

Inequality in Brazil and Argentina: Progress and Regress

Clara Tully

Abstract

This article analyzes and compares inequality in Brazil and Argentina, two large and populous countries in Latin America. Both countries have experienced economic growth in recent years but have also suffered from high levels of inequality. In both Argentina and Brazil, income inequality has remained a persistent issue, but inequalities in access to essential services such as education and healthcare have also played an important role. Both countries have also implemented some policies to combat inequality which, though they have had equalizing effects, are generally deemed to have been insufficient.

I. Introduction

Even as many countries around the world experience economic growth, inequality remains an issue worldwide. In countries such as Argentina and Brazil, economic growth has occurred at the same time that income inequality has increased. Though income inequality is a very important aspect of inequality and will be analyzed extensively in this article, it is not the only aspect. For example, in São Paulo, which is Brazil's wealthiest city, the residents of the worst neighborhood in the city live 23 years fewer than those of the best.¹

Key factors that contribute to a country's overall inequality are inequalities in access to essential services such as healthcare and education. Gender and racial inequality also play an important role. A recent OECD (2017) economic survey pointed out that high inequalities among provinces and cities in Argentina relate to high informality rates, lack of quality jobs, low skills and poor public services.

This article is structured into six sections: Introduction, Literature Review, Socio-economic Background, Analysis of Inequality in Argentina and Brazil, Ethical Analysis, and Conclusion. The literature review provides information on existing literature about inequality in Argentina and/or Brazil. The socio-economic background examines the evolution of GDP per capita, life expectancy, and literacy rate in both countries. The analysis of inequality in Argentina and Brazil section uses multiple indicators to measure inequality in the two countries. The ethical analysis

¹ Galarraga Gortázar (2022), paragraph 6.

section summarizes actions that have been taken in Argentina and Brazil in an effort to reduce inequality and also analyzes various perspectives on whether inequality is ethical.

II. Literature Review

There is a vast array of existing literature on inequality in Argentina and Brazil as Latin America is one of the regions of the world with the highest rates of inequality.² Brazil, especially, has garnered interest because it has consistently been one of the most unequal countries in Latin America.³ Among the many publications examining both countries, two powerful regional studies, one before and one after the emergence of COVID-19, are respectively, Lustig, Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez (2012) and Lustig, Martinez Pabon, Sanz and Younger (2020). A recent news story by Amnesty International (2022) also addresses inequality in Argentina and Brazil. Among recent country-specific studies, Tornaghi (2021) focuses on Brazil while Pilatti (2022) focuses on Argentina.

- Lustig, Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez (2012) detail how inequality has been decreasing in Brazil and Argentina throughout the 2000s, despite both countries still having a lot of inequality, specifically Brazil which, according to the Gini coefficient, is one of the top 10 countries with the highest wealth inequality. The report found that the decline in inequality in these countries could be attributed to both labor and non-labor income inequality. They found that increased government spending on education and increased education opportunities had an equalizing effect.
- Lustig, Martinez Pabon, Sanz, and Younger (2020) analyze the impact of COVID-19 lockdown policies on inequality in Brazil and Argentina, and other Latin American countries, as well as the extent to which expanded social assistance measures have been able to offset the negative impacts of those lockdowns. They found that, in Brazil, poverty among those of African descent and indigenous populations was much higher than among white populations, however the offsetting effects of expanded social assistance were also larger for those of African descent and indigenous peoples.
- Amnesty International (2022) examines the disproportionate number of deaths from COVID-19 in Latin America. It finds that countries with the highest rates of inequality and the lowest rates of public spending on health and social protection were hit hardest by the pandemic. It also cites regressive tax systems as a contributing factor to inequality in the region. Many Latin American countries could benefit from increasing taxes for the richest and using that money to redistribute wealth to the poorest in the country.
- Tornaghi (2021) discusses inequality in Brazil which reached a world record high Gini coefficient of 0.674 during the first quarter of 2021 and remains the most unequal country in Latin America. The article cites the gap in scores on the happiness index between Brazil's poorest and richest people. It also points out how, while the stock market has hit record highs and the country overall has seen economic growth, there has also been an increase in extreme poverty.
- Pilatti (2022) details how Argentina has been simultaneously experiencing economic growth and increasing inequality. In terms of economic growth, it cites increases in GDP

² World Bank (2022).

