

# Could Brazil's success in tackling intersecting inequalities be a model for the rest of the world?



*Often cited as one of the most unequal societies in the world, between 2002 and 2013 Brazil made significant progress in reducing inequality, especially amongst those facing multiple and overlapping inequalities. Drawing on insights from their recent [working paper](#) for the LSE International Inequalities Institute, **Naila Kabeer** (LSE International Development/Gender Studies) and **Ricardo Santos** (UNU-WIDER) argue that a better understanding of Brazil's achievements could help other countries make real progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.*

Recent decades have seen growing concern about the dramatic rise in income inequality across the world, with the global financial crisis bringing the phenomenon to the forefront of public consciousness.

During the same period, the UN Millennium Development Goals were criticised for their failure to acknowledge even income inequality, systematically excluding those at the intersection of multiple and overlapping inequalities from the progress reported by their home countries.



Staff of an NGO focusing on gender and racial inequalities in Salvador, Bahia ([Daniele Rodrigues, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#))

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that superseded the Millennium Development Goals in 2015 show clear signs of lessons having been learnt, with efforts to help the hardest to reach of the have-nots rather than simply bagging "easy wins". SDG 10 also goes beyond income inequalities to include inequalities based on sex, race, ethnicity, origin, religion, or other status, alongside a commitment to "leave no one behind".

There is much to be learnt from countries that have made progress in this direction, of which Brazil is one of the most important. Infamously one of the most unequal countries in the world, Brazil has attracted attention since the start of the millennium by reducing both absolute poverty *and* income inequality at a time when income inequalities were rising around the world. But less well-known are its advances in reducing intersecting inequalities.

## No one left behind? Brazil's decline in intersecting inequalities 2002-2013

[Our research](#) analyses [Brazilian household survey data](#) in terms of SDG indicators, finding clear evidence of improved lives and life chances for groups at the intersection of income inequality, marginalized group identities, and disadvantaged locations during the period 2002-2013.

*Income inequalities:*

Gender, ethno-racial, and regional inequalities in income all declined. The overall decline in poverty was larger among the most deprived ethnic groups, particularly black and mixed Brazilians, but also among indigenous people.

**Table 1: Indicators of group-based income inequalities**

Income Inequalities	Gender		Ethnic		Regional	
	2002	2013	2002	2013	2002	2013
Group weighted...						
Coeff. of Variation	0.338	<b>0.256</b>	0.567	<b>0.406</b>	0.250	<b>0.229</b>
Gini	0.169	<b>0.128</b>	0.175	<b>0.147</b>	0.159	<b>0.134</b>
Theil	0.062	<b>0.036</b>	0.061	<b>0.045</b>	0.044	<b>0.034</b>

Source: Kabeer and Santos (2017), calculations using data from PNAD 2002 and 2013

*Wage inequalities:*

There was a convergence of income among market occupations, particularly in relation to domestic work but also informal labour. The formalization of work status emerged as a major indicator of improvement in working conditions for those most disadvantaged by intersecting inequalities.

