

Social Inequalities, the World Cup, and Some Simple Solutions

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The World Cup is the most widely viewed sporting event around the world. Millions of viewers will tune in Sunday to watch the broadcast of the upcoming final match and cheer on their favorite teams as they battle for the golden trophy. In the United States, the event has become a much anticipated and celebrated source of entertainment – an opportunity for people to show support for their country and an excuse to grab a drink and watch the game with friends at a local bar. While the cameras zoom in on the athletes and the excitement of sport fans, many Brazilians would rather the world focus on the persistent social inequalities in their country.

According to a poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, the majority of Brazilians (six out of ten, to be exact) believe that the World Cup will do little to improve the social conditions of their country. This statistic is particularly shocking given that Brazil is considered one of the most soccer-obsessed countries in the world. Not only has Brazil won the World Cup five times, it has also produced world-renowned players such as Pele and Ronaldo.

Despite their love for soccer, Brazilians are enraged at their government's decision to spend an estimated \$14 billion to host the World Cup. Many people are concerned about the lavish spending on a sport event while turning a blind eye to the pressing social challenges in health, education, housing, infrastructure, and disproportionate poverty. It isn't hard to understand the frustration that many of the people of Brazil must feel as they watch poor people being forced out of their favelas when the construction of the stadiums began. More recently, thousands of homeless people have held demonstrations to call attention to their poor living conditions and their right to housing. In Rio de Janeiro, demonstrators have clashed with police and armed forces, resulting in many injuries and some deaths. The justified demands of the demonstrators and the social movement in Brazil require a simple understanding of the social inequalities that adversely affect people's everyday lives.

Income Inequality: Brazil has one of the top ten largest economies in the world, yet people living in Brazil experience one of the highest levels of inequality (ranked twelfth globally in social inequality). For instance, the richest 10% take about 80% of the total income, while the poorest 35% take a merely 1%. About 10% of the population lives on less than 2 U.S. dollars per-day. These numbers mean that a small number of people have an astronomical amount of income at their disposal, enough to live a million lifetimes, while a larger proportion of the population is living in dire conditions.

Health Inequalities: Health inequalities can be measured in many ways; however, life expectancy is considered the best indicator of health because it directly reflects the state of health during a person's lifetime. The average life expectancy in Brazil is 73 years, but this average varies as much as 13 years between rich and poor neighborhoods. Consider the life expectancy at birth of two male Brazilian babies living in two different locations in Rio de Janeiro, one living in poverty and the other in wealth. Although these babies might live just a few miles away, the poor baby is likely to live 13 years less than the rich baby. In other words, the rich baby is likely to see and celebrate his 74th birthday while the poor baby is lucky if he makes it to see his 61st birthday. Similarly, a poor female baby will live to 72 years of age while a rich female baby will live up to 81 years. Indeed, such health inequalities reveal the lack of opportunity for the poor to live healthy, dignified lives.

Gender Inequality: Brazil lags behind many industrial countries in gender equality. According to the

Gender Inequality Index developed by the United Nations, Brazil is ranked 85 out of 148 countries. In 2008, it was estimated that women's wages were approximately 84% of men's. More disturbing is that this gap increases at higher levels of education: among individuals with 12 or more years of schooling, women only earned 58% of the income of their male counterparts. This means that women and men with the same amount of education receive significantly different wages, suggesting extreme gender and structural inequality in the workplace.

Solutions: The Brazilian government has made notable attempts to combat poverty and social inequalities. According to the World Bank, poverty has fallen from 21% in 2003 to 11% over the last decade. Many social initiatives such as Bolsa Familia have significantly reduced poverty, providing financial assistance and lifelines to students and families in need. But despite the economic improvements of the last decade, it remains to be seen if the World Cup investments will produce any social benefits to the Brazilian people. Some solutions, however, are relatively simple:

First, it is estimated that FIFA will rake in over \$4 billion from the World Cup. Instead of pocketing the astronomical profits, FIFA could, and arguably should, return some of these profits to Brazil to assist with the expenses the country has incurred by hosting the World Cup. An alternative and potentially more valuable solution would be for FIFA to return some of its profits to social programs that would alleviate social inequalities.

Second, there need to be regulations put in place to ensure that FIFA's actions are transparent and that the organization is accountable for how it handles its profits. Corruption has been a prominent issue throughout the history of FIFA. In 2011 Jack Warner, vice president of FIFA, resigned after being charged with multiple counts of corruption, including taking an estimated \$500,000 in bribes in exchange for helping to Australia's unsuccessful bid as World Cup host in 2022. More recently, Joseph Blatter, the president of FIFA, has faced corruption allegations over the decision to make Qatar the World Cup host in 2022. Ironically, FIFA is classified as a non-profit organization, yet Joseph Blatter has an estimated net worth of \$10 million and his salary remains a secret.

Third, the Brazilian government needs to democratize the operation and activities of the World Cup. For instance, the government could give indigenous people in the Amazon and other parts of Brazil more power to decide how their land is used without external threats from mining companies and international corporations. This includes the threat of continuing to build buildings and stadiums in their lands. Taking this action would be a first step toward creating a balance of power and equity in Brazil.

Social inequalities in Brazil are no illusion. They are very much real, and tackling the issue of inequality from the root of the problem through empowerment and social and economic reform is a longer-term solution that has the potential to improve the quality of life for the millions of people in Brazil. After all, besides golden trophies and profits, capitalizing on our human bonds and kinship manifested in social equality is an ideal worth pursuing.

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