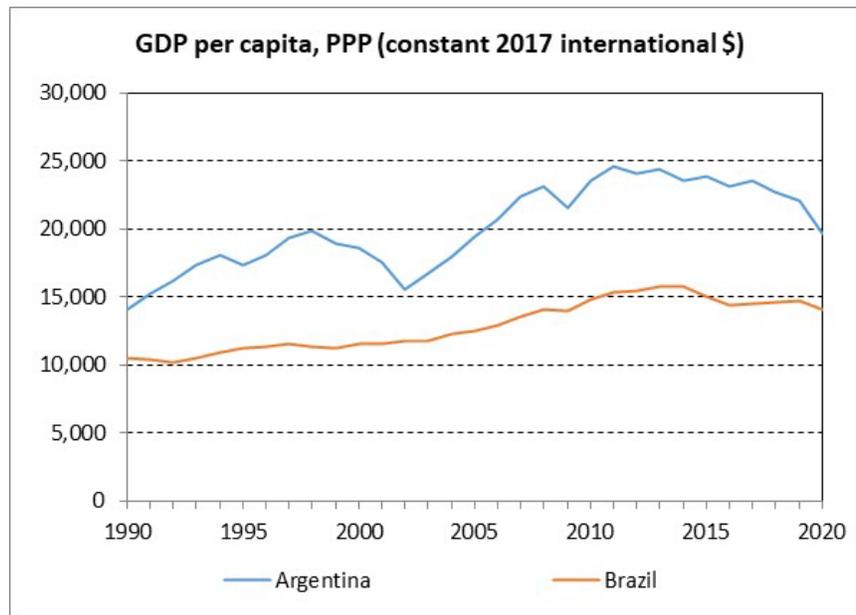
³ World Bank (2022).

as well as record high levels of exports. However, it also points out that almost 40 percent of Argentina’s population lives in poverty and the country has been experiencing its highest rate of inflation in 30 years which contributes to the high poverty rate.

III. Socio-economic Background

Since 1990, the earliest available data from the World Bank (2022), purchasing power parity (PPP)-adjusted GDP per capita in Brazil has remained at the minimum \$3,621 and at the maximum \$9,324 below that of Argentina. Brazil’s GDP per capita has, for the most part, consistently increased during this period, except for a slight decline in 2016 and another decline in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Argentina’s increase in GDP per capita has been less consistent than Brazil’s, with a large decrease in the early 2000s and many smaller drops throughout the 2010s. Additionally, Argentina experienced a greater decrease in GDP per capita due to the COVID-19 pandemic than Brazil did. Overall, Argentina’s GDP per capita has increased from \$14,145 in 1990 to \$19,691 in 2020 and Brazil’s GDP per capita has increased from \$10,521 in 1990 to \$14,064 in 2020. Thus, though Brazil has experienced more steady growth, Argentina has had the bigger overall increase in GDP per capita in absolute values.

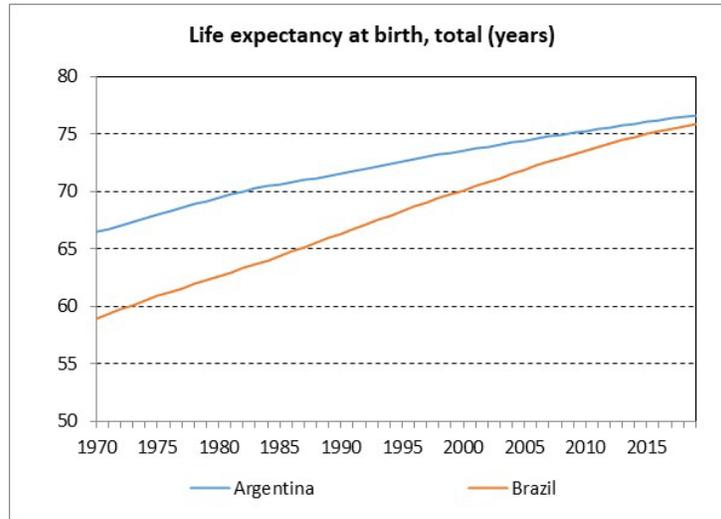
Figure 1: PPP-adjusted GDP per capita, 1990–2020



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2022).

As shown in Figure 2, Argentina has also had a higher life expectancy at birth than Brazil since 1970, however, Brazil has closed the gap quite a lot and the difference between the two is now less than one year. Both countries have seen only increases in life expectancy since 1970, but Brazil’s rate of growth has been significantly higher than that of Argentina, moving from 58.9 years in 1970 to 75.9 years in 2019. Argentina, in contrast, had a life expectancy of 66.5 years in 1970, which increased to 76.7 years in 2019.

