




SOCIAL ASSISTANCE POLICIES AND INDIGENOUS DEMANDS: A PERSPECTIVE OF SUSTAINABILITY AND RESPECT FOR ETHNIC DIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

This article addressed the construction of public policies aimed at indigenous communities, highlighting the importance of recognizing ethnic and cultural diversity as a central element for their effectiveness. The research, of a qualitative and bibliographic nature, explored the existing gaps in the formulation of these policies, analyzing how welfare practices and the disregard of cultural and territorial specificities compromise the rights and autonomy of indigenous peoples. Topics such as the intrinsic relationship between territory and culture, the role of sustainability in the preservation of traditions and the need for intersectoral strategies that integrate health, education and social assistance were discussed. The results pointed out that, although there are occasional advances, most policies still fail to meet the complex demands of indigenous communities, especially due to the absence of a dialogical and inclusive approach. It was highlighted that the strengthening of traditional practices and the demarcation of territories are essential for the cultural survival of these peoples. Despite the limitations of the research, which was restricted to bibliographic analysis, the study brought important reflections to the field of public policies, evidencing ways for a more effective and respectful performance. Finally, recommendations were presented for future studies, such as the inclusion of empirical approaches, regional analyses, and investigations into the use of technologies to strengthen indigenous autonomy.

Keywords: Ethnic Diversity. Public Policies. Indigenous Communities.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout Brazilian history, public policies have been marked by contradictions with regard to the recognition and appreciation of ethnic diversity, particularly with regard to indigenous peoples. Despite the legislative advances that sought to ensure fundamental rights to these groups, many challenges persist, especially in the field of social assistance and strategies aimed at sustainability and cultural preservation. The coexistence of legislation that theoretically recognizes indigenous rights with practices that often disregard their cultural and territorial specificities reveals a significant gap in the formulation and execution of these policies. In this context, ethnic diversity emerges as an essential aspect that needs to be incorporated more substantially and effectively into public planning.

The article focuses on analyzing the challenges and potentialities of public social assistance policies aimed at indigenous communities, with an emphasis on sustainability and the recognition of ethnic diversity as fundamental pillars for cultural preservation. The main objective is to investigate how public policies can be restructured or strengthened to meet the specific demands of these communities, promoting their autonomy and ensuring respect for their traditions. The research also seeks to understand the historical and institutional barriers that hinder the application of more inclusive and contextualized practices.

Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative approach, based on a literature review, based on academic works, scientific articles and institutional documents that deal with the indigenous theme in the context of public policies and social assistance. This methodological choice allows for an in-depth and critical analysis of the existing contents, promoting a consistent reflection on the problems and possibilities in the field of social policies for indigenous communities. The literature review is structured to explore the central points of the debate, such as sustainability, cultural preservation, and recognition of diversity.

The justification for carrying out this research is anchored in the growing relevance of indigenous issues in the national and international scenario. In a context of constant threats to indigenous rights, such as the intensification of deforestation and the invasion of territories, it is essential to discuss ways to strengthen public policies that protect these peoples. In addition, the study seeks to contribute to overcoming a Eurocentric vision that has historically permeated social and political practices in Brazil, proposing paths that promote equity and respect for differences.

The problem that guides this investigation can be formulated as follows: how can public policies effectively incorporate the ethnic and cultural diversity of indigenous

communities, promoting their autonomy and ensuring the preservation of their traditions, in the face of a context of structural and historical challenges? The answer to this question not only shows the gaps present in public policies, but also points out possible ways to transform public planning into a tool for social justice and sustainability.

CHALLENGES AND POTENTIALITIES OF SOCIAL ASSISTANCE IN SERVING INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Social assistance aimed at indigenous communities faces challenges of great complexity, as a result of a history of negligence, invisibility and exclusion that these peoples experience in Brazil. For centuries, social assistance was shaped by perspectives that ignored the cultural specificities and territorial demands of these communities. This mismatch between the real needs of indigenous peoples and the design of public policies is reinforced by a social structure that often sees ethnic differences as barriers rather than cultural richness. This limited view contributes to the perpetuation of practices that disregard the central role of diversity in the formulation of effective and inclusive policies (Amaral and Bilar, 2020).

