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# Food policies and sectorial referentials in the Brazilian trajectory

## *Políticas alimentares e referenciais setoriais na trajetória brasileira*

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**Abstract:** The paper analyses the referentials that has guided the design and implementation of food policies in Brazil. Based on documentary research and literature review, we identified six phases in Brazilian food policies: i) 1600-1930, with the presence of a referential of inaction; ii) from 1930 to 1960, with a referential oriented towards rational nutritional; iii) 1970 to 1980, guided by productivist interpretations and supply actions; iv) the 1990s, with a referential of commercial efficiency and social assistance focus; v) 2000 to 2015, with a referential of conflicting coexistence between productivism and food and nutrition security (FNS); vi) from 2014, under a dismantling sectorial referential. Over time, the most meaningful and constant actions were those that sought to change the dynamics of agricultural production, which were biased towards commodities expansion. The actions that sought to promote food accessibility, healthy diet, dialogue between family farming and FNS, agroecology and the valorization of local territories and food were fragile and unstable, sensitive to political and economic changes.

**Keywords:** public policy, food policy, referentials, food and nutrition security, family farming.

**Resumo:** O artigo analisa os referenciais que guiaram o desenho e a implementação de políticas alimentares no Brasil. Baseados em pesquisa documental e revisão de literatura, identificamos seis fases nas políticas alimentares brasileiras: i) 1600-1930, com a presença de um referencial de inação; ii) dos anos 1930 até 1960 com o referencial orientado para a nutrição racional; iii) 1970 a 1980, com o referencial guiado por interpretações produtivistas e de abastecimento alimentar; iv) anos 1990, com o referencial da eficiência comercial e da focalização socioassistencial; v) 2000 a 2015 com o referencial da convivência conflituosa entre o produtivismo e a segurança alimentar e nutricional (SAN); e, vi) a partir de 2014, sob o referencial de desmantelamento das políticas alimentares. Ao longo do tempo, as ações mais significativas e constantes foram aquelas que buscaram mudar a dinâmica da produção agrícola, notadamente para a expansão da produção de commodities. As ações que buscaram promover a acessibilidade alimentar, alimentação saudável, diálogo entre agricultura familiar e SAN, agroecologia e valorização dos territórios locais e da alimentação foram frágeis e instáveis, bastante sensíveis às mudanças políticas e econômicas.

**Palavras-chave:** políticas públicas, políticas alimentares, referencial, segurança alimentar e nutricional, agricultura familiar.

## Introduction

Food supply, healthy eating, and the construction of sustainable food systems have become central issues during the first decades of the 21st century (Le Coq et al., 2022; Preiss et al., 2020; Fouilleux & Michel, 2020; Brand et al., 2017). Urbanization growth, climate changes, famine endurance, and the emergence of obesity are global challenges that call for changes in the hegemonic food system. The current food production and consumption model is based, to a large extent, on intensive use of nature, use of inputs (industrial fertilizers and pesticides), circulation



of products and food over long distances, production of ultra-processed foods, concentration of the means of food production and distribution, as well as on growing inequalities (Fouilleux & Michel, 2020; Ioris, 2018; Schneider & Gazolla, 2017). Furthermore, the hegemonic food system is characterized by several intermediaries throughout the food production-consumption chain, by consumers' loss of contact with the rural, the farmers and the way of producing food, and by the control of the food system by few industries and companies (Bricas et al., 2017). Environmental, economic, social and cultural impacts and a set of "distances" are produced and intensified (Bricas et al., 2017).

This scenario pushes for the need of creating sustainable food systems, understood as those that "ensures food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised" (High Level Panel of Experts, 2014, p. 31). In further detail, Bricas et al. (2017) describe sustainable food systems as those that protect the environment and biodiversity and promote access to sufficient, healthy, and culturally accepted foods. Besides, such systems encompass an inclusive economy, which creates jobs, generates an equitable distribution of the value-added, reduces social inequality, strengthens social cohesion and respects cultural diversity, restores trust, and encourages citizens to take part in its development. This implies reassessing the foundations of hegemonic food systems and fostering agroecological farming, sustainable diets based on fresh and minimally processed foods, short market circuits, and relocalization of food in the territories.

As highlighted by High Level Panel of Experts (2014), various actors must engage in this process: international organizations, social movements, general society, and States. For Sonnino et al. (2016), the States are strategic actors with regards to feeding and food systems. Their regulatory power, massive budget, and mandate to act in the public interest, endow them with unique authority on food supply, consumption, and governance. Through food policies, States influence how foods are produced, processed, distributed, and consumed and, likewise, organize political arrangements and food supply governance (Lang et al., 2009). Thus understood, food policies have repercussions on agriculture, health, nutrition, and national and territorial development, influencing who eats what, when, and how (Lang et al., 2009).

By considering the importance of the State, food policies and their impacts on the development processes, this work seeks to analyze the trajectory of food policies in Brazil. Dialoguing with the cognitive approach for analyzing public policies, we search for ideas, values and guidelines present in food policies throughout the country's development as well as their effects on the creation of sustainable food systems. According to concepts of this approach, this paper seeks to map and analyze sectorial referentials strengthened in certain moments (Muller, 2015; Jobert & Muller, 1987).