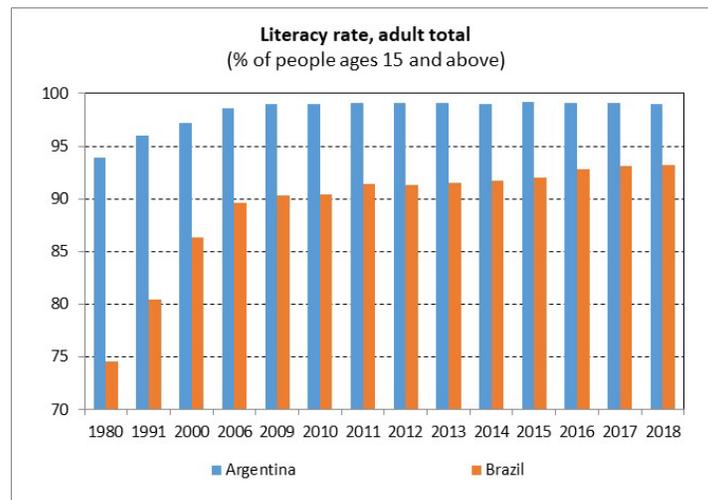
Figure 2: Life Expectancy at Birth, 1970–2019



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2022).

Until 2009, there are very few years for which the World Bank (2022) has data for literacy for both Argentina and Brazil. Figure 3 shows all the years for which such data was either available for both countries or could have been estimated based on close-by years. Despite the limited data, Figure 3 clearly shows that Argentina’s literacy rates have always been higher than those of Brazil during 1980 and 2018.

Figure 3: Adult Literacy (for years with data for both countries)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2022).

Figure 3 also shows that Brazil’s literacy rates have improved significantly from 1980 to 1991 (5.9 percentage points), from 1991 to 2000 (also 5.9 percentage points), and once again from 2000 to 2006 (3.2 percentage points), while they have increased by only 2.9 percentage points from 2009 to 2018. Argentina’s literacy rates have also increased from 1980 to 1991, from 1991 to 2000, and

once again from 2000 to 2006, though far less than in Brazil. Furthermore, while Brazil still saw some small increases from 2009 to 2018, Argentina’s literacy rates have been stagnating during the same period, fluctuating marginally between a minimum of 99.0 percent and a maximum of 99.2 percent within this period.

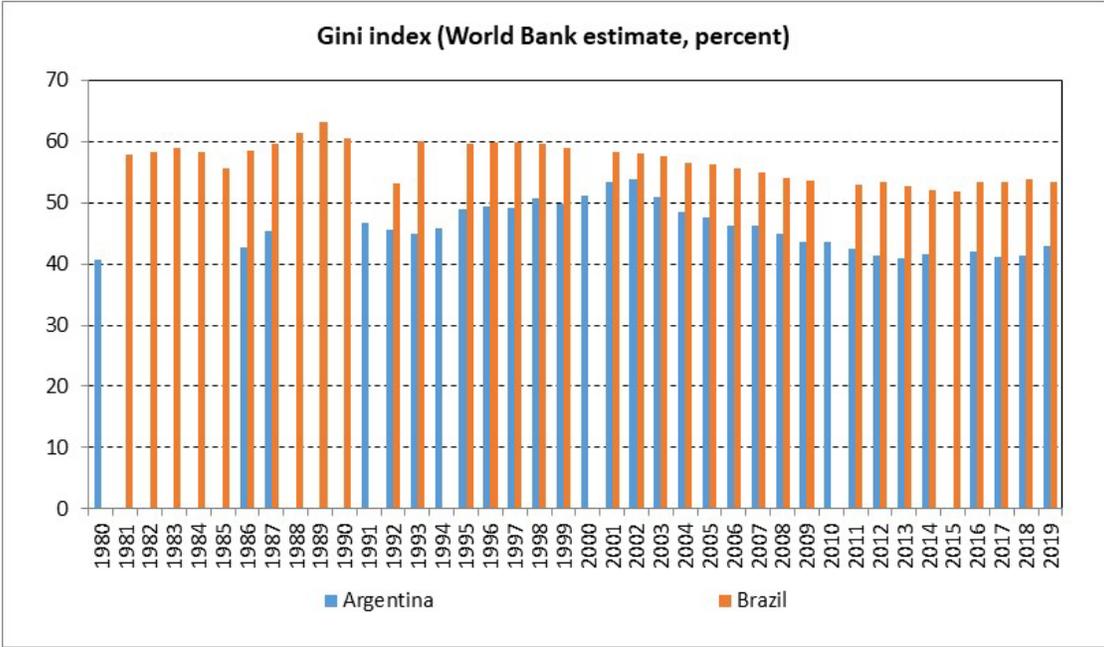
There are numerous other indicators that could be used to determine the development status of these two countries, however, based on these three indicators (GDP per capita, life expectancy, and adult literacy), it is clear that Argentina has a higher level of human development than Brazil as it has a higher GDP per capita, a greater life expectancy, and a higher adult literacy rate. Indeed, based on the latest Human Development Index (HDI) dataset, Argentina has an HDI of 0.842 in 2021 (rank 47 among 191 countries), while Brazil’s HDI was 0.754 for the same year (rank 87 among 191 countries).⁴