Historically, care practices have been limited to a logic of forced integration, which sought to assimilate indigenous peoples to the standards of the majority society, often disregarding their traditions, ancestral knowledge, and modes of social organization. This approach has generated a distance between indigenous communities and social policies, resulting in mutual distrust and low rates of adherence to the services provided. In addition, there is a perpetuation of colonizing narratives, which paint indigenous people as homogeneous and passive groups, reinforcing stigmas that hinder significant advances in the field of social assistance (Barreto, 2016).

One of the great challenges faced by Social Work in serving indigenous communities is the difficulty of establishing genuine intercultural dialogues. Social assistance professionals often encounter barriers related to linguistic differences, conceptions of the world and social dynamics present in these communities. In many cases, these barriers hinder the building of bonds of trust, compromising the success of care initiatives. For social policies to be truly transformative, it is necessary to adopt strategies that respect the specificities of each people, valuing their traditions and strengthening the autonomy of the communities served (Santana, 2022).

Social assistance also faces logistical and structural obstacles, especially in hard-to-reach regions. Many indigenous territories are located in remote areas, which makes it difficult for technical teams to continuously be present and maintain basic services. This

absence of infrastructure reveals historical negligence on the part of the State and highlights the urgency of a restructuring that considers the geographical particularities of these territories. Without this consideration, social assistance policies tend to remain distant and inadequate to local needs, aggravating the conditions of vulnerability faced by these communities (Baines, 2001).

The presence of indigenous organizations has proven to be fundamental to ensure that the demands of the communities are properly incorporated into public policies. These organizations act as mediators between the State and the communities, translating local needs into political demands. In addition, they play an essential role in the preservation of cultural traditions, which are often threatened by welfare practices that disregard ethnic plurality. Recognizing and strengthening the role of these organizations is an essential strategy to promote a more equitable dialogue and build more effective policies aligned with indigenous realities (Baniwa, 2007).

Often, professionals are not sufficiently prepared to deal with cultural diversity and the specific challenges faced by these communities. The absence of adequate training leads to the reproduction of standardized and decontextualized practices, which ignore local specificities and weaken the impact of public policies. Training programs that include content on the history, rights, and social dynamics of indigenous communities are essential to ensure a more qualified and respectful service (Oliveira, 2022).

The articulation between different public policies, such as health, education and social assistance, is essential to expand the reach and effectiveness of actions aimed at indigenous communities. However, the lack of integration between these areas often results in fragmented initiatives, which fail to meet the complex and multifaceted demands of these populations. To overcome this fragmentation, it is necessary to build intersectoral cooperation networks that consider the cultural and social specificities of indigenous peoples, promoting a more holistic and effective approach (Fernandes and Maciel, 2019).

The relationship between indigenous peoples and their territories plays a central role in shaping social assistance demands. For many communities, territory is not just a physical space, but an essential element of their cultural and spiritual identity. Public policies that disregard this intrinsic relationship often fail to address the real needs of communities. Recognizing the centrality of the territory and incorporating it as a structuring element of social assistance policies is a fundamental step to promote actions that are more aligned with indigenous specificities (Maciel et al., 2020).

Fiscal austerity policies imposed in recent periods have exacerbated the inequalities faced by indigenous communities, further restricting access to social assistance services.

These policies resulted in budget cuts that directly impacted the implementation of social programs, compromising the State's ability to meet the specific demands of these peoples. The defense of public policies that prioritize social justice and equity is essential to reverse this scenario and guarantee the rights of indigenous populations (Fernandes and Maciel, 2019).