According to Muller (2015), the dynamics of societies can be learned from their way of thinking and acting about themselves and, in this sense, global and sectorial referentials are important. A global referential concerns a "State's practical theory" which sets forth "whose interests and who the State serves (or whose interests and who it should not)", establishing the place of public policies in the functioning of societies (Muller, 2015, p. 57). It concerns economic, social, and ideological models that prevailed in different periods of capitalism (national developmentalism, neoliberalism, neodevelopmentalism etc.), which interfere in the dynamics of various sectors and subsystems (Ravinet & Palier, 2015). In its turn, a sectorial referential relates to a set of issues associated, in a more or less institutionalized manner, to certain populations and problems (Muller, 2015). The sector, or the sectorialization of public

action, is the result of a process of acquisition, by the State, of abilities for solving a given problem, and of legitimacy to apply its authority, thus taking part in its rationalization (Halpern & Jacquot, 2015). Therefore, we demarcate food issues as an analytical sector<sup>1</sup> influenced by interpretations and changes that take place in the global referential. With each change on the global referential, the sectorial referential is impelled to adapt to new world views, power relations, institutional structures, and political hegemony. How sectorial adjustment happens depends on the sector's "exposure" to global referentials, its framework, the available room for maneuver, and the sectorial mediators' capabilities for building hegemony (Muller, 2015). Based on these understandings, and on documentary research (laws, decrees, manuals and public policy reports, other government documents, minutes and documents of the National Food and Nutrition Security Council, reports from civil society organizations linked to food and nutrition security...) and literature review (main publications on food systems and food policy), this paper discusses the sectorial referentials that have influenced food policies throughout the country's trajectory.

This text is organized into seven sections. The first section approaches the role of the inaction referential that prevailed from the 1600s to 1930s. The second section presents the rational nutrition referential that guided food policies between the 1930s and the 1960s. The third one considers the referential of productivism and food supply prevailing from the 1960s to 1980s. The fourth discusses the outcomes of the referential of commercial efficiency and focus on social assistance in food policies during the 1990s. The fifth elucidates the influence of a referential of conflicting coexistence between productivism and food and nutrition security (FNS) in food policies from 2000 to 2014. The sixth section presents the current referential, marked by the dismantling of food policies. Finally, we present some considerations regarding the present debate.

### **Food policies under a sectorial referential of inaction (1600-1930)**

The first century of European colonization was depicted by chroniclers, religious people and government representatives as a period of food abundance, especially of natural products, in which the observation (under the sign of domination) of indigenous populations' eating habits was key (Cascardo, 1968). According to Linhares (1979, p. 33), "we may plausibly say that there were food abundance and no scarcity issues for Brazil's earliest populations". However, already in the 17th century, supply shortages emerged and intensified as population, interiorization and urbanization increased (Linhares, 1979). For Prado Junior (1961, p. 157), food shortfalls were often the general rule in denser population centers: in Bahia and Pernambuco, there was a "true chronic state of scarcity and food crisis which frequently became an overt and widespread famine". Similarly, Magalhães (2011, p. 248) affirms that "the title of 'the granary of Brazil', presently held by Goiás (...) conceals a past of deprivation with continuous scarcity, shortfalls and sometimes overt starvation, particularly during the periods of 1804 to 1805; 1819; 1823; 1830 to 1834; 1838; 1848; 1859 to 1860; 1865 to 1870; and 1878".

Many aspects have contributed to this scenario. One of them regards the colony's organization based on the metropolis' economic and political needs, giving overriding attention to export products. Treated as "a *feitoria* (trading post)" (Prado Junior, 1961) and based on slave labor,

<sup>1</sup> We understand that food issues are, by their nature, intersectoral. As Muller (2015) points out regarding gender issues, here we carry out an exercise, treating them as an analytical sector, to understand the changes undergone from the perspective of the global referential.

there was no concern to develop diversified productive systems focused on food production to supply Brazil (Prado Junior, 1961; Linhares, 1979). Prado Junior (1961, p. 152) reports that subsistence agriculture was included in the domains of large farms, destined mainly for “food subsistence of those who inhabited and worked the land”, cultivated by slaves “alongside large plantations” in less fertile lands, generally far from urban centers; and was also cultivated by poor small farmers.<sup>2</sup> In both cases, subsistence production was not a priority, given the preference for the foreign market. “Subsistence economies” (Linhares, 1979) could hardly produce a surplus for the domestic market, thus increasing food vulnerability in situations of climate hazards, incidence of pests and diseases, or political conflicts (Magalhães, 2011; Linhares, 1979). Also, precarious roads and means of travel hampered food commercialization and accessibility, as well as the channeling of food to better-priced markets.

Another aspect that contributed to supply crises refers to State’s omissions and incipient and insufficient regulations. Many authors highlight regulations established during the colonial period to ensure supply, such as: fostering the creation of weekly markets in the villages and settlements, in 1548; compulsory cultivation of cassava during the Dutch occupation of Olinda; the obligation imposed, at the end of the 17th century, on all residents of the Recôncavo of the city of Bahia, to plant, each year, 500 seed holes of cassava per slave, and the penalization for those who stockpile cassava flour for speculation; price-fixing and the prohibition to export food from Minas Gerais at the beginning of mining (ensuring the local supply); and the creation of barns (*tulhas*) in Rio de Janeiro and Bahia, between 1784 and 1788, to guarantee supply stability of certain products (Magalhães, 2011; Sousa, 2011; Linhares, 1979; Prado Junior, 1961). However, all these actions were virtually ignored, opposed or inefficient (Linhares, 1979; Prado Junior, 1961).

Throughout this trajectory, two food products were the main object of attention in supply: cassava flour and fresh meat. The first, due to its “ubiquitous daily presence” e for “captivating the Portuguese” since the beginning of the colonization (Cascardo, 1968). The second became a “star” (Linhares, 1979) for two reasons. One relates to the geographic and economic “distances” (Bricas et al., 2017) that make food supply difficult and demand regulation. As livestock production became more internalized in the country, the distance between producer and consumers increased, and new actors (merchants, dealers, managers, and municipal officials) and logistic and control difficulties (quality and supply) “came into play”. The other (and main) reason relates to the fact that meat was a privileged source of tax collection and support for City Councils. The Council was responsible for organizing public butchers (the only places allowed to slaughter), bidding the rights to cut and sell, as well as determining meat market prices according to their quality and origin. As inefficient as it was, as demand for urban supply grew, monopolies were established and liberal ideas gained strength in the 19th century, meat regulation began to be questioned (Linhares, 1979).