IV. Analysis of Inequality in Argentina and Brazil

IV.1. Gini Index and Income Inequality

Aside from Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America is the most unequal region in the world. The most popular measure used to determine inequality is the Gini index. A Gini index of 0 equates to perfect equality and a Gini of 1 (or 100 percent) equates to perfect inequality. Brazil has consistently scored among the highest countries on the Gini index, always above 50 percent, and has even scored above 60 percent in the past, making it one of the most unequal countries in one of the most unequal regions.⁵

Figure 4: Gini Index (all available years)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2022).

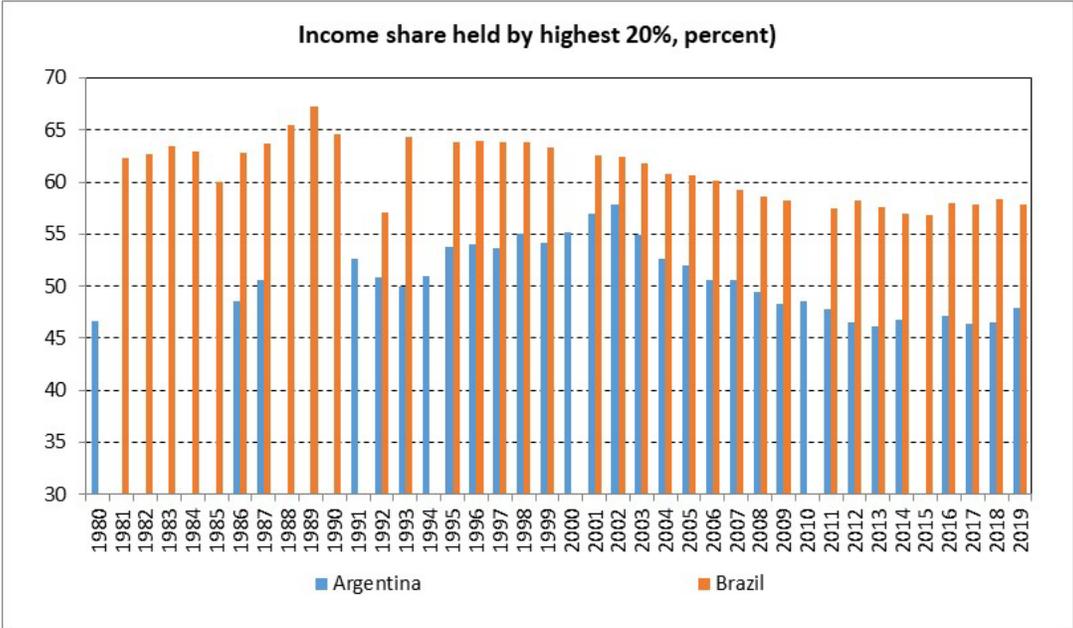
⁴ See: <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI>.

⁵ World Bank (2022).

Argentina, though not quite as unequal as Brazil and several other Latin American countries, has still scored fairly high on the Gini index compared to all countries worldwide, never achieving a score below 40 percent. As shown in Figure 4, Argentina reached its peak Gini index at 53.8 percent in 2002, while Brazil reached its peak Gini index in 1989 at 63.3 percent. Both Argentina and Brazil enjoyed decreasing inequality throughout the early 2000s, but around 2010 both started to even out and remained relatively constant throughout the 2010s. However, both countries have experienced increases in inequality in more recent years: Argentina saw an increase in the Gini from 41.3 percent in 2018 to 42.9 percent in 2019, while Brazil experienced a significant increase in the Gini from 51.9 percent in 2015 to 53.9 percent in 2018. The COVID-19 pandemic is expected to have increased inequality further in nearly all countries of the world.⁶

Another way to measure income inequality is to compare the shares of income held by a country’s richest 20 percent and poorest 20 percent. Figures 5 and 6 show the evolution of these indicators in Argentina and Brazil for all available years between 1992 and 2019. These indicators have followed similar patterns over time in both Argentina and Brazil, however the income shares for the wealthiest 20 percent and the poorest 20 percent have been higher and lower, respectively, in Brazil, demonstrating the greater level of income inequality that exists there. In Brazil, the income share held by the wealthiest 20 percent of the population has fluctuated between a minimum of 57.0 percent and a maximum of 64.3 percent, while the share held by the poorest 20 percent has fluctuated between a minimum of 2.2 percent and a maximum of 3.6 percent. Alternatively, in Argentina, the income share held by the wealthiest 20 percent of the population has fluctuate between a minimum of 46.1 percent and a maximum of 57.8 percent (barely higher than the minimum in Brazil), while the share held by the poorest 20 percent has fluctuated between a minimum of 2.6 percent and a maximum of 5.1 percent.