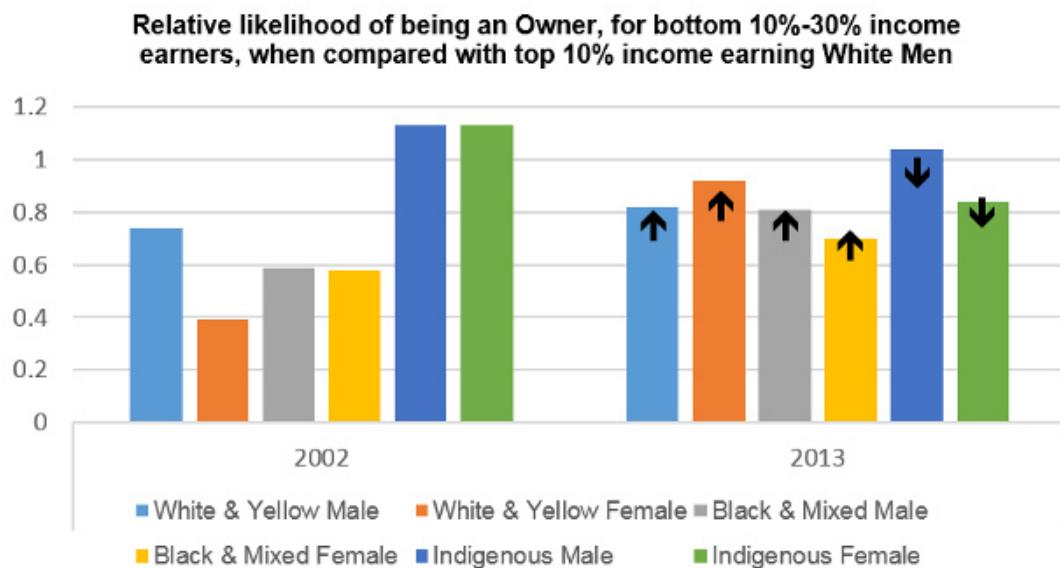
**Table 2: Average monthly wages by occupation**

Occupations	2002	2013	Yearly □%
Public Administration	1,033.9	2,747.8	<b>9.3%</b>
Other industrial activities	970.4	2,611.6	<b>9.4%</b>
Other Activities	1,075.6	2,496.3	<b>8.0%</b>
Education, Health and Social Services	768.9	2,285.0	<b>10.4%</b>
Transport, Storage and Communications	760.8	1,770.7	<b>8.0%</b>
Manufacturing	617.3	1,519.8	<b>8.5%</b>
Other collective, social and personal services	522.7	1,397.2	<b>9.3%</b>
Trade and Repairs	574.3	1,393.7	<b>8.4%</b>
Construction	482.2	1,371.4	<b>10.0%</b>
Underdefined Activities	348.2	1,170.0	<b>11.6%</b>
Accommodation and Food	419.7	1,169.0	<b>9.8%</b>
Agriculture	177.1	796.5	<b>14.6%</b>
Domestic Services	205.5	685.1	<b>11.6%</b>

Source: [Kabeer and Santos \(2017\)](#), calculations using data from PNAD 2002 and 2013; red (green) indicates that the occupation's wage yearly growth is below (above) the mean wage growth.

