

1. FIGHTING HUNGER, POVERTY, AND INEQUALITY

In the 21st century, democracy has become an idealized model of government that few countries openly oppose. It is hard for a state to deny society's role in politics, given that a nation is generally composed of a government, people, and territory. From this perspective, we might conclude that support for liberal democracy—characterized by popular participation and respect for individual freedoms—has been increasing. However, the numbers tell a different story.

Since 2006, the democracy index has been declining worldwide, indicating a backslide in this model. In general terms, this trend shows us that, even after the World Wars, the rise and fall of Nazi-fascism, Stalinism, and authoritarian regimes across South and Central America in the 20th century, liberal democracy—which appeared to represent the “end of history”—is still struggling to legitimize itself.

How, then, can this contradiction be explained?

There are several possible explanations: the distance between the people and the state, resulting in a lack of representation and political disengagement; cases of corruption; inaccessible laws; and public distrust in institutions. Yet these are *a posteriori* answers. What the Brazilian Parliament has recognized is that democracy cannot exist without the material conditions needed to ensure inclusion. Put simply: there is no democracy without a commitment to tackling hunger, poverty, and inequality.

The country has realized, especially since re-democratization (1985), that hunger and democracy cannot coexist. In line with this understanding, the Brazilian Congress helped enact Law No. 9,077, of July 10, 1995, which authorized the “Executive Branch to use public food stocks to fight hunger and poverty”. This initial step, documented in the Federal Senate's Digital Archive (<https://atom.senado.leg.br/index.php/plc-86-1995-pdf>), followed Brazil's participation in the 1994 National Conference on Food and Nutritional Security and laid the groundwork for future policies.

In 2001, for example, Law No. 10,219 established the National Minimum Income Program, which was linked to the educational project “Bolsa Escola”. In 2003, this program was incorporated into “Zero Hunger”, which also unified several other social programs. The following year, Law No. 10,836 launched “Bolsa Família”, consolidating previous policies and

adding requirements for receiving aid—in addition to keeping children in school—, such as health checkups, including up-to-date vaccinations.

Despite changes in the Executive Branch, the Brazilian Parliament maintained its commitment to civic welfare. In 2021, it enacted the “Alimenta Brasil Program”, through the sanction of Law No. 14,284, replacing “Bolsa Família”. This program was reintroduced and expanded in 2024, adapted to the evolving needs of a country different from what it was at the start of the 21st century.

Continuing these efforts, the Brazilian Parliament extended this policy with Law No. 14,818 of 2024, which introduced a financial incentive for low-income students enrolled in the 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades. These students, in addition to proving that they attend classes, will also be rewarded for taking the National High School Exam (Enem) and completing the final stage of basic education. Currently, Brazilian Parliament is debating bills to refine eligibility criteria for “Bolsa Família” and increase program funding.

Finally, it is worth noting that these paragraphs only highlight recent actions by the Brazilian Parliament, not its entire history. What was done was a more recent time frame, given that since the 1988 Constitution, human dignity has become a constitutional guarantee. As past actions inform future challenges, the Archive Coordination Office has compiled a survey of other initiatives related to this topic, accessible here: <https://www12.senado.leg.br/institucional/arquivo/pesquisas-prontas-e-documentos/cultura-e-historia/planilha-inclusao-social-combate-a-fome-e-a-pobreza.pdf>. The hope is that this brief history will help the Brazilian Congress reflect on its progress and, alongside other parliaments, consider the next steps toward full citizenship for all.