The 19th century marks the consolidation of the national states of Ibero-America and the independence of Brazil. Although remaining essentially rural, the country’s population and urbanization started to grow, calling for supply measures. After the Portuguese Court settled in the country, supply policies started to encompass improvements on paths, the opening of new roads, building of warehouses, prohibition of cabotage trade to foreign ships, incentive to street markets, concern with hygiene, and organization of food sales by creating public markets. Nevertheless, during the remainder of the century, government actions continued

<sup>2</sup> There were also less frequent situations, of large farms dedicated solely to crops intended for the country’s food supply (Prado Junior, 1961).

to be quite ephemeral, keeping up with the growth of a liberal global referential and private initiative in the food supply. As quoted by Linhares (1979), at the beginning of the 19th century, agri-food trade companies expanded their operations so that, in the middle of that century, there was a hegemonic participation of foreign dealers in Rio de Janeiro's food trade and, by the end of the century, large scale food companies were already based or represented in the country. At the same time, even with the food crisis that started in the 1850s and the economic changes resulting from the banning of slave labor, any State intervention came to be seen "as the greatest possible damage to property. Liberals used varied arguments: there is no crisis (...) or, more elaborated arguments: the economy has its natural laws and any intervention would only cause its disorganization, even when a group seized the entire supply of foodstuffs" (Linhares, 1979, p. 189).

At the beginning of the 20th century, a set of elements pushed for the establishment of a new referential in food policies, with the supply crisis in 1917-1918 as a catalyst. Several elements converged to build this scenario, such as the big drought in 1915, the food demands from countries at war during the First World War, the Spanish flu (1918), the worker's strikes (1917-18), and the "threats" from Russian Revolution. The speculative use of food stocks, the production, trade, and credit monopolization by foreign companies and banks (which claimed the maintenance of high food prices), as well as demands from the rising national bourgeoisie to control food exports and prices, also contributed. These issues led to the creation of the Commission for Public Food (*Comissariado de Alimentação Pública* - CAP), aimed at "determining what staple foods could be exported, fixing food prices in the domestic market, purchasing foodstuffs and allocating them to direct sale, requisitioning private stocks for directing them to the market to ensure supply and price reduction" (Menezes et al., 2015, p. 25). However, the CAP faced resistance and was soon extinct, replaced by the Supply Superintendency, that halted control and regulation measures and (incipiently) fostered agricultural production, with tax exemptions for the foods most demanded by consumers, as well as promoted cooperatives and food markets (Linhares, 1979).

Thus, although famine and food shortage persevered over the centuries, they got into the public agenda only momentarily and their expression in public policies was virtually nonexistent, inefficient, or transitory. Guidelines aimed outwards, to the foreign market, in addition to the State's fragilities and the global referential of "unbridled liberalism" (Linhares, 1979) – especially active in the 19th century – produced timid food policies, mainly comprising regulatory instruments and some infrastructure measures during Imperial Brazil. The precedence granted to foreign trade, production of commodities, and the private sector during the establishment of a food system resulted in a referential of inaction in food policies.

### **The rational nutrition referential in food policies from 1930 to 1960**

As of the 1930s, with the advancement of both industrialization by imports substitution and national developmentalism (Brum, 2011), a new referential for food policies began to gain ground. On the one hand, this new global referential required changes in agricultural production to meet food demands in the domestic market, ensure the supply of staples, contribute to fuel production, and support the production of goods for export. During a speech, in 1931, the then-president Getúlio Vargas committed "to expand our cultivated lands and improve our industries, in such a way that it will become a patriotic gaffe to feed or dress with imported fare or fabrics" (Brum, 2011, p. 188). To that end, cooperatives were fostered and a few initiatives

were established, such as the Bank of Brazil's Agricultural and Industrial Portfolio (*Carteira Agrícola e Industrial do Banco do Brasil*), the Commission for Agriculture Finance (*Comissão de Financiamento da Produção* - CFP) and the Minimum Prices Guarantee Policy (*Política de Garantia de Preços Mínimos* - PGPM), in addition to specific agencies for coffee, cocoa and wheat (Gonçalves Neto, 1997; Linhares & Silva, 1979). Although important, such initiatives would only gain momentum and new arrangements notably from the 1960s, with the introduction of a new referential in food policies.

On the other hand – and more significantly – the referential established for food policies regarded workers' access to quality food as a key element to industrialization. The understanding was that the population presented nutritional deficiencies and, so, the provision of adequate food and education on adequate, hygienic, and economical diet was necessary. Some government documents claimed that “human life depends on food. Well-nourished, the worker increases his labor capacity and his health, and feels greater joy of living” (Jornal Amapá, 1945, p. 3). According to Costa (2016, p. 32 and 33):

In the wake of the progress devised by the government, food held a position of extreme relevance, insofar as adequate nutrition would allow the worker to enjoy greater physical vitality and, thereby being more productive (...). Thus, nutrition starts to be seen as a support tool in the pursuit of progress.

This change was triggered by new actors emerging in the academic debate and by the “institutional circulation” (Silva & Oliveira, 2011) of many among them in the political space. Indeed, the end of the 1930s features the beginning of Nutrition courses and the emergence of various physician nutrition specialists in public services, such as José de Castro e Dante Costa (L'Abbate, 1988). From the nutrition field, professionals and political actors started to highlight food and nutrition deficiencies and the importance of nutrition based on scientific precepts, adequate to workers' nutritional needs, and affordable (Costa, 2016).

