Challenges to building longtermism in Brazil

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Tinyurl for this memo: tinyurl.com/longotermismobrasil

About this memo

1. **Goal**: To provoke discussion and deepen the debate. Apart from the Condor Camp team retreat, I haven't discussed this subject with anyone else in EA Brazil in this level of detail (as far as I remember). I believe that people who work or plan to work on long-termism should discuss this much more.
2. **Epistemic state**: Trying to be less confused; I don't have much confidence in many typologies and solutions/conclusions. However, I am reasonably confident about conclusions leaning towards caution and slowness due to recent difficulties and scandals, even though I haven't developed them deeply yet. I hope this is a good space to make them more robust by receiving criticism.
3. **Privacy**: Do not share this document outside of this group without asking me first (renannascimentoaraujo@gmail.com).

Why build longtermism in Brazil?

1. **Talent search**
    a. I believe this aspect accounts for >70% of the reason to build the field in the country.
2. **Damage control**
    a. Without proactive efforts to popularize the field with high fidelity and quality, there is a possibility that media articles or rumors could negatively popularize the field in Brazil (e.g., the poorly written article in Nexo, which is currently the main coverage of the topic by a Brazilian media outlet, as far as I know).
3. **Indirect effects in geopolitically strategic regions**
    a. The popularization of the field in an academically/professionally receptive environment can contribute to the popularization of the field in geopolitically strategic regions (e.g., the United States, China, India).

Main challenges

1. **Lack of opportunities for immediate engagement.**
    a. There is a lack of internships, easy projects for beginners, and a supportive community.
2. **Lack of human capital.**

    a. AI safety experts.
    b. Generalists who possess domain knowledge and high operational capacity.
3. **Controversial reputation of the field.**
    a. Controversies related to the involvement of billionaires, EA, Bay Area culture.
    b. Emerging field without academic tradition.

Possible solutions

1. Active talent search to create the necessary human infrastructure (e.g., professors, doctoral students, students).
2. Creating opportunities to connect beginners in Brazil to existing international opportunities.
3. Creating high-fidelity and quality written material in Portuguese.
4. …

Risks and cruxes

1. Would the most talented and interested individuals still reach international opportunities anyway?
    a. What is the counterfactual impact of local programs?
    b. Is going to the Bay Area inevitably important?
2. Is the current human infrastructure sufficient to build the field with tolerable risk?
    a. Or is it better to slow down the construction of the field and focus on building human capital?
    b. How to attract qualified individuals without the field being built, and how to build the field with few qualified people?
3. What level of risk is tolerable? Here is a draft typology of risks:
    a. **Low fidelity**: Without qualified individuals, we can create a Brazilian version of long-termism that is not faithful to the original and does not address the most important points (e.g., the urgency of existential risk prevention, focusing on existential risks such as AI safety and pandemics instead of climate change and supervolcanoes).
    b. **Low quality**: Without qualified individuals, we may deter talent; the level of discussion may drop to the point where the field is not attractive enough. It could be seen as "poisoning the well" for future efforts.
    c. **Controversies**: Brazil is a country with urgent present-day issues and highly politically polarized. It is possible that underqualified individuals may struggle to navigate this complex environment and deal with controversies, potentially worsening the situation.

Some tentative conclusions

1. It is worth building long-termism in Brazil if there are individuals with a high comparative advantage and a low opportunity cost for doing so.

    a. Otherwise, it is better to focus on other fields with greater impact. Within long-termism, this means participating in opportunities within the international community.
2. Minimizing the mentioned risks is crucial.
    a. My impression is that new communities or communities primarily driven by volunteers disconnected from the international community, as has been the case with the EA Brazil community, do not take community building risks seriously enough.
    b. This leads to unnecessary overexposure to risks. The normal risks are already high and complex, and with this overexposure, the situation of long-termism construction in Brazil becomes even more negative in expectation.
3. We should skill up the people who will work on long-termism construction to avoid the mentioned risks, especially those related to it.
    a. The first step of any plan to build long-termism should be self-upskilling, primarily before engaging with the external world.
4. It is worth seriously considering a slow pace of long-termism construction in Brazil (3-5 years instead of 1-2 years)
    a. particularly considering the timeline for self-upskilling and qualification of the individuals who will work on it.
    b. Ideally, those who will work on it should also have some practical experience with the subject, such as conducting research or direct work with machine learning.
    c. Less ideally, these individuals should at least participate in programs, courses, internships, and other means to acquire a sophisticated understanding of the subject. *The minimum bar should be to reasonably explain the main arguments for focusing on long-termism, AI safety, pandemic prevention, etc.*
        i. Without this minimum bar, the mentioned risks are plausibly too high for long-termism construction in Brazil to be worthwhile.