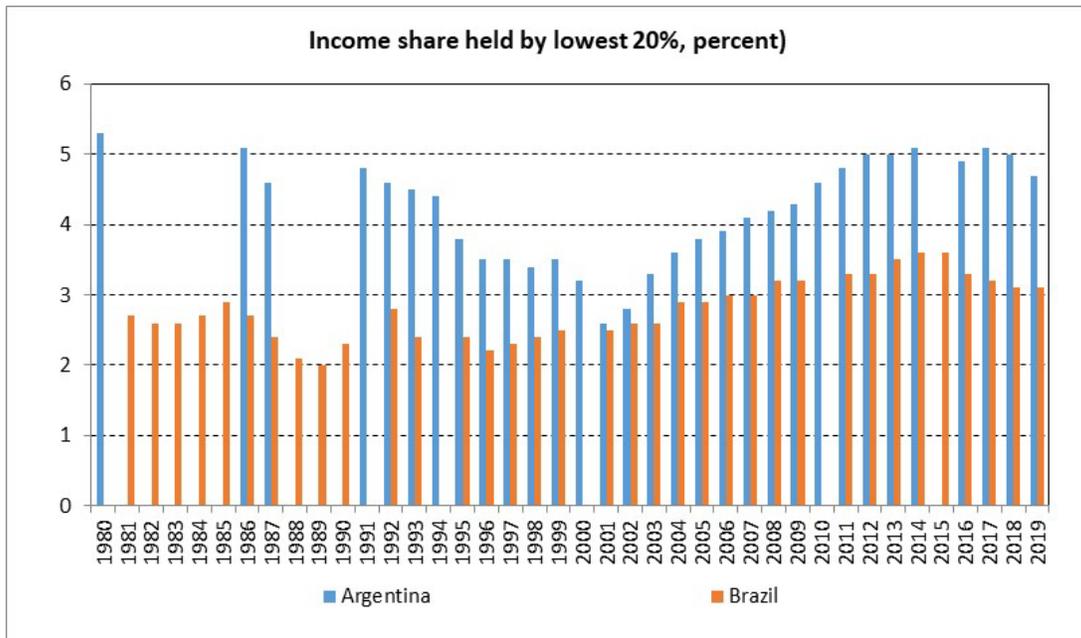
Figure 5: Income Share Held by the Highest 20 Percent (all available years)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2022).

⁶ Stiglitz (2020).

Figure 6: Income Share Held by the Lowest 20 Percent (all available years)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2022).

Oxfam International (2022) provides important statistics that demonstrate the current culture of inequality in Brazil. A minimum wage worker in Brazil would have to work 19 years to make what an individual in Brazil’s richest 0.1 percent makes in just a month. At Brazil’s current rate of progress, the gender wage gap will not be eliminated until 2047 and the racial wage gap will continue to exist until 2089. The gap between Brazil’s richest and poorest is also substantial, with the richest 5 percent bringing in the same amount of income as the remaining 95 percent of the population. Just the 6 richest individuals in Brazil, all men, have the same amount of wealth as the poorest 50 percent of the population, approximately 100 million people.⁷

While Brazil has made significant progress in recent years in terms of lifting many out of poverty, the extreme inequality that persists in the country is a huge threat to this progress and will likely cause many more to fall back into poverty. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic is a big factor in the great inequality in Brazil. In 2020, earnings for Brazil’s poorest 40 percent dropped by one third due to the pandemic, however, earnings for the richest 10 percent dropped by only 3 percent. During this period, however, Brazil’s economy saw significant growth.⁸ Marcelo Nery, director of the Center for Social Policies at the Fundação Getúlio Vargas, a higher education institution and think tank in Brazil, said in 2020, “GDP was better than expected, the currency appreciated, the stock market is up. Even formal job creation has improved”⁹ but the positive effects of these economic boosts were clearly not felt by the Brazilian population as a whole, in fact circumstances deteriorated during the pandemic for the country’s poorest.

⁷ Oxfam International (2022).

⁸ Tornaghi (2021).