Considering the need for nutritional improvement in the Brazilian diet, the government outlined several projects surrounding the Social Security Food Service (*Serviço de Alimentação da Previdência Social* - SAPS) (1940-1967). One of these projects was the meal centers, which offered meals with nutritional quality for “affordable prices” (Fogagnoli, 2011). Scattered in many cities across the country, these meal centers encompassed: restaurants built and supported by SAPS, restaurants belonging to autarchies or para-public organizations and managed by SAPS, industrial and commercial kitchens supervised by SAPS; and a university cafeteria in Rio de Janeiro (Costa, 2016). Based on nutrition precepts, the dishes carried the nutrients required to replace the workers' needs (Costa, 2016). The meal centers also offered food education activities (SAPS' monthly bulletins and guidance on economic eating practices) as well as socioeconomic and cultural activities, making SAPS a center for sociability, cultural promotion and training for workers (Fogagnoli, 2011). In addition to the meal centers, SAPS also organized Subsistence Stations, that is, retail stores through which the State offered food, bought directly from producers, at subsidized prices to workers, who could thus follow the guidelines of rational food. Food Aid also stood out, expressed in the distribution of rational food to unemployed workers (Fogagnoli, 2011).

In the 1950s, the debate over nutrition gained new momentum with the institutionalization of the National Commission for Food (*Comissão Nacional de Alimentação* - CNA), assigned to “support the government in the creation of the national food policy” (Linhares & Silva, 1979, p. 117). In 1951, the CNA drew up the National Food Policy that underlined the link between malnutrition, health and productivity, and recommended socioeconomic reforms and emergency

actions, such as school nutrition, which was launched as the School Lunch Campaign, in 1955, relying upon food donations from international organizations (L'Abbate, 1988). However, the CNA had a timid performance during the 1950s, leading to its extinction in the 1970s.

Although with different intensity and tools (L'Abbate, 1988), this sectorial referential of rational food prevailed in food policies from 1930 to 1960. The strategic role of food issues in the country's development, the concerns with a healthy diet (based on nutritional criteria), and the interactions (although incipient) between production and consumption displayed by the Subsistence Stations are noteworthy. Even if environmental perspectives were not present (for being not a concern then) and the debate on rational food hardly considered local eating habits<sup>3</sup>, the current food policies pointed to relevant contributions to what recent literature calls sustainable food systems.

### The referential of productivism and supply in food policies (1960-1980)

While the global developmentalist referential was moving forward, in the 1950s the food supply issue was gaining greater intensity. Indeed, "by the beginning of the 1960s, the supply situation for large urban centers was increasingly serious" (Linhares & Silva, 1979, p. 144 and 156). Distinct sectorial referentials competed for interpretations regarding the necessary pathways to continue with the developmentalist project. On the one hand, some claimed land reform as an essential step to boost rural capitalism with the necessary effects on urban capitalism (Furtado, 1991; Guimarães, 1968). On the other hand, some emphasized the archaic mode of production, deficiencies in soils, technological inferiority of the country's agricultural production, and the absence of public policies for agricultural modernization (Linhares and Silva, 1979). Some interpretations pointed the limitations of food transport, storage, distribution and commercialization in urban spaces, due to the strong presence of intermediaries, monopolistic markets and speculators. Many signaled "the supply issues regarding the ability to deliver, with some efficiency, staple foods to consumers (Linhares and Silva, 1979, p. 156).

At the beginning of the 1960s, some of these ideas linked to the structuralist perspective of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) found their way into institutionalization through the National Supply Superintendence (*Superintendência Nacional de Abastecimento* - Sunab), the Brazilian Food Company (Cobal), the Brazilian Storage Company (Cibrazem), the strengthening of the Commission for Agriculture Finance (CFP) (Linhares & Silva, 1979) and embryonic experiments with Supply Centers in Northeastern Brazil (Recife and João Pessoa). Interpretations about the need for agrarian reform and other structural reforms to ensure supply and promote industrialization in the country also advanced in institutionalization. Nonetheless, the beginning of the military regime would only partially guarantee the continuity of these ideas.

The military coup of 1964 carried on with the developmentalist global referential, increasingly open to foreign investments. Agricultural policies (and not the agrarian reform) would be sufficient to ensure economic growth, by stimulating production and overcoming the backwardness of agriculture. Converging to this interpretation was the assumption that started to guide food policies in most countries from the 1940s and 1950s, which claimed that, if supported by science and technology, agriculture should produce more, with impacts on society's welfare (Lang et al.,

<sup>3</sup> Workers were presumed not to know how to eat properly, thus requiring change of habits such as that of consumption of cassava flour (Costa, 2016). Nutrologists involved in the program stated that "in nutrition, reason drives, and appetite obeys" (Fogagnoli, 2011, p. 20).



2009). Science and capital could enhance resources so far underutilized, increase agricultural production in certain countries and regions, and feed the ones constrained by natural resources (Lang et al., 2009). The basis for modernization of agriculture was laid out, with no change in the country's agrarian structure (Graziano da Silva, 1999). Several agricultural regulations, policies and instruments to modernize production and management standards in rural establishments and integrate them into the industry were created. Noteworthy among them are the creation of the National Rural Credit System (1965), reformulation of the Minimum Prices Guarantee Policy (1966), introduction of the agricultural insurance (1966), constitution of the Brazilian Agricultural Research Enterprise (*Empresa Brasileira de Pesquisa Agropecuária* - Embrapa) (1972) and the Brazilian Rural Assistance and Extension Enterprise (*Empresa Brasileira de Assistência e Extensão Rural* - Embrater) (1975), tax incentives for exports and subsidies for inputs, machines and equipment acquisition (Gonçalves Neto, 1997; Delgado, 1985).

