

FOME ZERO: AMONG DIGNITY, CITIZENSHIP AND PARTICIPATION

FOME ZERO: ENTRE A DIGNIDADE, A CIDADANIA E A PARTICIPAÇÃO

FOME ZERO: ENTRE DIGNIDAD, CIUDADANÍA Y PARTICIPACIÓN



Mariana VASCONCELOS¹
e-mail: mariana.vasconcelos@unesp.br



Carla Gandini Gianni MARTELLI²
e-mail: carla.martelli@unesp.br

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¹ São Paulo State University (UNESP), Araraquara – SP – Brazil. Undergraduate student in Social Sciences.

² São Paulo State University (UNESP), Araraquara – SP – Brazil. Professor in the undergraduate and graduate programs in Social Sciences at UNESP/FCLAr.

ABSTRACT: This article aims to analyze how the public policy of ‘*Programa Fome Zero*’ acted in fighting hunger and food insecurity in Brazil. Therefore, a procedural analysis was carried out that investigated the previous background of the program, with the historical context that culminated in its creation; its development, raising its objectives and structuring; and the scenario after the program, focusing on the current political structure that, as shown, influenced food insecurity indicators. The methodology used was a bibliographic review, using reference authors in public policies research, analyzed by neoinstitutionalist perspective. In general, the ‘*Programa Fome Zero*’ was an important public food policy, but without keeping this subject on governmental agenda, the results tend to be lost in the long term.

KEYWORDS: Fome Zero program. Public Policies. Citizenship. Participation.

RESUMO: *O presente artigo procura analisar como a política pública do Programa Fome Zero atuou no combate à fome e à insegurança alimentar no Brasil. Para tanto, foi realizada uma análise processual que investigou os antecedentes do programa, com o contexto histórico que culminou na sua criação; o desenvolvimento deste, levantando seus objetivos e estruturação; e o cenário posterior ao programa, com foco no quadro político vigente que, como demonstrado, influenciou nos índices de insegurança alimentar. A metodologia utilizada foi de revisão bibliográfica, utilizando autores referência da pesquisa em políticas públicas, analisadas a partir da perspectiva do neoinstitucionalismo. De maneira geral, o Programa Fome Zero foi uma importante política pública alimentar, mas sem a continuidade desta pauta na agenda governamental, os resultados tendem a se perder à longo prazo.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Programa Fome Zero. Políticas públicas. Cidadania. Participação.*

RESUMEN: *Este artículo busca analizar cómo funcionó la política pública del Programa Hambre Cero para combatir el hambre y la inseguridad alimentaria en Brasil. Para ello se realizó un análisis procedimental que investigó los antecedentes del programa, con el contexto histórico que culminó en su creación; el desarrollo de éste, planteando sus objetivos y estructuración; y el escenario posterior al programa, centrándose en el marco político actual que, como se ha demostrado, influyó en las tasas de inseguridad alimentaria. La metodología utilizada fue una revisión bibliográfica, utilizando autores de referencia de investigaciones en políticas públicas, analizadas desde la perspectiva del neoinstitucionalismo. En general, el Programa Hambre Cero fue una política pública alimentaria importante, pero sin la continuidad de este tema en la agenda gubernamental, los resultados tienden a perderse en el largo plazo.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Programa Fome Zero. Políticas públicas. Ciudadanía. Participación.*

Introduction

In the field of public policy studies, it is common to produce works that analyze the process of formulation, implementation, and outcomes of state-led interventions aimed at the population. Such evaluation is essential to measure the impacts generated by a given policy, assessing its social, financial, and governmental feasibility.

Against this backdrop, the present study is motivated by the need to conduct analyses of specific public policies that have marked the country's history. This article proposes a process-oriented investigation of the trajectory of conception and development of the *Fome Zero* (Zero Hunger) program, a public policy created in 2003 with the objective of addressing the situation of malnutrition and food insecurity that characterized Brazil at that time. In other words, the study seeks to analyze the processual dynamics between the historical contexts that contributed to the creation of *Fome Zero* as a landmark program in the field of Brazilian public policies.

To this end, a bibliographic review methodology was employed, focusing on relevant authors in the areas of food insecurity, *Fome Zero*, and public policy. A broad set of academic texts aligned with the research theme was surveyed, and, following careful reading and refinement of the study objectives, those works that constitute the theoretical framework of this article were selected. Based on this corpus, it was possible to develop the analyses presented herein, including empirical and quantitative data drawn from the existing literature. Accordingly, the figures and data throughout the text originate from the selected and duly referenced bibliography.