⁹ Tornaghi (2021).

Increasing income inequality has even had an impact on happiness index scores. Between 2019 and 2020, happiness index scores for Brazil's poorest 40 percent decreased significantly, while scores for Brazil's richest 20 percent actually increased slightly. This substantial decrease in happiness scores for the poorest 40 percent in Brazil pulled the average score down so much that, in a study of 40 countries worldwide, Brazil's overall happiness index score fell the greatest amount. Additionally, in 2021 Brazil hit a record high of 14.7 percent unemployment, putting further constraints on Brazil's poorest and exacerbating the already extreme inequality in the country.¹⁰

Argentina, though not as unequal as Brazil based on the Gini index for income inequality, has experienced a persistent increase in income inequality since 2016, a trend that has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Argentina has also experienced economic growth, like Brazil, with April 2022 marking a record high for the country's exports. However, nearly 40 percent of the country's population remains in poverty. Additionally, inflation is at 29.3 percent, the highest it has been in 30 years, which disproportionately affects the country's weakest. Furthermore, the concentration of wealth is very high in Argentina, with Argentina's richest 10 percent controlling more wealth than 60 percent of the country and there has been little development of the idea of social responsibility for Argentina's business leaders.¹¹

IV.2. Government Spending on Education

Government spending on education has been linked to a decrease in inequality in both Brazil and Argentina.¹² Figures 7 and 8 demonstrate the evolution of government expenditure per student (% of GDP per capita) for primary, secondary, and tertiary education, respectively in Argentina and Brazil. Overall, Argentina shows declining trends in all three education sectors during the late 1990s and early 2000s, followed by relatively sharp increases until 2009, and an overall stagnating trend from 2009 to 2017. Brazil's trends in government spending differ by sector: for tertiary education, government spending having been decreasing from 2002 to 2008, followed by an overall stabilization from 2008 to 2014, and a relative sharp increase from 2014 to 2015; for primary and secondary education, government spending have been increasing during the 2000s, but have overall stabilized during the five years such data is available in the 2010s.

Figure 7 also shows that with the exception of 1998 to 2000, Argentina's government expenditures per student (% of GDP per capita) were the largest for secondary education, while they were (with exception of 2003) the lowest for primary education. Except for a few years, government expenditures per student (% of GDP per capita) for tertiary education were in between those of primary education and secondary education.

Comparing Figure 7 for Argentina with Figure 8 for Brazil, we can see that the ranking of government spending across primary, secondary and tertiary education is very different in Brazil. Brazil's government expenditures per student (% of GDP per capita) were always the largest for tertiary education, while they were about the same for primary and secondary education. Brazil's disproportionately high government expenditures per student (% of GDP per capita) in tertiary education can be considered to worsen inequality, as at least in the past only already wealthy and privileged groups attended tertiary education. Fortunately, Brazil's tertiary school enrollment has

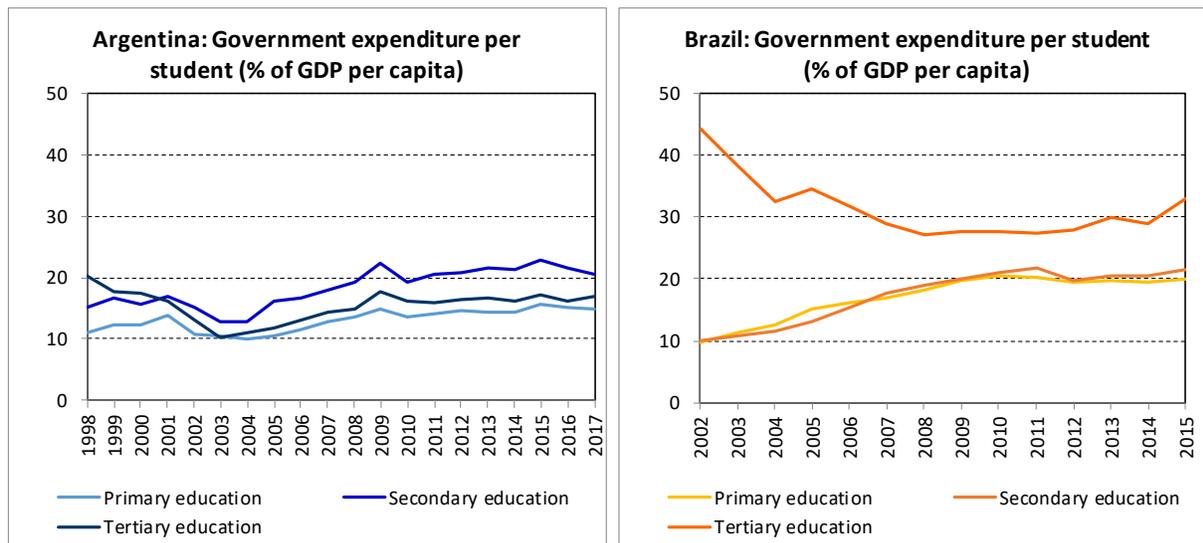
¹⁰ This paragraph is based on information provided by Tornaghi (2021).