In the 1970s, together with intensification of agricultural modernization policies (especially rural credit), food policies gained new nuances consistent with small changes in the global referential. If, in the 1960s and early 1970s, the main goal was the global economic growth ("grow the pie") to ensure the investment capacity of given sectors, in the mid-1970s, social inequality laid bare the need to deal with the "social". To L'Abbate (1989), measures such as transforming the subsistence agriculture of the Northeast and North regions of the country, protecting small producers, and "implementing distributive policies while the pie grows" became part of the developmentalist project. Moreover, urbanization and supply of large cities have become "a constant concern of military governments", demanding intensification of nutritional and supplying policies (Belik & Cunha, 2015, p. 217).

In 1972, the National Institute of Food and Nutrition (*Instituto Nacional de Alimentação e Nutrição* - Inan) was created as a result of the influence and technocratic performance of the "clinical-laboratory strand" of nutrition, dissonant to that of the physician nutrition specialists of the 1940s (such as Josué Castro e Dante Costa) (L'Abbate, 1989). During the First National Program for Food and Nutrition (Pronam) (1973-1976), several initiatives consonant with the global referential were launched, with the slogan "nutrition is development", few of which were fruitful. Yet, during the second Pronam (1976-1979), three main strands of action have been strengthened: a) food supplementation for pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, children from zero to six years, schoolchildren (National School Feeding Program - PNAE<sup>4</sup>) and low-income workers (Worker's Food Program); b) complementation and food support activities (fighting nutritional deficiencies through food fortification by industries); and c) rationalization of food production and commercialization systems, with emphasis on the small producer (Vasconcelos, 2005). Two, among the mechanisms triggered in this latter strand, stand out: the Staples Production Rationalization Program (*Programa de Racionalização da Produção de Alimentos Básicos* - Procab) and the Staples in Low-Income Areas Program (*Programa de Alimentos Básicos em Áreas de Baixa Renda* - Proab), which combine nutrition and food supply activities. The Procab purchased food from small farmers of Brazilian Northeast, at established minimum prices, and assigned the food to supplementation activities developed by Inan. Proab, in turn, enabled the purchase of food from rural areas in the Northeast (especially from small farmers) and assigned it for subsidized commercialization to small retailers located in the outskirts of the Northeast's big cities (Petry, 1993).

<sup>4</sup> PNAE has its roots in the School Meals Campaign of 1955 and was initially linked to an international movement for free food distribution. In 1976, the resources for school meals started to be financed by the Ministry of Education and managed by the National School Food Campaign and, in 1979, the Program was renamed National School Feeding Program (PNAE), assuming a universal character and spreading over the national territory.

Also, to support food supply, the National System of Supply Centers (*Sistema Nacional de Centrais de Abastecimento* - Sinac – 1972) was created aimed to

modernizing and organizing food production structures, reducing transaction costs of produce and information asymmetries between actors in the production chain, raising the quality of marketed products, stimulating the modernization and efficiencies of retail outlets, and (...) gradually eliminating the urban problems (mainly of transit and hygienic-sanitary conditions) arising from the street markets system (Belik & Cunha, 2015, p. 220).

In total, 22 supply centers, 47 warehouses and dispatcher markets, and 158 retail outlets were established in the main urban centers of the country. Additionally, in 1978, the Somar Network was created, which, via Cobal, supplied small retailers with foodstuffs at subsidized prices, brought food to isolated areas, and offered managerial training to small retailers to improve their business planning (Silva, 1995).

Although this productivist and supplying referential has contributed to increasing agricultural production and enabled food to reach the urban areas, its dynamics have been marked by environmental issues, economic concentration, and the aggravation of social inequality. Recurrent studies have shown changes in the technical basis of agriculture towards farmers' loss of autonomy, increasing integration of agriculture into industry, financialization of agriculture, rural exodus, agrarian conflicts, loss of biodiversity, intensification of commodity production, and threats to biomes (Graziano da Silva, 1999; Delgado, 1985). The "small farming" was virtually disregarded by State's actions, struggling with its social reproduction and permanence in the countryside. At the same time, there were frequent criticisms about the Supply Centers due to private appropriations, presence of middlemen and commercial agents, cultural and social disregard, and commercialization of food at great distances (Belik & Cunha, 2015; Cunha & Belik, 2012). Although there are actions focused on promoting food accessibility, studies highlighting the privileged treatment given to industrialized foods to the detriment of fresh foods are not uncommon (L'Abbate, 1989). All these elements were mostly adjusted to the global referential focused on industrialization, modernization, and economic growth of the country.

### **The food policies referential of commercial efficiency and social assistance focus (1990s)**

The economic crisis in the 1980s and the institutionalization of the neoliberal global referential at the end of the decade gave rise to changes in the Brazilian State action. Free market and non-interference of the State became the current guidelines. According to Buainaim & Souza Filho (2001, p. 373),

The idea is precisely to reduce the State's role and assign it to the market, to the fullest extent, a more relevant role in guiding the economy's movements. When necessary, interventions should not be against – or a substitute to – the market; on the contrary, they should seek to reduce the so-called market flaws, develop and expand the reach of the market's mechanisms.

Following these interpretations, measures were adopted such as the suspension of non-tariff barriers to imports, redefinition of custom tariffs (affecting the competition with domestic products), inducement of regional integration with southern border countries, and creation of broader areas of free trade. Furthermore, economic activities were deregulated, state-owned companies were privatized, disciplinary measures for public finances were adopted and the entry of private enterprise into public actions was stimulated, implying a reduction in state investments (Delgado, 2010; Leite, 2001).

