; welfare is run state to state. In Mexico, Oportunidades is the nation's welfare system. Oportunidades has strict guidelines that make the recipients take courses on health, nutrition, and stay in education (SEDESOL). Although it still has a lot of room for improvement, Oportunidades is a step in the right direction for closing the poverty gap in Mexico.

Like Oportunidades, Brazil's program, Bolsa Familia has strict guidelines which the recipients must follow. It is with these guidelines that Brazil has been able to make its biggest impact on closing

their poverty gap. Since its expansion in 2003, Bolsa Familia has been able to aid a large percentage of Brazilians out of poverty. Compared to the United States' welfare system, Bolsa Familia is more effective at ending poverty; the program gives money directly to the poor, promotes health awareness, promotes education, and has strict guidelines which must be followed in order to receive the benefits.

#### **IV: Brazil Case Study**

Brazilian families in extreme poverty are often times forced to end their children's education early, live in extreme conditions, have little to eat, and go into child labor. Bolsa Familia is making strides to end extreme poverty. The program was designed to help the Brazilian family in desperate need. It is a cash program which gives its recipients the money directly. The money varies from household to household but provides roughly twelve dollars per child (Eldorado). In order to receive the benefits offered there are certain rules and criteria that must be followed. For example, in order for a household to receive the cash benefit, families must encourage and allow school-age children to attend school. Students are only allowed to miss fifteen percent of the time without the benefits being suspended (Global Extension of Social Security). Health checks and vaccinations must be up to date and regular in order to receive the benefits.

#### **V: Bolsa Familia and American Welfare Compared**

Education is a key component to closing the poverty gap. Bolsa Familia focuses on maintaining children in school and does so by making it a part of the criteria. This method of forcing families to keep their children enrolled in school is one that could potentially work worldwide.

In the United States, there is no strict policy for receiving public aid. One simply applies, and if the requirements of poverty are met, begins to receive benefits. In 2011 the *Chicago Tribune* released data on students that were absent to school. The data, broken down by race, showed that 20.4 percent of African American students missed an average of fourteen days of school, 8.3 percent of Latinos

missed an average of 8.5 days of school, both groups are Chicago's biggest public welfare recipients. Many families would be more inclined to enroll and send their students to school if their welfare benefits depended on it.

Brazil's Bolsa Familia system is effective because classroom attendance is a requisite to receiving funds. In order for the parents to receive their monthly benefit, their children must be enrolled in and attend school. This component alone is going to have the biggest impact on Brazil's poverty gap. If children are enrolled in, and attend school, they are less likely to go into child labor thus creating opportunities to continue their education. If and when students continue their education they will be in a position to seek higher education or at least find a better paying job. In 2011, PBS released a public media initiative called *America-Graduate, Let's Make it Happen*. The statistics are staggering –forty percent of Chicago's youth drop out of high school (Rammohan).

## **VI: America's Future**

This is only one case study but the statistics speak for themselves, America, a developed nation, has a developed city, with a forty percent dropout rate. Of the forty percent it is difficult to tell which students are on welfare, however, the communities with the highest dropout rates are communities with the highest percentage of welfare recipients. If Chicago adopts a program like Brazil's Bolsa Familia, it will help decrease the dropout rate the city is currently facing and thus empower future generations.

Applying the principles of globalization and allowing integration of a program that is seeing success in Brazil will allow the United States to truly have a lasting impact on families receiving welfare.

## **VII: Bolsa Familia –Guided Autonomy**

Bolsa Familia is changing the way welfare functions by distributing money directly to the poor rather than distributing it to municipalities which in turn give to the community. After a family qualifies for Bolsa Familia they are issued the equivalent of a debit card. The government then is given the power to distribute the money directly to the families in need. This method of delivery allows for many things, the main one being that the government can stop all cash transfers if criteria are not met. In Chicago the welfare system runs on 6 month cycles. A family is guaranteed their stipend for 6 months and then they re-enroll. In Brazil, the moment a family does not meet the criteria their cash transfers are stopped. This ensures that students are constantly enrolled in school, are receiving frequent doctor visits, and are meeting all other requirements.