¹¹ This paragraph is based on information provided by Pilatti (2022) and Meschke (2018).

¹² Lustig, Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez (2012).

increased from 16.1 percent in 1999 to 55.1 percent in 2019. Despite this increase in tertiary school enrollment, Brazil's tertiary school enrollment is still far below that of Argentina, where tertiary school enrollment has increased from 48.8 percent in 1999 to 95.4 percent in 2019.¹³

Figures 7 and 8: Government Expenditure Per Student (% of GDP per capita) for Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Education, respectively in Argentina and Brazil



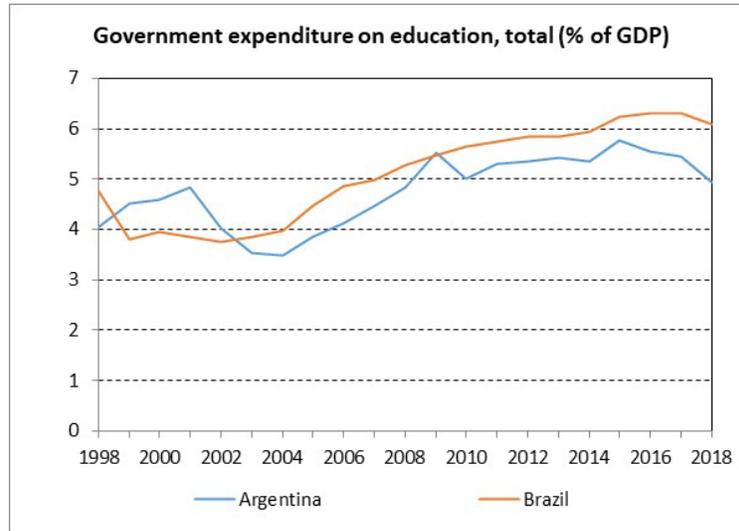
Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2022).

Figure 9 shows total government expenditure on education as percent of GDP from 1998 to 2018, which are the years the World Bank has data for both countries. Excluding the late 1990s and the early 2000s, the overall trend has been increasing for both countries. However, government expenditures on education have (as percent of GDP) been declining in Argentina from 2015 to 2018, while they have overall stabilized during the same period in Brazil. Figure 9 shows that from 2004-2017, Brazil had a slow, but steady increase in spending on education, in terms of percent of GDP, from 4.0 percent to 6.3 percent, with a small drop down to 6.1 percent in 2018. Argentina's trend is less steady. It had a faster growth rate than Brazil from 2004-2009, but then had a sharp decline and experienced only minor increases and decreases since then, bringing it back to 4.9 percent, slightly less than the 5.0 percent of GDP the government spent on education in 2010. With exception of 2009, Brazil had spent more on education than Argentina during the last two decades (as percent of GDP).

While the higher and long-term increase in spending on education may have a positive effect on overall equality in Brazil, more spending may be required, especially as Brazil's literacy rates have stagnated at around 91 to 94 percent during the last ten years such data is available. The stagnating literacy rate also seems to indicate that education spending is not being targeted sufficiently on making sure that everybody can read and write.

¹³ The data on tertiary school enrollment have been taken from World Bank (2022).

Figure 9: Total Government Expenditure on Education (percent of GDP)



Source: Created by author based on World Bank (2022).

V. Ethical Analysis

As stated by Beghin (2008, p. 2), “in contemporary democracies, inequalities and poverty result from tensions between the ethical requirements related to rights and the imperative of economic efficacy; between the legal order that promises equality and the reality of exclusion brought about by the exercise of power.” This section reviews first some ethical implications of inequality in Argentina and Brazil, and then examines the recent attempts of these two countries to curb inequality.

V.1. Ethical Implications of Inequality

It has been claimed by many that income inequality is morally justified because it is a result of free markets. These claims are especially popular among those in power, as they are typically the ones to benefit from income inequality. One exception to this is Chris Hughes, a facebook cofounder. Hughes actually attributes his financial success mainly to luck.¹⁴ If income equality exists because of luck, it can certainly be argued that income inequality is then inherently unfair - why should some be so much better off than others simply because they have good luck?