Furthermore, the theoretical foundation of the investigation is grounded in the neo-institutionalist tradition, which emphasizes the role of institutions in shaping policies and decision-making processes (Peres, 2008). Within public policy studies, this approach highlights how institutional design can influence both the implementation and the outcomes of a given action. As discussed below, the implementation context of *Fome Zero* coincided with a policy window of opportunity (Capella, 2007), enabling the program to develop with positive results. This outcome is associated with the institutional characteristics prevailing in that governmental context, as indicated by the neo-institutionalist perspective.

The development of the article is structured into three stages. First, it outlines the context of food insecurity that largely characterized Brazilian reality until 2003, drawing on the contributions of Castro (1961; 1984), Carvalho (2001), Brito and Baptista (2021), and Tapajós, Rodrigues, and Coelho (2010). Second, *Fome Zero* is presented as a public policy specifically

designed to address this problem, including its organization and implementation, based on the works of Aranha (2010), Schwarcz (2019), Cortes (2011), Fonseca et al. (2021), and Peliano (2010). Finally, the contemporary scenario of hunger and malnutrition is delineated, drawing on Romão, Bezerra, and Rodrigues (2021) and Salles-Costa (2022). In addition, Capella (2007) supports the public policy research methodology adopted, and statements by Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003; 2023) are incorporated, as he was a key political actor in federal administrations during the two periods in which anti-hunger policies in Brazil gained greater prominence (Brito & Baptista, 2021).

In summary, hunger constitutes a historical feature of the Brazilian context, and *Fome Zero*, situated spatially and chronologically in this study, represented a significant instrument for reducing inequalities, enhancing social inclusion, and strengthening the population's relationship with the State, as will be further developed in the following sections.

Background: the issue of hunger in Brazil

The formation and development of Brazilian society occurred in a highly distinctive manner compared to other countries on the same continent, due to specific political, historical, and geographical factors that shaped its trajectory. As a result, certain problems have become entrenched in Brazil's condition of underdevelopment, including inequality, poverty, and hunger.

In this context, Josué de Castro (1961; 1984) devoted a substantial part of his work to analyzing hunger in Brazil, conceptualizing it as a social phenomenon. Castro fundamentally shifts the prevailing explanation of hunger—from one attributed to natural phenomena and environmental adversities—to one understood as a political and economic issue. In his view, it is the rational choices made by the State that generate deteriorated conditions of food production and distribution, giving rise to food insecurity in a country whose economy is largely oriented toward the export of primary commodities (Castro, 1984). While hunger has a nutritional dimension, it is above all a political and social phenomenon, and can be examined within the Social Sciences following Castro's framework (1961):

[...] the phenomenon of collective hunger—the hunger that endemically and epidemically affects large human masses [...] the so-called hidden hunger, in which, due to the lack of certain nutritional principles essential to life, entire population groups slowly starve to death, despite eating every day (Castro, 1961, p. 76-77, our translation).

Thus, Castro advances his argument by emphasizing the role of the State not only in producing this reality but also in resolving it through well-founded economic and social policies and the creation of social programs. For the author, it is not possible to address existing imbalances through economic development alone if such development is dissociated from social development (Castro, 1984).

With regard to the construction of public policies, it is after the 1988 Federal Constitution that greater openness emerged for the creation of distribution programs and mechanisms for social participation. Nevertheless, even with these advances, Brazil remained behind other Western countries in terms of citizenship (Carvalho, 2001). Brito and Baptista (2021) examine how the issue of hunger entered the political debate in the context of redemocratization. The authors synthesize how each political period attributed meaning to and made use of the problem of hunger, articulating the context and key documents in the field for each phase analyzed.

In general terms, from 1986 to 1994 hunger entered the political debate as a problem, with more emphatic actions occurring only after 1993, under the government of Itamar Franco and his articulation with Herbert de Souza (Betinho). From 1995 to 2002, during the administration of Fernando Henrique Cardoso, hunger is characterized by the authors as a theme of political dispute. It is only from 2003 onward, according to Brito and Baptista, that hunger became a priority on the policy agenda, under the government of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. This marks the moment when, as stated by the head of the Executive, there was a “[...] resumption through growth against hunger, unemployment, and social inequality” (Lula, 2003, our translation).