SUSTAINABILITY AS A BASIS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF INDIGENOUS CULTURES AND TRADITIONS

Sustainability, when integrated into public policies, can become an important axis for the preservation of indigenous cultures and traditions. This concept, which encompasses environmental, social and economic aspects, dialogues directly with indigenous ways of life, guided by respect for nature and the balanced use of natural resources. In this context, sustainability should not be understood only as a tool for development, but as an essential strategy for the protection of the cultural identities of these peoples. The application of this principle requires an approach that values traditional knowledge and recognizes the intrinsic relationship between indigenous communities and their territories (Baniwa, 2007).

The connection that indigenous peoples maintain with their lands is a central element in understanding sustainability in their daily practices. For these communities, the territory is not just a physical space, but the basis of their collective existence, where their ancestral knowledge and cultural identity are found. However, the expansion of economic projects that disregard these specificities has represented a constant threat to the integrity of these territories. The adoption of sustainable practices can therefore serve as a means of ensuring the preservation not only of the environment, but also of the cultural traditions associated with these territories (Fernandes and Maciel, 2019).

The traditional knowledge of indigenous communities represents a model of sustainability that differs from the Western paradigm. These practices, often passed down orally for generations, involve the balanced management of natural resources, respecting the cycles of nature and promoting harmonious coexistence between humans and the environment. Incorporating this knowledge into public policy-making processes not only values Indigenous knowledge, but also offers effective solutions to contemporary environmental issues (Barreto, 2016).

Our main objective for wanting the land is not to lose our culture. Culture is the only thing left for us, the rest has already been taken from us. They are trying to take away even more, which is the culture we still have. We are often judged as a people who no longer know the culture, but perhaps the fault is the lack of a space, the lack of a demarcated village, for us to have our own autonomy. We need a space where

we can be Guarani. The way we are. Our reason is very simple, we don't want our culture, our being, to be lost (BRASIL, 2013, p. 2).

The environmental destruction caused by the unbridled exploitation of natural resources has a direct impact on indigenous cultures, which depend on ecological balance to maintain their ways of life. When forests are cleared, rivers are polluted, or land is degraded, not only the physical environment is affected, but also the cultural and spiritual practices that are deeply rooted in these spaces. In this sense, sustainability emerges as an indispensable approach to protect the ecosystems that sustain indigenous communities, while promoting the strengthening of their traditions (Baines, 2001).

The role of indigenous organizations in advocating for sustainability is critical to ensuring that their perspectives are incorporated into public policies. These organizations have promoted initiatives that reinforce the importance of environmental conservation as a basis for cultural survival, demonstrating that the struggle for the preservation of nature is inseparable from the struggle for indigenous rights. This protagonism reinforces the need for indigenous peoples to be recognized as active agents in the formulation of sustainable strategies, rather than mere beneficiaries of government programs (Baniwa, 2007).

Public policies that seek to align development and sustainability often fail to disregard the specificities of indigenous communities. In many cases, economic projects are implemented in indigenous territories without the consultation or participation of local populations, resulting in negative impacts on both the environment and traditional cultures. The adoption of prior, free, and informed consultation mechanisms, as established by ILO Convention 169, is an essential tool to ensure that public policies respect indigenous rights and promote truly sustainable practices (Fernandes and Maciel, 2019).

Strengthening indigenous cultural practices through sustainable initiatives can be an effective strategy to promote the resilience of these communities in the face of socio-environmental transformations. Programs that encourage sustainable agriculture, traditional crafts, and other economic activities based on local knowledge contribute to income generation without compromising cultural values. In addition, these initiatives help to reaffirm the importance of indigenous knowledge in building a more balanced and respectful society with the environment (Pinto and Berger, 2019).

Education is one of the main pillars for promoting sustainability and the preservation of cultural traditions. Educational programs that value indigenous knowledge and promote intercultural dialogue can play a transformative role by strengthening cultural identities and empowering communities to address contemporary challenges. The inclusion of sustainable indigenous practices in school curricula, for example, can create a connection between new

generations and ancestral knowledge, ensuring the continuity of these traditions (Maciel et al., 2020).