Many also argue that financial success is a result of hard work and for that reason income inequality is ethical, however, there are millions of people worldwide who work hard every day and yet still live in poverty which proves this theory untrue. Another justification for inequality is that it maximizes total income. While it may be true that a certain amount of inequality is necessary to encourage hard work which maximizes income, the levels of extreme inequality that exist worldwide today have the potential to be extremely detrimental to economic growth.

Numerous philosophers have reached different conclusions about the ethics of inequality. Kant’s humanist approach believes that, by nature of being human, all humans have an inherent right to

¹⁴ Basu (2018).

be treated equally, in which case inequality is unethical because it is a breach of one's human rights. Rousseau's idea of a social contract implies equality because people would not "sign" the contract if it involved inequality. A third approach is that of Rawls which states that inequality is justified if the poorest person is better off than they would be with equality. If this idea is applied to the extreme inequality in Brazil and Argentina, then the inequality is not justified because the poorest people there would certainly be better off with equality than they are now with inequality. Libertarians, specifically the 17th century philosopher John Locke, believe inequality to be justified as long as wealth is acquired legitimately. There is certainly more controversy on this front, with valid arguments on both sides of the debate over whether people with large amounts of wealth have obtained that wealth legitimately or not. This idea also has to be applied separately to all people with great amounts of wealth as there are innumerable different ways of acquiring wealth, some legitimate and others not.

V.2. Attempts to Curb Inequality

In 2020, Argentina implemented a tax on the wealthiest members of its population. The tax will only apply to those with assets of more than \$2.5 million, or 200 million pesos, which is about 12,000 Argentinians. These people will have to pay up to 3.5 percent on wealth in Argentina, and up to 5.25 percent on wealth anywhere outside the country.¹⁵ Though this tax does not treat all citizens equally, it is still in line with the fairness or justice approach to ethics because it promotes fairness by taxing all citizens equitably. Of the money raised from the new tax, 20 percent will go to medical supplies, 20 percent to relief for small and medium sized businesses, 20 percent to scholarships for students, 15 percent to social developments, and 25 percent to natural gas ventures.¹⁶

These all have potential to have equalizing effects in Argentina. Some of them also have the potential to increase inequality. For example, scholarships to students from poor households would likely have an equalizing effect but providing scholarships to students from upper class families has the potential to increase education inequality. The same goes for the purchase of medical supplies, depending on who those supplies are given to. The biggest portion of revenue from the new tax will go towards natural gas ventures, which may not seem related to inequality, however, climate change and global warming disproportionately impact poorer communities so any action to curb climate change is likely to have a positive impact on those communities. Overall, the tax is in line with the common good approach to ethics because the money that the country brings in from the tax will be used to benefit society as a whole. However, according to Meschke (2018), there has been little development of the idea of social responsibility for Argentina's business leaders.

Large scale conditional cash transfer programs have also had equalizing effects in Latin America. Despite being a small portion of total government social spending, these cash transfer programs have "remarkable distributive power."¹⁷ In Brazil, the Bolsa Familia program has been successful in reducing inequality and is actually the largest conditional cash transfer program in the world. The program, introduced in 2003, provides cash transfers from the federal government to low-income families as long as they agree to certain conditions. Conditions differ for each family but

¹⁵ This paragraph is based on information provided in British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (2020).

¹⁶ British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) (2020).

¹⁷ Lustig, Lopez-Calva and Ortiz-Juarez (2012), p. 12.

can include school attendance, immunization, prenatal monitoring, and remedial education. The program has had a very large public impact, reaching 46 million people and 1 in every 4 families in Brazil. Three in four Bolsa Familia beneficiaries are Afro-descendants and more than half are women.¹⁸ Conditional cash transfer programs such as Bolsa Familia are in line with the utilitarian approach to ethics. In addition to combating income inequality with the cash transfers, the conditions that must be met by recipients also work to combat inequalities in health and education, maximizing the net benefit of the program.

VI. Conclusion

As is evident, inequality is a prominent issue in both Argentina and Brazil, though certainly to a greater extent in Brazil. Despite economic growth, inequality remains persistent. This inequality does not just refer to the income gap, but also differences in access to things such as healthcare and education. There is also gender and racial inequality, as women and Afro-descendants are more likely to lack access to these necessities.

Argentina and Brazil have both taken substantial action to reduce inequality and while the programs implemented have had equalizing effects, it is still not enough as inequality remains prominent. Both countries must take further actions to redistribute wealth from the wealthiest in the country to the poorest who are living in poverty. They must also do more to ensure all people have access to adequate healthcare and education regardless of their gender, race, or economic status.

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