Such interpretations also reverberated in the sectorial referential for food issues. Many agricultural policy instruments were extinct or modified (Sinac, Embrater, Sunab, Cobal, CFP, Cibrazem, Federal Government Loan with selling option – a modality of the minimum price guarantee policy, key for creation of strategic and regulatory stock), resources allocated to agricultural policies were reduced, and action tools were created along with the private initiative (Delgado, 2012; Leite, 2001). These actions, in addition to supplying and inflation control strategies through imports and price reduction of agricultural commodities, caused a drop in agricultural income, which would only be actively enhanced by the State in the late 1990s, due to tensions in the global referential (Bastos, 2012). With the currency crisis of 1999, the government changed its strategy and began to seek a surplus in the trade balance. By the second term of President Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC) (1999-2002), the strategy of economic growth based on primary sector exports was resumed, redirecting the State and the public policies towards the promotion of agricultural production (Delgado, 2012). Agricultural policies began to seek production records and the transformation of the country into one of the great leaders in the global food and fiber trade (soon after treated as the world's granary).

Similarly to what happened in agriculture, in the first half of the 1990s, the federal government also “unleashed a brutal reduction of financial resources, emptying and/or abolishing food and nutrition programs” (Vasconcelos, 2005, p. 447). Many regulations and public policies were extinct (Proab, Procab, Somar Network, Inan and the Milk National Program for Disadvantaged Children), various programs endured operational and financial constraints and others had their goals or actions aimed at former, outdated, practices, such as the prioritization of foods processed in the context of actions for food supplementation (Vasconcelos, 2005; Peliano, 2001).

Over the 1990s, three events stand out for their relevance to food policies for generating outcomes, especially in the 2000s. The first concerns the pressure exerted on the global referential, from 1992 to 1994, due to the launch of the Movement for Ethics in Politics, leading to the impeachment of President Fernando Collor. He was replaced by Itamar Franco, who gave a different emphasis to the global neoliberal referential and sought legitimacy and dialogue with civil society organizations (Zimmermann, 2011). This tension in the global referential reverberated through the food policies sectorial referential with the creation of the “Civic Action against Hunger, Poverty and for Life” and the “National Campaign to Fight Hunger”, originated from the above mentioned movement. These changes culminated in the launch of the Plan to Combat Hunger and Poverty, creation of the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (*Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional* – Consea), realization of the First National Conference on Food and Nutrition Security and creation of new programs (e.g., the Emergency Food Distribution Program) or changes in some programs, such as the decentralization of school feeding (Triches, 2010). Despite such tensions in the global and sectorial referentials, they would be again readapted to neoliberal ideals when FHC assumed the presidency in 1995 – Consea was extinct, the debate on focused actions (to the detriment of government policies and services universality) and food issues lost prominence in the national public agenda with the creation of the Solidarity Community Program, which articulated a set of social programs (Maluf, 2007).

Despite the disruption of critical regulations regarding food and nutrition, the coordination between governmental and non-governmental actors was able to put together a Food and Nutrition National Policy (*Política Nacional de Alimentação e Nutrição* - Pnan – 1999). Although initially limited to formulating guidelines on FNS in the health area, this policy gained strength in the 2000s, collecting data, monitoring indicators, and promoting more intersectoral actions

(Alves & Jaime, 2014). From this second event on, interactions between health, FNS and agriculture intensified during the second decade of the 2000s (National Plan on Food and Nutrition Security, and the Food Guide for the Brazilian Population), although in a transitory way and more focused on guidelines.

The third event concerns the political and institutional recognition of family farming, since the creation of the National Program for Family Farming Strengthening (Pronaf) (1995). Such recognition was a result of massive political pressure from social and trade union movements of family farming and of a certain adherence of such actions to the neoliberal global referential (Grisa, 2012). Indeed, several studies, and government documents as well, called the State to act in the creation of a friendly environment for the strengthening of family farming and its integration to the markets, conditions that would not be solved by the “hands” of the market (Brasil, 1998). Essential to the promotion of FNS, in the following years, family farming policies would be reinforced, based on the guidelines of a new global referential.

Thus organized, in the 1990s, the food policies referential was guided by commercial efficiency (opening of the market to ensure supply, stocks, and competitive prices) for guaranteeing FNS and acted on “market flaws” via focused social policies. By reducing its intervention, the State made room for corporations to command the structure of the agrifood system, whose configurations prompted reactions involving food issues from many civil society organizations (already incited by the re-democratization) (Grisa, 2012; Maluf, 2007). In the second half of the decade, significant changes started to emerge, intensified in the 2000s, bringing about conflicting coexistence of distinct food policies.

Food policies under a sectorial referential of conflicting coexistence between productivism and FNS (2000-2014)

In the first decade of the 2000s, a new global referential – which had shown signs since the end of FHC’s second term – gained ground on the political-institutional agenda (Bastos, 2012). That is, according to the associated theoretical strands, the neodevelopmentism, new developmentalism, or social developmentalism referential. Despite differences between these strands, authors converge on that this referential puts the State back on the approach to development focused on promoting macroeconomic stability, economic growth of the domestic market and insertion in the international market, industrial competitiveness, promotion of consumption as a way to activate the economy, and poverty reduction (Bresser-Pereira, 2016; Bastos, 2012; Siscu et al., 2005). Thus organized, many strategies were put in motion, some of which were conflicting and contradictory. According to Favareto (2017, p. 17), on the one hand, the State

heavily invested in the primarization of its economies, via commodities export (...) On the other hand, it organized an important bundle of policies based on the expansion of freedom and rights of the poorest and on inclusive institutions. This second policy vector partly compensated for the concentration and structural exclusion generated by dependence on commodities.