Thus, Tapajós, Rodrigues, and Coelho (2010) characterize the scenario faced by the federal administration in 2003 as one of “[...] advanced erosion of rights, arduously achieved through social struggles, gradually reduced to the sphere of voluntarism and favor, and displaced to the unusual and discontinuous solidarity-based provision entrusted to society” (Tapajós; Rodrigues; Coelho, 2010, p. 44, our translation). This window of opportunity (Capella, 2007) created the conditions for the implementation and execution of public policies on the issue, opening the agenda for the realization of the *Fome Zero* Program.

The *Fome Zero* Program: constitution and development

According to Peliano (2010), it is possible to historically trace food security policies in Brazil back to the 1940s, with programs such as the Central Food Service and the Social Security Food Service, which are fundamental to understanding anti-hunger actions in the country. The second implementation of the National Food and Nutrition Program represents another milestone in this historical trajectory, as it brought small-scale rural production to the center of public policy initiatives. After 1990, however, the various anti-hunger programs developed up to that point were limited or discontinued (Peliano, 2010).

It is in this context that, in 2003, the *Fome Zero* Program emerged as an initiative of the Federal Government under Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003–2011), who, both during his campaign and from the outset of his mandate, placed the issue of hunger at the center of his agenda, as made explicit in his government program (Lula, 2002). *Fome Zero* initially began as a program and, as its scope of action expanded, became consolidated as a broader strategy that nationally integrated initiatives related to food production, supply, and access (Aranha, 2010).

Accordingly, the program's target population, as noted by Tapajós, Rodrigues, and Coelho (2010), initially focused on individuals living in poverty and extreme poverty, and progressively expanded to include other socially vulnerable groups. The monitoring indicators associated with *Fome Zero* are the standard social indicators typically observed: the Gini index, poverty, extreme poverty, and child malnutrition (Aranha, 2010).

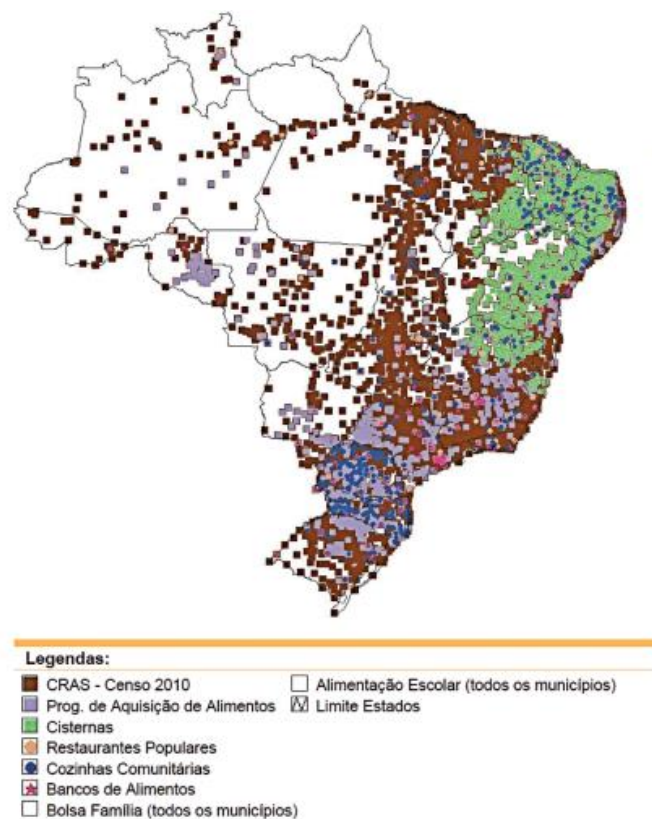
In this way, the program's core pillars involve encouraging family farming and income generation, contributing to the diversification of *Fome Zero*, which is dedicated not only to eradicating hunger but also to reducing social inequality (Aranha, 2010). As argued by Schwarcz (2019), inequality is a historical legacy of Brazilian society and is not limited to social inequality alone, but also encompasses income, gender, and opportunity inequalities, all of which hinder access to basic elements of survival, such as food.

In this sense, the *Fome Zero* Program also functions as a mechanism for social assessment, as it addresses, on a national scale, the distinct needs of each region according to family conditions and those of rural workers. To this end, federal, state, and municipal actors were mobilized, resulting in improvements in social indicators related to poverty, food insecurity, and malnutrition (Aranha, 2010).

In practical terms, *Fome Zero* actions also encompassed financing policies, such as the expansion of the Bolsa Família Program and the Family Farming Financing Program; income

generation through professional training and the promotion of the solidarity economy; and social mobilization through the creation of councils and reference centers. One example of an activity developed under *Fome Zero* was the installation of household cisterns in the semi-arid region, which faces water supply challenges due to low and irregular rainfall (Aranha, 2010). Figure 1 illustrates the actions of the *Fome Zero* Program and their distribution across the national territory.