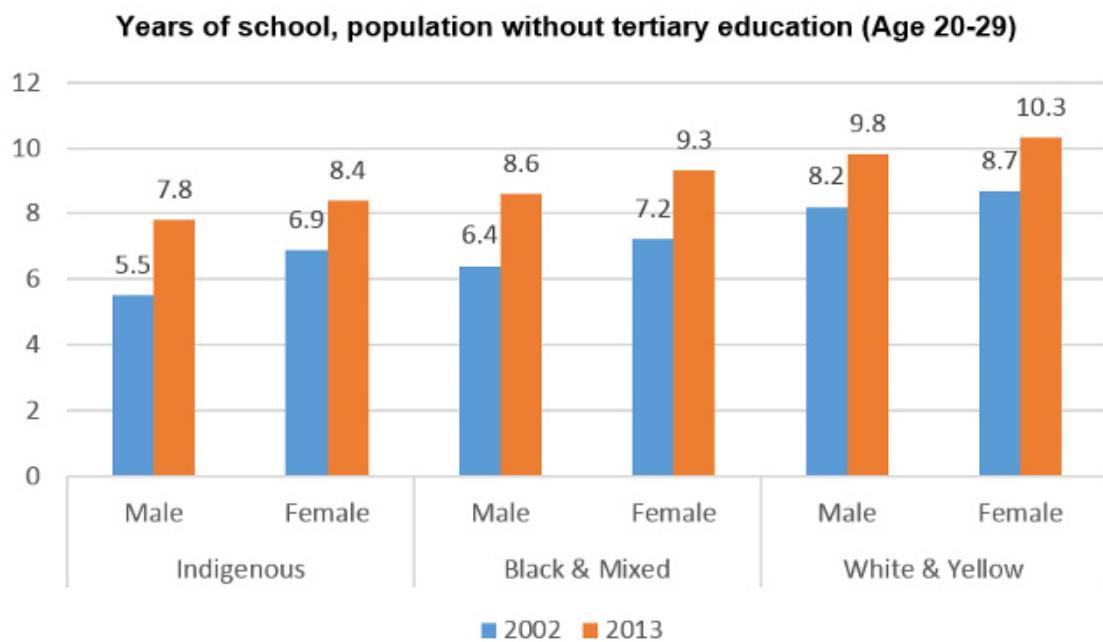
*Land rights:*

Increased formalisation of land rights has also benefited most groups, with the exception of indigenous men and women.



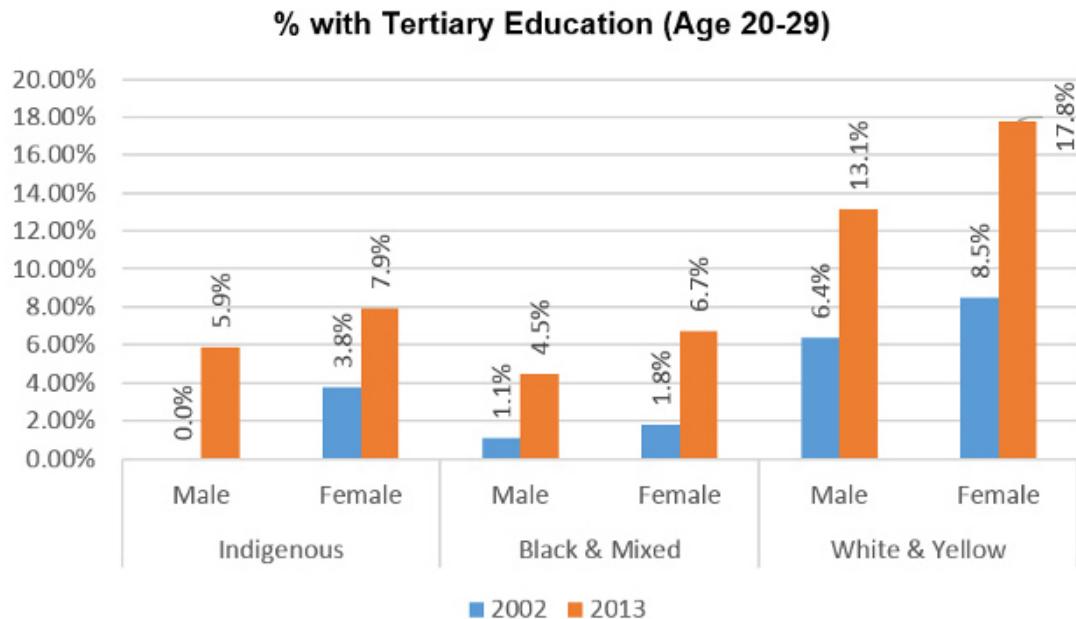
Source: based on calculations from [Kabeer and Santos \(2017\)](#), using data from PNAD 2002 and 2013

#### *Education:*



Source: based on calculations from [Kabeer and Santos \(2017\)](#), using data from PNAD 2002 and 2013

Both pre-school and primary school enrolment have improved, with convergence towards the levels of boys from the richest and most privileged ethno-racial group. In addition, years of primary and secondary education and the proportion of individuals with tertiary education increased for all groups, including groups at the intersection of different inequalities.



Source: based on calculations from [Kabeer and Santos \(2017\)](#), using data from PNAD 2002 and 2013

### Brazil's break with history: policies for social change

Many have pointed to the commodity boom and the strong growth rates as the main explanations for declining economic inequalities in the early 2000s, but earlier periods of growth [did not have the same impact](#). Even the so called 'miracle years' of growth between 1967 and 1973 saw a widening of income inequalities.