These contradictions were also manifested in food policies. On the one hand, several public policies were established or strengthened aimed at food production and enhancement of food accessibility and FNS. We highlight the strengthening of Pronaf, crop guarantee, technical assistance, and rural extension and land credit, and the creation of the Food Acquisition Program (PAA), the Family Allowance Program, family farming insurance, policies for price guarantee for family farming produce and for socio-biodiversity products, the “One Million Cisterns” and “One Earth, Two Waters” programs, the national policy and plans for agroecology and organic production, and the program for promoting rural productive activities. Other changes are also

worth nothing such as the school meals, the establishment of the Food Guide for the Brazilian Population, various food education initiatives which permeated other public policies, the recovery of the minimum wage (especially its impact on the target public of Social Security), the increase in the level of formal employment and other poverty reduction initiatives (Sambuiche et al., 2017; Grisa and Schneider, 2015; Niederle et al., 2014; Brasil, 2014). Several of these actions focused on food production, accessibility and security, contributing to build integrated food policies. These actions had been claimed by organizations related to family farming, agroecology and food and nutrition security, and were formulated at different spheres of social participation (Consea, National Council for Sustainable Rural Development and Conferences), along with an “engaged bureaucracy” (Evans, 1993) or one that practiced an “institutional activism” (Cayres, 2015) around food issues.

In addition to these initiatives, a set of regulations and regulatory frameworks stand out, which put food issues back on the government agenda, guiding new initiatives and opening opportunities (not always consistently explored) to regard food as a strategic axis for the country's development. Noteworthy examples are the Zero Hunger Project (2003), the (temporary) creation of the Extraordinary Ministry for Food Security and Fight against Hunger and the reconstitution of CONSEA (2003). Also important is the establishment of the Organic Law on Food and Nutrition Security that instituted the National System of Food and Nutrition Security, the Interministerial Chamber for Food and Nutrition Security (2006), the declaration of adequate food as a right and the definition of the National Policy for Food and Nutritional Security with its corresponding Plans (2010). These regulations have strengthened the agenda of adequate and healthy food. However, the economic and political crises installed since 2013/15 would slow it down and, later, dismantle the outlined actions.

On the other hand – and reflecting the referential aimed at economic growth and exports, the broad political alliances that characterized the governments of Lula and Dilma, and the timely moment of demand for commodities in the international market –, several policies and actions were established to promote agribusiness, mining and large investment projects. Concerning agribusiness, we highlight the resumption of the rural credit (with a significant increase for agribusiness), the maintenance of the Kandir Law, tax exemptions for production and sale of pesticides, and the loosening of environmental and agrarian regulations (Delgado, 2012). Strengthening the export-agrarian bias established since the colonization, a new pact of political economy was re-established (similar to what occurred in the 1970s/1980s) formed by some agro-industrial complexes, political segments of agribusiness, large landowners and the state (Delgado, 2012). Mostly focused on the foreign markets, Brazil sought to become the “granary” of the world. However, the strengthening of commodity production often involved reductions in the food sectors destined for internal supply (rice, beans and wheat), deforestation, threats to socio-biodiversity, increased socio-environmental conflicts, intensified use of industrial pesticides and fertilizers, contamination of water and depletion of natural resources, trough dynamics characterized as neo-extractivist (Niederle & Wesz Junior, 2018; Delgado, 2012; Sauer & Leite, 2012; Gudynas, 2009).

Also worth noting are the State's actions and inaction regarding other areas of the food system. For instance, the lack of regulation and control over the distribution and retail sector, especially large supermarket chains, disregarding dynamics of concentration and/or promotion of “food deserts” (Truchero, 2015). Furthermore, the State's dubious stance related to food quality control, since, while authorizing commercialization of transgenic, ultra-processed and conventional foods, the government has hardly established new labelling mechanisms (salt, sugar and fat control)

and, paradoxically, adopts stricter health regulations for the commercialization of artisanal and traditional foods. Tax support for ultra-processed food and beverage industries (Correia Neto, 2020) and scarce control over the advertising of ultra-processed foods are further examples.

Thus, based on a referential that comprised a conflicting coexistence between productivism and FNS, the State's actions and inaction (in agriculture, distribution and industrialization), while reducing hunger and advancing in terms of social inclusion and FNS, also minimized the efforts to reduce inequality and promote the Human Right to Adequate Food. Despite advances regarding the creation of healthy food systems, several efforts were cancelled or faced contradictions in the State's own actions.

### **Food policies under a dismantling sectorial referential (2014-2020)**

Since the end of President Dilma's first term, some changes started to happen in the global referential, which became more explicit during the governments of Michel Temer and Jair Bolsonaro. Several elements converged in this direction, such as the fall in international prices of commodities, reduction in foreign investments, withdrawal of the State from interventions due to more orthodox economic measures, reorganization and public expressiveness of conservative sectors (in politics, judiciary, media and religion) and the impeachment that happened in 2016. Neoliberal, conservative neoliberal or extreme right-wing populism are some definitions for the current global referential. This referential is based on significant fiscal adjustments (reduction of public spending and investments) to maintain the trust of economic agents, and the resumption of economic growth and business competitiveness through the State's actions to preserve economic stability, flexibility of labor regulation, or even through deregulations that favor competitiveness in the foreign market. Furthermore, this referential has repositioned the market (and not the State) as an engine of development processes and reinforced conservative social values in society (Couto, 2020; Balestro & Monteiro, 2019; Andrade, 2020).