Figure 1 – *Fome Zero* actions in Brazil, 2010



Source: Social Information Matrix — SAGI/MDS/2010. Extracted from Aranha (2010, p. 88).

As can be observed, the program's actions are distributed throughout the national territory, with full nationwide coverage provided by Bolsa Família and School Feeding initiatives. All actions illustrated in Figure 1 are coordinated with the aim of eradicating hunger in the country—hence the importance of allocating policies across states in accordance with territorially specific needs.

With regard to *Fome Zero*'s implementation, the main institution responsible for promoting social mobilization—one of the program's stated objectives—is the National

Council for Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA). Social participation became a central demand as a result of the advances introduced by the 1988 Federal Constitution, which brought about significant changes in the pattern of relations between society and the State (Cortes, 2011).

Accordingly, CONSEA's motivation was to expand population involvement in this public policy by bringing target groups closer to the planning and implementation stages. This process entailed the recovery of citizenship and participation that had long been weakened, as well as the recognition of hunger as a political issue (Peliano, 2010), as previously suggested by Castro.

It should be emphasized that participatory mechanisms within public policies are a central topic of debate, as they contribute to the legitimacy of the democratic regime and to the cultural construction of politics as a collective activity (Cortes, 2011). Fonseca *et al.* (2021) highlight the role of participation by tracing its trajectory between 2010 and 2020. They argue that the first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed profound transformations in Brazil's democratic institutional politics, particularly through the expansion of channels for social participation in public policies (Fonseca *et al.*, 2021). This analytical period encompasses *Fome Zero* and its interventions, revealing the program's contributions to the Brazilian context beyond the issue of food alone.

With respect to these advances, the monitoring of social indicators also revealed progressive changes in the social structure. According to data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sovereignty, and Food and Nutritional Security in Brazil, child malnutrition among children under five years of age declined from 13% to 7% between 1997 and 2007, a ten-year period (Aranha, 2010). Beyond hunger itself, food insecurity is characterized by irregular access to food, whether in terms of frequency or nutritional adequacy.

In summary, *Fome Zero* can be understood as a polysemic public policy in terms of its objectives, actors, and actions. The multiple meanings embedded in its design were consistent with the diverse problems that needed to be addressed, extending beyond the priority of food provision alone. The program's outcomes, such as the aforementioned reduction in child malnutrition, as well as several other indicators discussed in the literature, underscore an overall positive assessment of this intervention.

Post-implementation perspectives of *Fome Zero*: hunger in contemporary Brazil

Drawing on Capella (2007), changes in the political agenda—such as governmental transitions—are reflected in shifts in the windows of opportunity for specific public policy issues. In this sense, the political transformation between 2016 and 2022 ultimately removed hunger from the list of programmatic priorities. This political shift led to significant changes in the Brazilian reality, particularly in light of the multiple advances achieved under *Fome Zero*. This study highlights two of the setbacks that occurred during this period: the decline in food and socioeconomic indicators and the dismantling of participatory structures.

With regard to the dismantling of participatory mechanisms, CONSEA—previously identified as the main instrument for ensuring interaction between the State and society within *Fome Zero*—was abolished by Provisional Measure No. 870 of January 1, 2019, enacted on the first day of Jair Bolsonaro's presidential term (2019–2022). Being one of the government's first actions, this decision foreshadowed the nature of subsequent measures and represented only the initial step in the erosion of participation, followed by further abolitions or weakening of participatory bodies and collegiate institutions, as documented by Romão, Bezerra, and Rodrigues (2021). The authors conclude that restricting participation also constrains the formulation of public policies—a fact that became evident over the subsequent four years (Romão; Bezerra; Rodrigues, 2021).

With specific regard to hunger, statistical data indicate a sharp decline in the progress previously achieved in combating food and nutritional insecurity. Data from the National Household Sample Surveys of 2004 and 2013, and from the 2018 Household Budget Survey, organized by Salles-Costa (2022), show that until 2013 food security improved as insecurity rates declined. However, between 2013 and 2018 this trend reversed: food security decreased while food insecurity increased (Salles-Costa, 2022).