Bolsa Familia is a cash transfer program and so it does not distribute money solely for food but it gives the family the power to decide how the money is spent. In Chicago, the LINK card gives the family an allotted amount of money to spend on food. Section 8 and Public Housing give families allotted money for rent and home. With a cash transfer system like Bolsa Familia's a family in need can put their money towards rent, food, or any other items they may need, so long as they are meeting the criteria.

### **VIII: Bolsa Familia and Oportunidades Comparison**

Bolsa Familia also focuses on health and nutrition awareness. Another requirement to qualify for Bolsa Familia is that all vaccinations must be up to date. Having all vaccinations met helps with infant and toddler mortality rates. No information on this has yet been published however, in theory it is a system that works. Bolsa Familia is often compared to Mexico's Oportunidades program, which has seen a positive result in child immunizations (International Poverty Centre). Lack of medical facilities may have a negative impact on Brazil's data however, awareness on health and nutrition are on the rise.

Programs like Oportunidades and Bolsa Familia not only encourage families to take nutrition classes but make it a part of the requirements. In Chicago health and nutrition classes are offered but

are not mandatory to take qualify for benefits. LINK Card in Chicago can be used to purchase any cold food items. In turn, families are able to purchase carbonated beverages, chips, and other types of unhealthy foods. In Brazil, Bolsa Familia does not issue food vouchers only cash transfers. In Chicago families that qualify for food vouchers also have the opportunity to apply for home vouchers.

Chicago's welfare system can reduce poverty by educating the public on how to lead healthier lives. The current public aid system in Chicago is crippling its recipients by offering easy access to funds, lack of access to high quality resources, and little expectations to better themselves.

## **IX: Conclusion**

Although Bolsa Familia is still a work in progress, there are many countries observing the effects. Since it expanded in 2003 many nations have studied Bolsa Familia's progress. Thanks to Bolsa Familia, poverty in Brazil has fallen from twenty-two percent to seven percent (Rosenberg). There is still much room for growth and improvement. The country is still struggling, however, with more students in school it is interesting to see what the long term effects of Bolsa Familia will be on the nation.

According to recent studies Bolsa Familia is having a positive effect in school's attendance, enrollment, and completion. People are beginning to spend more money on food, clothing, and education, which in turn has a positive effect on the economy. Chicago and other cities alike can learn much from Bolsa Familia and other cash transfer programs, they give the money directly to those in need, they are run nationally, and have strict guidelines and requirements that the recipients must follow in order to receive their benefits.

Globalization can change the way in which the USA and the world approach welfare. If ideas are shared cross-boarders, and only concepts that work are applied, the nation's neediest children will have a system in place that will hold them and their families accountable for health, education, and work. The current welfare system in the United States does not hold families accountable (Bass, Shields, and

Berhman). Globalization and integration can play a huge role in the way in which, not only the United States, but all nations address assisting their nation's neediest families.

### **X: Experience**

As a Community Organizer, I care for the betterment and empowerment of the people. Often times, my job requires building capacity and educating people on a specific issue or campaign. My most recent campaign involved working with families in Chicago's Brighton Park neighborhood, on the Southwest side. I worked with over two-hundred families, all of them were Latino, all of them were poor, and all of them wanted one common thing: a better education for their child.

My first role was to educate them on how to open a new Noble school in their community, however, soon after we launched our campaign to open a new school on the Southwest side, I quickly realized education was only one piece. On Chicago's Southwest side, there is a lack of access to resources. There are no hospitals, high quality produce stores, or green space. Many families did not know how to articulate the need for these items, therefore they didn't advocate for them.

Consumed by passion, I began to work with these families. I educated them on the various resources that could be brought to them if they united and asked for them. Many of the families were immigrants from Mexico, some were even recipients of Mexico's Oportunidades program. When we discussed the benefits that they had received through Oportunidades, one resounded the most: they were given a space to learn about healthy living. These lessons often included: cooking demo's, Zumba classes, diabetes workshops and much more.

Soon after we created a vision map, we reached out to various outlets that would also benefit from nutrition and physical activity classes. A local school on the Southwest side offered to host monthly workshops, and now, the group is meeting weekly. While I wish I could take credit for helping these families, the reality is, many of them just needed to be put in an environment of accountability. Once I

created that environment, they were able to advocate for a resource they had once had, a resource that had, and will continue to empower them.

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