This new global referential also produced changes in the food policies referential. With regard to family farming, institutional, political and economic changes have further altered the power relations between actors in the Brazilian rural environment. Rural development started to be guided – almost exclusively – by organizations, and political and academic groups that represent the interests of agribusiness, viewing farming from an agricultural productivist perspective and supporting the existence of a single agriculture in Brazil (therefore, with no need for differentiated policies) (Niederle et al., 2022; Grisa, 2018). These ideas, along with fiscal adjustment and the interest in attracting private investments, have converged into a process of dismantling of public policies, which implies direct, indirect, hidden or symbolic changes to reduce the number of policies, instruments or intensity of action on a particular area (Bauer & Knill, 2012, p. 35). Among the institutional changes, some examples are the extinction of the Ministry of Agrarian Development, the halt in territorial policies, reduction of resources for technical assistance and rural extension, decrease in the recognition and title of indigenous and *quilombola* lands, and cessation in establishing agrarian reform settlements, as well as new guidelines and objectives for these actions (Sabourin et al., 2020a, 2020b; Grisa, 2018).

Such dismantling also had repercussions on policies and regulations to promote access to healthy food. Indeed, the political groups that occupied the institutional spaces since 2016 and,

particularly, since 2019, have neglected historical problems such as hunger<sup>5</sup>, commended the centrality of decisions and focused on fiscal adjustment. Based on such interpretations, these actors reduced resources allocated to the Family Allowance Program and the One Million Cisterns Program (Vasconcelos et al., 2019), extinguished Consea, stopped the National Conferences on Food and Nutrition Security and the formulation of a new FNS Plan (2020-2023) (Delgado and Zimmermann, 2022). They also dissolved the Interministerial Chamber and the National Council for Agroecology and Organic Production and stopped the constitution of the new National Plan for Agroecology and Organic Production (2020-2023). Likewise, several instances of social participation related to food issues have been extinguished or reduced – such as National Council for Sustainable Rural Development (CONDRAF), National Environment Council, Cities Council, National Social Assistance Council –, thus increasing the “political distance” and the loss of control of the food system by citizens (Bricas et al., 2017).

The pandemic caused by the new coronavirus in 2020, which brought to light several food issues – risks of food shortages, increased unemployment and poverty, vulnerability to the virus due to comorbidities resulting from poor nutrition – could be considered a “critical moment” or “external event” (Mahoney, 2001) that would produce tension in the global referential and, mainly, in the sectorial referential. However, despite some actions implemented due to intense pressure from civil society organizations – the creation of Emergency aids, expansion of resources for PAA and emergency distribution of food baskets – the sectorial referential of dismantling remains, manifested in different ways, whether actively through environmental and agrarian deregulations or vetoing proposals for public actions and policies, or, still, in a symbolic and discursive manner, denying social and environmental problems related to food issues or even the severity of the pandemic (Niederle et al., 2022; Caponi, 2020).

These processes of dismantling of food policies aggravate weaknesses and vulnerabilities caused by the dynamics of the hegemonic agrifood system. As seen in the previous sections, throughout Brazilian history, processes and guidelines took form and became established, focusing on the production of commodities, territorial productive expansion, intensive use of natural resources with increasing environmental impacts, concentration of productive means and resources, loss of sociobiodiversity, industrialization of food, disconnections between production and consumption, generation of food hazards and diseases and the reproduction of inequalities. Such processes and guidelines are aggravated by the absence or reduction of several regulations, public policies and instruments to promote family farming, agroecology and healthy eating intended to create sustainable food systems.

### Final remarks

By retracing the journey of food policies in Brazil, we observed that the handling of food issues was marked by omissions and instability, as well as by institutional discontinuity in the spheres of governance and public policies. Over time, only during three periods (1940s, 1970s and 2000s) and with different sectorial referentials (rational food, productivist and supplying referential and the referential of conflicting coexistence between productivism and food and nutritional safety), food issues have more firmly entered the government’s agenda and gained centrality in the development strategy, although not without tension, disputes and questionable

<sup>5</sup> In a meeting with journalists, on July 19, 2019, President Jair Bolsonaro stated that “to say that people starve in Brazil is a big lie. (...) You don’t see skeletal people, even among poor people, on the streets as we see in other countries around the world” (El País, 2019). According to the news agency, “Bolsonaro also said that talking about hunger is a “populist discourse” (El País, 2019).

outcomes. In the 1940s, with the advancement of industrialization, food policies discussed the issues of access to food, nutritional-rational quality and workers' health. In the 1970s, with the advance of urbanization, food policies sought to ensure production, urban supply, food accessibility for socially vulnerable populations and the promotion of nutrition, especially through formulated foods (generally ultra-processed foods). And, in the 2000s, in a context of resumption of economic growth, food policies were established aiming to meet demands for promoting citizenship and FNS, and economic dynamism based on consumption. As discussed above, these policies – associated with their respective global and sectorial referentials –, although significant and with differentiated results, were permeated by limitations or contradictory effects from the perspectives of sustainable food systems or even of reaching their goals.

Over time, the most meaningful and constant actions were those that sought to change the dynamics of agricultural production, which were biased towards commodities expansion. Although in the first four centuries omissions in public policies were recurrent, the very act of “doing nothing” was based on a political and economic organization aimed outwards through extensive agriculture. Slowly emerging in the 1930s, productivist policies were intensified in the 1960s and 1970s and remain valid and active (albeit with oscillating strength). Counting on certain support from the State and especially on its omissions in regulation, industrial food and large distribution channels also gained ground. The actions that sought to promote food accessibility, healthy diet, dialogue between family farming and FNS, agroecology and the valorization of local territories and food were fragile and unstable, sensitive to political and economic changes. Such fragilities revealed to be emblematic in the recent period given the current sectorial referential of dismantling.

The creation of sustainable food systems is a challenge in view of historical elements and dynamics that reproduce themselves over time, even if adapted to emerging global referentials. Rather than passively following historical dynamics and processes that define – based on market interests – the types of food produced, the way they are produced and distributed and their dynamics of accessibility and consumption, food issues must be placed at the center of the country's development strategy and, therefrom, restructure the country's productive, social, economic, environmental and political life, guided by justice values.

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