In many communities, women play central roles in the management of natural resources, the transmission of ancestral knowledge and social organization. Recognizing and strengthening women's protagonism in sustainable initiatives is essential to promote effective change, ensuring that public policies reflect the diversity and richness of indigenous cultural practices (Santana, 2022).

Sustainability, in addition to its environmental dimension, must be understood as an ethical commitment to future generations. For indigenous communities, preserving the balance of nature is a way of honoring ancestors and ensuring the well-being of those to come. In this sense, the promotion of sustainable practices is a manifestation of respect for the cycles of life and the interdependence between human beings and the environment. Incorporating this understanding into public policies is essential to build a fairer and more balanced society (Amaral and Bilar, 2020).

Indigenous cultural traditions offer a unique perspective on the concept of sustainability, challenging conventional notions of progress and development. Rather than seeking economic growth at any cost, indigenous practices emphasize the harmony between human needs and the environment's ability to regenerate. This paradigm, based on reciprocity and respect for nature, can serve as an inspiration for the construction of alternative development models that prioritize equity and environmental preservation (Baines, 2001).

The recognition of indigenous territories as spaces for environmental and cultural preservation is an essential strategy to promote sustainability. These areas, often protected by specific laws, play a vital role in conserving biodiversity and maintaining cultural traditions. However, the effective protection of these territories depends on strengthening indigenous rights and ensuring that communities can fully exercise their control over the lands they occupy (Baniwa, 2007).

Indigenous peoples, due to their intrinsic relationship with nature, have knowledge and practices that can contribute significantly to the mitigation of these impacts. Valuing and incorporating this knowledge into policy-making processes is an essential step towards building more effective and inclusive solutions (Maciel et al., 2020).

The adoption of sustainable technologies adapted to indigenous realities can enhance the benefits of public policies, while preserving cultural values. Simple technologies, such as rainwater harvesting systems or renewable energy sources, can improve the living conditions of communities without compromising their cultural identity.

These innovations, when developed in partnership with communities, reinforce the autonomy and resilience of indigenous peoples (Oliveira, 2022).

RECOGNIZING ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF PUBLIC POLICIES

Recognizing this diversity as a central element in the formulation of inclusion strategies is essential to promote equity and repair the historical damage that indigenous populations, quilombolas, and other marginalized communities have suffered over the centuries. This recognition must go beyond generic discourses of inclusion, requiring practical and situated approaches, adapted to local realities and the specificities of each group (Amaral and Bilar, 2020).

The construction of public policies that respect and value ethnic diversity involves, first, active listening to the communities involved. In the case of indigenous populations, for example, prior, free and informed consultation is not only a right established by ILO Convention 169, but also a practice that ensures that their voices are considered in the formulation of policies that directly impact their lives. However, this practice still faces significant challenges, often being limited to bureaucratic processes that do not reflect genuine dialogue (Fernandes and Maciel, 2019).

A concrete example of the importance of recognizing ethnic diversity can be observed in the implementation of health policies aimed at indigenous peoples. Many of these peoples have conceptions of health and disease that differ radically from Western biomedical models. Ignoring these differences results in health programs that are ineffective or even rejected by communities. On the other hand, initiatives that integrate traditional healing practices with conventional medicine have shown more positive results, reinforcing the importance of building public policies that dialogue with local knowledge (Santana, 2022).

Education is another field where recognition of ethnic diversity is key. Indigenous communities, for example, often fight for an educational model that respects their languages, histories, and ways of life. Projects that integrate these elements into the school curriculum not only promote access to education, but also strengthen the cultural identity of indigenous children and youth. However, the effectiveness of this type of policy is still limited, running into resistance ranging from lack of resources to the reproduction of institutional prejudices (Amaral, 2019).

Ethnic diversity also requires that public policies be shaped by territorial perspectives. In regions such as the Legal Amazon, where a large part of the population is made up of indigenous and riverine communities, economic development strategies need to

take into account local ways of life. Experiences that ignored these specifics, such as large infrastructure projects that disregarded cultural and environmental realities, resulted in devastating impacts, both for ecosystems and communities. These failures reinforce the need to incorporate local knowledge as a basis for effective policymaking (Baniwa, 2007).

In the field of social assistance, ethnic diversity is often treated in a superficial way, with programs that do not distinguish the specific needs of each group. A recurring example is the application of standardized criteria to determine eligibility for social benefits, disregarding the particularities of indigenous communities, such as their collective relationship with the land and their social organization based on community structures. Policies that recognize and respect these specificities not only increase their effectiveness, but also promote the dignity of the populations served (Baines, 2001).

The cultural resistance of indigenous and quilombola populations, in the face of policies that do not respect their diversity, is a warning sign for public managers and researchers. When these communities reject state interventions, it is not a mere refusal, but a way of protecting their values and ways of life in the face of practices that have historically tried to assimilate them. Thus, the recognition of ethnic diversity is not only a matter of social justice, but a strategy to build public policies that count on the active adherence of the benefited communities (Maciel et al., 2020).

Ethnic diversity also challenges social work professionals to adopt more specific and contextual approaches. A study carried out in the service of quilombola communities revealed that generic income transfer programs, although important, do not address structural issues such as lack of access to land and environmental vulnerability. In this sense, integrated policies that articulate social assistance, territorial rights, and sustainability offer more adequate responses to the demands of these populations (Fernandes and Maciel, 2019).

The inclusion of ethnic diversity in the processes of public policy formulation also requires changes in the training of managers and technicians who work in this field. Professionals who are unaware of the history and culture of the populations with which they work end up reproducing practices that reinforce inequalities. Training courses that address topics such as indigenous history, structural racism, and territorial rights are essential steps to prepare these professionals to work in contexts of diversity (Oliveira, 2022).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Despite normative frameworks, such as the Federal Constitution of 1988 and ILO Convention 169, which guarantee fundamental rights to indigenous communities, the abyss

between the legal text and practical reality remains a critical challenge. The literature consulted points out that this distancing is reinforced by a state logic that favors standardized models of care, to the detriment of approaches that respect the cultural and territorial specificities of indigenous peoples (Amaral and Bilar, 2020; Pinto and Berger, 2019).

One of the most evident problems raised is the persistence of welfare practices in the scope of social assistance policies. These practices, instead of promoting the autonomy of communities, perpetuate a relationship of dependence and disregard the modes of collective organization of indigenous peoples. According to Fernandes and Maciel (2019), this approach not only delegitimizes traditional knowledge and practices, but also reinforces the invisibility of cultural and territorial demands. To overcome this obstacle, public policies need to be rebuilt from a perspective that integrates diversity as a structuring element and promotes the active participation of indigenous communities in decision-making processes.

The study by Baniwa (2007) emphasizes that the loss of traditional territories has devastating impacts on indigenous ways of life, compromising both their social organization and their cultural practices. This analysis converges with the quote from Brasil (2013), which highlights the intrinsic relationship between territory and cultural identity, reinforcing that the struggle for land is, above all, a struggle for cultural survival. In this context, public policies need to adopt an approach that recognizes the territory as a space for collective existence and a basis for the construction of autonomy.

However, the results also point to specific advances, especially in initiatives that integrate traditional knowledge with sustainability and environmental preservation practices. Projects that incorporate indigenous practices of sustainable management of natural resources have shown potential to strengthen the resilience of communities and promote the appreciation of their ancestral knowledge. Baines (2001) points out that these initiatives not only guarantee environmental preservation, but also strengthen the collective identity and self-esteem of communities, creating a virtuous cycle that benefits both indigenous peoples and society in general.