Instead, focus should be directed to the policies of the '[liberal neo-developmental policy regime](#)' adopted in the wake of Brazil's democratic transition. The left-wing Workers Party that took power in 2001 upheld the previous regime's commitment to promote Brazil's global competitiveness and retained several of its orthodox macroeconomic policies, but it also pursued an agenda marking a clear break with classic neoliberal prescriptions:

- *Interventionist economic policy*

Lula's '[growth acceleration program](#)' expanded aggregate demand through state investment in infrastructure, increased supply of credit by state banks, and greater investment by state-owned enterprises. The state also underwrote public enterprises competing in the open economy and diversifying the domestic productive base.

- *Labour-market policies*

With job growth resulting from economic recovery, [additional policies](#) were put in place to encourage greater formalization of the economy.

- *Redistributive policies*

The Lula administrations 2003-2011 consolidated all federal guaranteed-income programmes into *Bolsa Família* while also expanding the target population to 13 million households, thereby halving the number of people below the poverty line. A policy of regularly increasing the minimum wage above the inflation rate saw the incomes of the bottom quintile of labour rise by 38% from 2003 to 2008. Growth in social expenditure led to multiplier effects through its impact on domestic demand.

### The politics of social change: mobilising from the grassroots

But how did this liberal neo-developmental regime come to be adopted in the first place?

One important explanatory factor is the long history of social mobilisation that brought the Workers Party into power. The military regime's disregard for human rights and legality cost it the support of several traditional political allies, opening up space for grassroots opposition. Simultaneously, the [growing prominence of cultural politics](#) extended the movement beyond the demand for formal institutions of democracy to the demand for equality and participation for poor and marginalised groups.

New interpretations of citizenship provided a common ground between those advancing redistributive demands and those challenging cultural rules that denied them recognition, thereby giving rise to new categories of rights. Labour organisations emerged as the most influential groups pushing for change, with the New Union Movement taking advantage of the legalisation of new political parties to establish the Workers Party. With its leadership drawn from the popular classes, the party was strongly committed to fostering grassroots democratic practices both *before* and for some time *after* it achieved power.

In sum, Brazil's break with its longstanding history of intersecting inequalities should be considered in light of a willingness to move away from the policy orthodoxy associated with rising inequalities elsewhere thanks in part to the support of extended social mobilisation.

With the end of Workers Party rule, the entire Brazilian political system has become mired in allegations of corruption. The recent economic decline [has been attributed](#) to the fact that Brazil's pattern of growth failed to bring major productivity and technological gains. Meanwhile, regressive taxes continue to account for half of the country's tax revenue.

Ultimately, redistribution did not go far enough to enable those at the bottom to become a political force strong enough to hold the party accountable to its electorate, prevent the slide into corruption, and counter the ongoing influence of powerful interests with a stake in defending the status quo.

Notes:

- The views expressed here are of the authors and do not reflect the position of the Centre or of the LSE
- This work draws on the authors' working paper "[Intersecting Inequalities and the Sustainable Development Goals: insights from Brazil](#)" (LSE International Inequalities Institute, 2017), also published as [WIDER Working Paper 167/2017](#)
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#### **Naila Kabeer – LSE International Development/Gender Studies**

Naila Kabeer is Professor of Gender and Development at the Departments of International Development and Gender Studies, London School of Economics and Political Science. Her work focuses on gender, labour markets, social exclusion, social protection and collective action.



#### **Ricardo Santos – UNU-WIDER**

Dr Ricardo Santos is a Research Fellow of the United Nations University World Institute of Development Economics Research – UNU-WIDER, stationed in Maputo, Mozambique. He is also an Associate Researcher of the Institute of International Inequalities of the London School of Economics and a visiting researcher at the National Centre of Scientific Research (CNIC) of the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL).