

FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER AS A PUBLIC POLICY: THE PROGRAMS TO PROVIDE MEALS TO THE POPULATION IN SITUATIONS OF SOCIAL VULNERABILITY IN BRAZIL



<https://doi.org/10.56238/arev6n4-068>

Submitted on: 11/05/2024

Publication date: 12/05/2024

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ABSTRACT

Social public policies are fundamental to enable access to certain rights and needs for marginalized citizens, without which this would not be possible. In Brazil, social policies were instituted as consequences of class struggles, a path to the conquest of rights and the reduction of inequalities. As the effectiveness and maintenance of public policies are dependent on the release of public resources, one of the problems is their fragmentation and discontinuity due to changes in government over the years. Faced with the scenario of food and nutritional insecurity experienced by the Brazilian population and aware of the State's responsibility to respect, protect and promote people's right to have access to adequate and healthy food, the government has created several strategies to guarantee this right established by the Federal Constitution of Brazil. Among the strategies, programs to provide healthy and nutritious food to socially vulnerable people stand out. Narrowing it down a little further, there is the Popular Restaurant program, which was designed with the objective of providing complete and healthy meals at affordable prices for the low-income population. In this context, this research aimed to identify whether the Federal Government and the State Governments have programs for access to free or subsidized food in all Brazilian states. For this, the research was developed with a quantitative and exploratory approach, and the data collection was done through the websites of the Federal and State governments to identify the policies/programs of access to free or subsidized food, analyzing the following elements: if there are programs, what is the number of units, the amounts charged for lunch and the date of implementation of the program. It was concluded that, despite the difficulty of finding information regarding the programs in some states, in quantitative terms, there is a relevant number of establishments, but there is a need for a better geographical distribution of them so that access to free or low-cost food is achieved by the population of the various Brazilian regions and not just some.

Keywords: Public Policies. Healthy Eating. Social assistance. Fight against Hunger.

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INTRODUCTION

Public policies are essential instruments for the organization of society and the promotion of collective well-being. They seek to meet the needs of the population, ensuring access to fundamental rights such as health, education, security, housing and social assistance. In addition, public policies establish guidelines that regulate and guide social behavior, creating conditions for harmonious coexistence and sustainable development.

Public policies to combat hunger are essential to guarantee the right to food, considered a fundamental human right by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. According to Santos and Oliveira (2020), hunger reflects social and economic inequality, mainly affecting the marginalized population. Through public policies, it is possible to implement programs that promote food and nutritional security, ensuring access to quality food for the socially vulnerable population.

One of the main roles of public policies is the reduction of social and regional inequalities. Through specific programs and actions, the government can serve vulnerable groups, fight poverty, and provide opportunities for all. Initiatives such as social inclusion policies, popular housing, food, and income distribution are concrete examples of how public policies transform realities and promote greater equity among citizens.

Hunger in Brazil has always been present among millions of inhabitants and persists despite the technological advances obtained and the country being one of the main food producers in the world. The problems that make this reality still exist are diverse, and one of the ways to understand them is through the analysis of public policies aimed at fighting hunger and the challenges faced to implement them over the years.

Public policies to combat hunger play an essential role in guaranteeing the human right to food, promoting social justice and reducing inequalities. According to Santos and Oliveira (2020), hunger is one of the main manifestations of extreme poverty and a challenge that affects millions of people in the world. In this context, specific public policies, such as food security programs and the offer of free food or at very affordable prices, are essential to ensure that a more vulnerable population can have access to healthy and nutritious food.

Another important aspect is the reduction of the impacts of hunger on public health. According to studies by Silva and Pereira (2019), malnutrition is responsible for increasing infant mortality rates and aggravating chronic diseases in vulnerable populations. Policies such as the provision of school meals, nutritional supplementation, and the provision of

food to the socially vulnerable are proven effective strategies to prevent these problems and improve the indicator for combating hunger.

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Hunger in Brazil is a structural issue that reflects the persistent social and economic inequalities in the country. According to Santos and Oliveira (2020), food insecurity in Brazil is aggravated by factors such as income concentration, unemployment, and the fragility of external public policies for social protection. Recent data indicate that millions of Brazilians live in extreme poverty, which limits their access to basic foods and directly affects their quality of life. This reality demonstrates the urgent need for government action.

In addition to the social impacts, hunger has serious effects on public health. Silva and Almeida (2019) highlight that malnutrition, common in contexts of food insecurity, contributes to the increase in infant mortality and the worsening of chronic diseases. These problems are more evident in regions with low human development indexes, such as the North and Northeast of Brazil. The situation is even more worrying when associated with the absence of public policies to combat hunger. Thus, in this context, it is important that the Public Power, whether at the National, State or Municipal level, has programs that provide food for socially vulnerable citizens free of charge or at low prices with State subsidies.