Education also emerges as a field of dispute and possibilities in the recognition of ethnic diversity. According to Amaral (2019), the inclusion of content related to indigenous history and knowledge in school curricula is a powerful tool to deconstruct prejudices and promote respect for diversity. However, there is still structural resistance within the education system, which often reproduces a Eurocentric vision and ignores the cultural specificities of indigenous peoples. The challenge, therefore, lies in the formulation of

educational policies that integrate intercultural dialogue as a central principle, respecting and valuing indigenous contributions.

Therefore, a critical aspect identified is the fragility of intersectoral articulations between different public policies. The integration between social assistance, health, education and land rights is often fragmented, resulting in isolated initiatives that fail to meet the complex demands of indigenous communities. Fernandes and Maciel (2019) highlight that the absence of cooperation between sectors perpetuates gaps that could be solved by coordinated actions. In this sense, the articulation of intersectoral networks that promote the complementarity of public policies is a viable response to overcome structural challenges and advance in the construction of more effective strategies.

Thus, the results indicate that, although there are specific advances and successful initiatives, there is still a long way to go so that public policies can effectively incorporate ethnic diversity and promote the autonomy of indigenous communities. The recognition of cultural and territorial specificities, the appreciation of traditional knowledge and the construction of intersectoral networks are indispensable elements to transform public planning into a tool for social justice and cultural preservation. These aspects, widely discussed in the literature, offer concrete ways to overcome the identified limitations and create policies that truly meet the needs of indigenous communities (Amaral and Bilar, 2020; Fernandes and Maciel, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the recognition of ethnic diversity is an indispensable element in the construction of public policies aimed at indigenous communities. The analysis showed that, although there are promising initiatives, there are still significant gaps in the formulation and implementation of these policies, especially with regard to the integration of cultural and territorial specificities. Valuing traditions, strengthening autonomy, and guaranteeing rights are fundamental pillars that need to be widely prioritized so that indigenous peoples can live in dignified conditions and with full preservation of their identity.

The intrinsic relationship between territory and culture, evidenced throughout the work, reinforces the urgency of strategies that ensure not only the demarcation of indigenous lands, but also the active inclusion of communities in decision-making processes. In addition, overcoming welfare practices and building intersectoral actions can contribute significantly to increasing the effectiveness of public policies. It is therefore concluded that recognizing ethnic diversity is not only a matter of respect, but also a condition for the promotion of social justice and sustainability.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

Although the research has provided important reflections on public policies for indigenous communities, some limitations need to be considered. First, the qualitative and bibliographic nature of the study restricted the analysis to materials already published, without the inclusion of empirical data collected directly from indigenous communities. This approach, although rich in theoretical discussions, may not fully capture the nuances and specific demands of the populations analyzed.

The study did not delve into regional specificities, which could reveal relevant particularities in the way public policies are applied in different indigenous territories. In addition, the focus on general aspects of social assistance policies, sustainability and ethnic diversity may have limited the analysis of more specific issues, such as intersectoral relations in certain contexts.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Given the relevance and complexity of the topic, future studies could explore a more empirical approach, directly involving indigenous communities through interviews, focus groups, or case studies. This type of investigation would allow a more detailed understanding of the perspectives, challenges and demands of these populations, enriching the analyses and bringing the conclusions closer to the reality experienced by indigenous peoples.

Comparative studies between different territories can reveal successful practices, in addition to identifying specific barriers that require localized solutions. In addition, the analysis of public policies from an intersectoral perspective, involving health, education, environment and social assistance, can contribute to the development of integrated and more effective strategies.

In conclusion, future studies can explore the relationship between technological innovation and cultural preservation in indigenous communities. Investigating how new technologies can be incorporated in a respectful and collaborative manner in the context of communities can bring valuable perspectives for the formulation of contemporary and inclusive public policies. These approaches can significantly amplify the impact of research in strengthening the rights and autonomy of indigenous peoples.

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