Accordingly, the author interprets this scenario as the one that the COVID-19 pandemic would encounter two years later—a phenomenon that significantly contributed to the deterioration of quality of life. In her analysis, she precisely defines food insecurity as access to food in sufficient quantity and frequency so as not to compromise the fulfillment of other basic needs. She also emphasizes food as a fundamental human right, the protection of which is a responsibility of the State (Salles-Costa, 2022). Her conclusion is as follows:

Brazil has historically been marked by inequalities in access to food. Between 2004 and 2013, this situation changed through the guarantee of the Human

Right to Adequate Food (DHAA)³ and a significant reduction in hunger: during this period, the proportion of severe food insecurity, which expresses hunger among the population, progressively declined, reaching its lowest level in 2013. The active participation of CONSEA in highlighting the importance of using Food and Nutritional Security (SAN) indicators in the country, as well as its dialogue with the federal government on SAN policies, contributed to the interdisciplinary debate on social and health inequities and to the reduction of food insecurity (Salles-Costa, 2022, p. 88, our translation).

Therefore, the consequences of deprioritizing hunger in government actions become evident, as does the extent to which a favorable political context can create significant opportunities for change. In light of the contemporary scenario, the most recent electoral cycle once again opened a perspective similar to that encountered by *Fome Zero* in 2003, with one of the first actions on January 1, 2023 being the reestablishment of CONSEA, based on the premise that “[...] it would be neither fair nor right to ask patience of those who are hungry” (Lula, 2023).

Final considerations

In a political and economic context as unstable as Brazil’s, implementing long-term public policies capable of producing lasting results for the population poses significant challenges. In this regard, the monitoring of social indicators reflects much of the population’s living conditions, whether in terms of household income, access to quality healthcare, illiteracy, or food security.

Accordingly, this study sought to synthesize how *Fome Zero* was designed as a policy aimed at eliminating the social problem of hunger and its broader implications. More than addressing food and nutritional insecurity, *Fome Zero* sought to integrate other dimensions, such as inequality, professional qualification, and participation. This approach represents not only the restoration of human dignity—understood here primarily as access to food in adequate quality and quantity—but also the recovery of citizenship, since social participation is severely constrained in contexts of scarcity.

From this perspective, a process-oriented analytical approach was adopted to reveal, across three distinct moments, why hunger gains relevance as a policy issue, how it loses priority, and how it regains prominence. The study was developed through a bibliographic review of the relevant literature, drawing on materials that provided a broad contextualization

³ Human Right to Adequate Food.

of the object of analysis and in-depth treatment of specific themes raised throughout the argument.

Castro (1961; 1984) was the first author mobilized, given his pioneering role in analyzing hunger as a social problem arising from political and economic decisions made by the State. Carvalho (2001), Brito and Baptista (2021), and Tapajós, Rodrigues, and Coelho (2010) contributed to establishing the background for a specific public policy aimed at overcoming malnutrition—namely, *Fome Zero*. To understand the program and its contributions, its structure, objectives, and actions were examined through materials produced by the Ministry of Social Development and the Fight against Hunger, with Aranha (2010) and Peliano (2010) providing essential insights.

Subsequently, Schwarcz's (2019) interpretation of inequality situates hunger as one of its manifestations and introduces the discussion on social participation, further developed through the contributions of Cortes (2011) and Fonseca et al. (2021). Within *Fome Zero*, participation was a central element in the program's design, aimed at strengthening interaction between society and the State, particularly through the establishment of CONSEA. The study also presents evidence of the outcomes of increased participation and improvements in socioeconomic indicators generated by the program, based on Aranha's (2010) analysis.

Finally, the contemporary situation of hunger in Brazil is examined in the aftermath of the program and its achievements. The works of Romão, Bezerra, and Rodrigues (2021) and Salles-Costa (2022) reveal a context of dismantling and regression in terms of participation and the fight against food insecurity—gains that had been arduously achieved between 2003 and 2016. The change in government removed equality and redistribution policies from the agenda, contributing to the resurgence of malnutrition in the country.

In this light, the importance of a federal administration committed to these demands becomes evident, which explains the recurrence of statements by President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003; 2023) both at the outset of his first term in 2003, when *Fome Zero* was launched, and upon his return to office in 2023, when he encountered a scenario in which hunger had reemerged with greater intensity and required renewed solutions.

In sum, *Fome Zero* holds fundamental significance within the Brazilian context, having contributed practices that shaped the population's experience and improved indicators of poverty and child malnutrition over more than a decade. Nevertheless, such measures must be continuously implemented and genuinely understood as a pillar of national development, with

institutional arrangements designed to act in favor of the outcomes of implemented public policies.

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