In this context, the general objective of the research is to identify whether the Federal and State Governments have programs for access to free or subsidized food in all Brazilian states.

This research is important to identify whether the Government has developed actions to combat hunger through programs of access to food free of charge or subsidized by the Government, because the fight against hunger, in addition to being a moral imperative, is essential for sustainable development. According to Barros and Lima (2020), food insecurity impacts levels of health, education, and productivity of populations, creating a cycle of poverty that hinders the social and economic progress of a country. Thus, public

policies of this nature are fundamental to minimize the impacts of a class that is already very marginalized in society.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

PUBLIC POLICIES FOR THE SUPPLY OF FOOD TO THE SOCIALLY VULNERABLE POPULATION

Hunger in Brazil is a structural problem that reflects historical and persistent inequalities in access to resources and opportunities. According to Santos and Almeida (2021), hunger is the result of factors such as income concentration, precariousness in the labor market, and the absence of effective public policies for wealth redistribution. Although the country made progress in the fight against hunger between 2003 and 2014, the recent health, economic and political crises reversed part of this achievement.

The concept of food and nutrition security, which guides public policies in Brazil, was formalized in the Organic Law of Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN) in 2006. According to Conceição and Veiga (2020), this legislation consolidates an institutional framework that integrates external actions with regular and permanent access to quality food. However, the authors point out that the implementation of these policies faces important challenges, such as the discontinuity of programs due to changes in political managers.

The impacts of hunger in Brazil are amplified in populations, such as children, the elderly, and residents of rural and peripheral areas. Silva et al. (2020) emphasize that food insecurity has serious consequences for human health and development, increasing infant mortality rates and compromising school performance. In addition, hunger is often associated with public health problems such as malnutrition and disease.

To address the problem of hunger, it is essential to strengthen intersectoral public policies and ensure the participation of civil society. Carvalho (2022) argues that initiatives such as food security councils and social movements are essential to promote equity in access to food and monitor the execution of government policies. In addition, long-term strategies should address the structural causes of hunger, such as land reform, job creation, and the promotion of a sound economy.

Public policies play a central role in the organization of the Brazilian State, being fundamental for guaranteeing rights and promoting social well-being. According to Souza (2021), public policies can be understood as a set of actions and decisions taken by government agencies to meet social, economic, and environmental demands. In Brazil,

these actions are strongly influenced by the Federal Constitution of 1988, which distributed a robust normative framework, ensuring the universalization of rights to citizens.

The formulation and implementation of public policies in the country faces structural challenges related to social and territorial inequality. According to Araújo and Silva (2020), the concentration of income and the discrepancy in access to basic services between urban and rural regions make it difficult to implement equitable policies. Another important aspect is the influence of federalism in the execution of public policies. The decentralization of policies is a striking feature of the Brazilian federative system, allowing greater autonomy for states and municipalities. However, this decentralization also brings challenges, such as the fragmentation of government actions and the inequality of administrative capacities between federative entities (Brasil, 2019).

In this context, Padrão and Aguiar state that

From this perspective, we recognize social public policy as imperative, within the framework of capitalist accumulation, to materialize rights, human needs and immediate demands, in the expectation of expanded citizenship, which contribute to improving the working and living conditions of the working class. This position, however, should not overestimate the possibilities of politics in overcoming the situation of vulnerability of the material existence of the workers as a whole, nor should it inhibit or paralyze the struggle from the perspective of political and human emancipation, which will only materialize with the end of the exploitation of man by man himself (Padrão and Aguiar, 2018, p. 3).

Social participation is an essential element for the success of public policies in Brazil. As Carvalho (2022) highlights, municipal councils and public policy forums are instruments that strengthen participatory democracy, allowing civil society to contribute directly to the formulation and monitoring of policies. The evaluation of public policies is another field that has been gaining relevance. According to Mendes and Oliveira (2020), the measurement of results and impacts is crucial for the continuous improvement of policies, enabling adjustments and reorientations. In Brazil, the use of indicators and monitoring systems has been expanded, although there are still difficulties related to the standardization and integration of these data.

Thus, public policies in Brazil cannot be proven without considering the historical and political context. Almeida and Silva (2021) observe that changes in governments often impact the continuity and prioritization of policies, which reflects the need for institutional mechanisms that ensure greater stability and efficiency. Thus, the strengthening of institutions and public governance is indispensable for the declaration of policies that promote social justice to be consolidated.

In this context of public policies, it is worth noting that they exist to fight hunger and access to food for socially vulnerable citizens. The right to food is guaranteed by the Federal Constitution of 1988 as an essential component for human dignity and citizenship. Social and economic inequalities in Brazil have aggravated food insecurity, especially in low-income populations. Recent data indicate that millions of Brazilians live in a situation of hunger, especially in rural and peripheral areas. According to Santos and Almeida (2021), structural poverty and unemployment are determining factors that hinder regular and permanent access to quality food, highlighting the need for effective public policies so that these marginalized people can have access to nutritious and quality food.

The Bolsa Família Program (currently replaced by Auxílio Brasil) represented a milestone in income transfer and food security policies in the country. Studies show that the transfer of resources to families in vulnerable situations has contributed significantly to the reduction of poverty and hunger (Silva et al., 2020). In addition, its articulation with school feeding programs enhanced the positive impact by guaranteeing daily meals for children and adolescents enrolled in the public school system. State programs to provide food at low costs have also gained ground in recent years.

Another prominent program is the Food Acquisition Program (PAA), which promotes the purchase of agricultural products directly from small producers and their destination to institutions that serve vulnerable populations. According to Costa and Oliveira (2020), the PAA not only strengthens family farming, but also reduces the impacts of food insecurity.

In addition to government initiatives, civil society plays an important role in the fight against hunger. Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements implement complementary actions, such as community kitchens and food banks, to serve the marginalized public. According to Carvalho (2022), these initiatives are essential to fill gaps left by the government and strengthen social mobilization around the right to healthy food.

In this sense, the strengthening of public food policies requires the integration of different sectors, such as health, education, social assistance and agriculture. As Almeida and Silva (2021) highlight, overcoming hunger in Brazil depends on a multisectoral approach that not only meets emergency demand, but also addresses the structural causes of food insecurity, promoting equity and sustainable development.

POPULAR RESTAURANT PROGRAM

Healthy and nutritious food programs for vulnerable populations play a central role in combating food insecurity in Brazil. According to Conceição and Veiga (2020), these initiatives are approved with the concept of food and nutritional security, thus, they seek to ensure regular and permanent access to quality food, in sufficient quantity and without compromising other essential needs. These programs are key to mitigating the effects of poverty and promoting social inclusion.

Among the most relevant programs is the National School Feeding Program (PNAE), which provides balanced meals to millions of children and adolescents enrolled in the public school system. Mendes and Oliveira (2020) highlight that the PNAE not only ensures the right to food, but also promotes healthy eating habits by prioritizing the acquisition of products from family farming. This public policy has contributed to the reduction of child malnutrition and the strengthening of the local economy. The Food Acquisition Program (PAA) is another program that has stood out.

Another Program that is very important, object of study of this work, is the one that enables access to healthy and nutritious food to the socially vulnerable society through Popular Restaurants (PRs). At the Federal level, there is the Popular Restaurant Program, which aims to:

expand the offer of nutritionally adequate meals, at affordable prices, to the low-income, socially vulnerable and food and nutrition insecure population; and also to promote adequate and healthy eating and the appreciation of regional eating habits (MDS, 2024).

In addition to this objective, the following can be mentioned:

- Offer ready and healthy meals at affordable prices, without any profit;
- Benefit the population at nutritional risk;
- Contribute to the formation of food protection systems;
- To offer users relevant services and information regarding food and nutritional security;
- Increase the quality of food away from home, ensuring the variety of menus with a balance between nutrients in the same meal;
- Promote food and nutrition education actions, aimed at nutritional security, promoting gastronomic culture, combating waste and promoting health;
- Generate new healthy eating practices and habits;
- Encourage the use of regional foods;
- Promote the strengthening of citizenship by offering meals in clean, comfortable environments, favoring dignity and coexistence among users;
- Create spaces for community development and citizenship formation, in order to carry out educational and cultural activities, such as concerts, presentations and community meetings;
- Encourage the biological treatment of organic waste;

- Encourage the creation of vegetable gardens (MDS, 2023).

From 1930 onwards, hunger began to plague Brazil and in this context, the researcher Josué de Castro idealized the Popular Restaurants (RPs) program, as he carried out a study that pointed out that 71.6% of the family budget was committed to the acquisition of food, contributing to high mortality and low life expectancy (Castro, 1965 apud MDS, 2023). The Program created in 1930 operated until 1967 when it was extinguished by the military government, along with the institution that administered them, the Social Security Food Service (SAPS), leaving a large gap in assistance to workers, returning only in 1990 to serve only low-income people (MDS, 2023).

Between 2003 and 2015, there was an expansion of the Popular Restaurant Program in Brazil, reaching a total of 204 restaurants in operation, serving meals to 209 thousand

beneficiaries daily, in 123 municipalities in the country that are part of 24 states of the federation and the Federal District (MDS, 2023). However, once again, confirming a trajectory of instability, marked mainly by dependence on the political prioritization of governments, in subsequent years, due to the political and economic situation in the country, there was discontinuity in the implementation and implementation of PRs, but this time the existing establishments were maintained (MDS, 2023).

This Program is one of the programs integrated into the network of actions and programs of Fome Zero, a social inclusion policy created in 2003 and which is currently the responsibility of the Ministry of Social Development and Fight against Hunger and it is expected, with it, to create a food protection network in areas with a large circulation of people who eat away from home, thus serving the most nutritionally vulnerable segments (MDS, 2023).

In continuity with these actions, which had families in a situation of food and nutrition insecurity as their target audience, the Organic Law on Food and Nutrition Security (LOSAN) was sanctioned in 2006, which created the National Food and Nutrition Security System (SISAN) and enabled the formulation of the National Food Security Policy and the National Food Security Plan in the country (PLANSAN).

Thus, the Federal Government created an entire structure to support the creation and maintenance of the Program in the states and municipalities in which restaurants are part of the operational structure of the National Food and Nutrition Security System (SISAN). In addition, it supports the training and training of professionals in these

establishments. The Popular Restaurants are aimed at municipalities with more than 100 thousand inhabitants that have a high number of people in a situation of misery or poverty. As the establishments are not for the exclusive use of vulnerable social citizens, the adoption of differentiated prices according to the condition and socioeconomic profile of the user is advised, since the priority of service is specific population groups in a situation of food and nutritional insecurity and/or social vulnerability (MDS, 2023).

The managing/financing body of the RPs Program is the Federal Government and must be executed in the form of a voluntary transfer of financial resources intended for costing and investment expenses detailed in the approved proposals, through a partnership between the Federal Government and the interested States/Municipal Governments. This transfer is made through direct or indirect administration bodies, provided that all the requirements established by the legislation in force are met, and are also subject to the existence of budgetary appropriations and financial resources to guarantee the counterpart (MDS, 2023).

Regarding the competencies to put into practice the PR program at the federal, state and municipal levels, the decentralization model is followed and it is up to the Federal Government to voluntarily transfer financial resources destined to costing and investment expenses detailed in the approved proposals and support to the States, Federal District and Municipalities for the construction, renovation and adaptation of buildings; the purchase of equipment, permanent material and consumables; the formation of the work team and the promotion of food education, among others. At the state/municipal levels, the competencies refer to the coordination and monitoring of the services provided (MDS, 2023).

According to data from the MDS website, there are currently more than 130 PR units spread throughout the country that have the capacity to serve up to a thousand meals per day, each with values ranging from R\$ 1 to R\$ 7 (MDS, 2024).

METHODOLOGY

The research had a quantitative approach, as it sought to have access to the locations where programs of access to free or subsidized food occur in Brazil, in order to identify them. The quantitative approach in research methodology is described by the use of numerical data to describe, explain, and predict specifications. According to Cervo, Bervian and Silva (2007), this approach uses statistical techniques for the analysis of

measurable variables, allowing the generalization of the results to larger societies. The application of the quantitative approach is especially useful in studies that seek to identify patterns, correlations, or causal relationships, offering greater objectivity and precision to the data collected.

As for the ends, exploratory research was adopted since greater knowledge of the chosen theme was sought to make it as clear as possible. Exploratory research is a type of investigation whose main objective is to provide greater familiarity with the problem to be trained, making it more explicit or building hypotheses for further studies. Lakatos and Marconi (2003) highlight that this methodology serves as a preliminary stage for other investigations, contributing to the delimitation of the problem and to the development of hypotheses and research strategies.

Regarding the technical procedures, the research involved the processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation, writing and presentation of results (Creswell, 2010). Secondary data were used as the main source of information. The use of secondary data in research methodologies refers to the use of information previously collected and organized by other sources, such as reports, censuses, databases, academic articles, and institutional records. According to Gil (2019), secondary data are valuable to save time and resources, especially in exploratory studies or when primary data collection is unfeasible. This data can be used to contextualize a research problem. Thus, data were collected through Federal and State government websites to identify policies/programs for access to free or subsidized food. The following elements were analyzed: if there are programs, what is the number of establishments, the amount charged for lunch and since when the program was implemented.

Excel software was used to tabulate the data and the data analysis was performed using the numerical technique.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The data in chart 1 were extracted from the government websites of the state governments or their respective social networks.

Table 1. Data extracted from the websites or their respective government social networks of the 26 Brazilian states plus the Federal District.

States	Number of establishments	Lunch price	Date created
Acre	1	2	No information

Alagoas	2	2	No information
Amapá	2	4,5	No information
Amazon	44	1	2020
Bahia	2	2	No information
Ceará	1	1	No information
Holy Spirit	0	-	No information
Goias	15	2	No information
Maranhao	180	1	No information
Mato Grosso	1	1	No information
Mato Grosso do Sul	0	-	No information
Minas Gerais	1	3	No information
Stop	1	2	2008
Paraiba	10	1	No information
Paraná	24	1 a 7	No information
Pernambuco	105	0 a 7	No information
Piaui	3	1	No information
Rio de Janeiro	12	1	No information
Rio Grande do Norte	56	1	2002
Rio Grande do Sul	6	1	No information
Rondônia	19	2	2020
Roraima	3	1	No information
Santa Catarina	39	0 a 6	No information
São Paulo	120	1	2000
Sergipe	18	1	2023
Tocantins	21	3	No information
Brasilia	18	1	2008
TOTAL	704		

Source: Prepared by the author.

As can be seen in chart 1, the Federal Government's policy minimally encouraged adherence by the states or even some states and/or municipalities created their own food security programs for the socially vulnerable population. In total, 704 establishments were identified that provide food at prices ranging from R\$ 0 to 7.00, depending on the social class to which the citizen belongs.

Few states, Amazonas, Pará, Rio Grande do Norte, Rondônia, São Paulo, Sergipe and the Federal District provide the dates of implementation of the programs in their respective locations, and most do not provide such information, only basic information regarding the locations of the establishments.

The states of Maranhão, São Paulo, Pernambuco, Rio Grande do Norte, Amazonas and Santa Catarina stand out, which together add up to 544, that is, six states have 77.28% of the total establishments. Contrary to this, it is noteworthy that no information was found in the states of Espírito Santo and Mato Grosso do Sul, with only income transfer programs. Another situation to be analyzed in the table is in relation to the distribution of establishments, because while some states have high numbers of establishments, others do not. The Northeast region is the one that stands out the most, as

Maranhão, Pernambuco and Rio Grande do Norte, together, add up to 341 establishments, while seven states in different Brazilian regions have up to one establishment, that is, it is necessary to have a better distribution of establishments throughout Brazil.

According to FAO, 2018, access to healthy and adequate food is an essential right inherent to human dignity, but even so, approximately 821 million people around the world have low or no access to food, being in a situation of hunger. In Brazil, approximately 6.8 million do not have sufficient access to food on a continuous basis, which generates a significant situation of food and nutritional insecurity.

Longaray (2023) states that Popular Restaurants represent an important strategy for the implementation of food safety actions in Brazilian municipalities. Considered one of the first food policies in the country, over several decades the program has gone through complex political and historical processes that, when explored more deeply, have left several gaps and important questions for a better understanding of the program.

CONCLUSION

The difficulty in accessing current information about the program and the effectiveness of its execution substantially compromises the evaluation of the policy, the planning and maintenance of actions by the public administration. Given this scenario, it is not possible to measure the program qualitatively, but quantitatively in some states the programs for providing healthy and nutritious food for free or at symbolic prices are very full-bodied. Considering some fragile regions, it is important that the federal government resumes strengthening programs so that the most socially marginalized society can have access to healthy and nutritious food, minimizing the negative impacts that this portion of society already feels.

According to Longaray (2023), with almost two decades of existence, the Popular Restaurants program is at a critical moment in its institutionality, as well as a set of social protection policies that were dismantled between 2013 and 2022, through a sudden paradigmatic turn in Brazilian politics. Today, under the light of a new government, several agencies linked to social and food issues are being resumed, which is a good sign for assistance to socially vulnerable people.

Thus, it is concluded that, in quantitative terms, there is a very relevant number of establishments, but there is a need for a better geographical distribution of them so that

access to free or low-cost food is achieved by the population of the various Brazilian regions and not just some.

Finally, there is a need to deepen qualitative research in relation to the programs studied in this work so that they subsidize the social protection system of the public administration, whether federal, state or municipal, in the search for new implementations, maintenance and strengthening for the continuity of the program.

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