


**THE SCENARIO OF HUNGRY AND FOOD INSECURITY: THE RESPONSIBLE
ACT IN PUBLIC POLICIES**

**O CENÁRIO DA FOME E DA INSEGURANÇA ALIMENTAR NO BRASIL: ATO
RESPONSÁVEL ÀS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS**

**EL ESCENARIO DEL HAMBRE Y DE LA INSEGURIDAD ALIMENTARIA: EL
ACTO RESPONSABLE EN LAS POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS**

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ABSTRACT

Hunger is a structural and persistent phenomenon in Brazil, linked to poverty, social inequalities, and the fragility of public policies. The aim of this study is to analyze the current scenario of food insecurity in the country, placing it in a historical context and examining the effects of both the dismantling and the subsequent resumption of social programs aimed at food security. The research adopts a qualitative and bibliographic approach, grounded in the contributions of Josué de Castro and interpreted in light of Mikhail Bakhtin's (2010) concept of the Responsible Act. The results indicate that, although recent advances demonstrate the positive impact of public policies in reducing hunger, challenges remain regarding unequal food distribution, food inflation, and barriers to accessing healthy diets. It is concluded that overcoming this situation requires continuous, intersectoral, and sustained actions, guided by the principle of human dignity and aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda, in order to guarantee food as a universal and inalienable human right.

Keywords: Hunger. Food Insecurity. Public Policies. Josué de Castro. 2030 Agenda.

RESUMO

A fome é um fenômeno estrutural e persistente no Brasil, vinculado à pobreza, às desigualdades sociais e à fragilidade das políticas públicas. O objetivo deste estudo é analisar o cenário atual da insegurança alimentar no país, contextualizando-o historicamente e examinando os efeitos do desmonte e da posterior retomada de programas sociais voltados à segurança alimentar. A pesquisa adota uma abordagem qualitativa e bibliográfica, fundamentada nas contribuições de José de Castro e interpretada à luz do conceito de Ato Responsável, de Mikhail Bakhtin (2010). Os resultados apontam que, embora avanços recentes demonstrem o impacto positivo de políticas públicas na redução da fome, persistem desafios relacionados à distribuição desigual de alimentos, à inflação alimentar e às barreiras de acesso a dietas saudáveis. Conclui-se que a superação desse

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quadro exige ações contínuas, intersetoriais e sustentadas, pautadas pela dignidade humana e alinhadas aos Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável da Agenda 2030, de modo a garantir a alimentação como direito humano universal e inalienável.

Palavras-chave: Fome. Insegurança Alimentar. Políticas Públicas. Josué de Castro. Agenda 2030.

RESUMEN

El hambre es un fenómeno estructural y persistente en Brasil, vinculado a la pobreza, a las desigualdades sociales y a la fragilidad de las políticas públicas. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar el escenario actual de la inseguridad alimentaria en el país, contextualizándolo históricamente y examinando los efectos del desmantelamiento y la posterior reactivación de los programas sociales orientados a la seguridad alimentaria. La investigación adopta un enfoque cualitativo y bibliográfico, fundamentado en las contribuciones de Josué de Castro e interpretado a la luz del concepto de Acto Responsable de Mijaíl Bajtín (2010). Los resultados señalan que, aunque los avances recientes demuestran el impacto positivo de las políticas públicas en la reducción del hambre, persisten desafíos relacionados con la distribución desigual de los alimentos, la inflación alimentaria y las barreras de acceso a dietas saludables. Se concluye que la superación de este panorama exige acciones continuas, intersectoriales y sostenidas, guiadas por la dignidad humana y alineadas con los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible de la Agenda 2030, con el fin de garantizar la alimentación como un derecho humano universal e inalienable.

Palabras clave: Hambre. Inseguridad Alimentaria. Políticas Públicas. Josué de Castro. Agenda 2030.

1 INTRODUCTION

People in poverty are considered, that is, those who survive on less than a dollar a day, those who do not have their basic human needs met, this is how Carlos Augusto Monteiro defines poverty in its direct relationship with hunger and social inequalities faced in the country. "Food, housing, clothing, health care: all these dimensions become even more visible and urgent, when social inequality imposes itself on the most vulnerable groups in society" (Monteiro, 1995, p. 195).

In 2022, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), together with the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Food Programme (WFP), and the World Health Organization (WHO), revealed that approximately 828 million people in the world were affected by hunger in 2021. This represents an increase of 46 million compared to 2019, when 150 million individuals were already experiencing this reality (UNICEF, 2022).

In Brazil, the numbers are also alarming. Data from the II National Survey on Food Insecurity in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, conducted by the PENSSAN Network in 2022, indicate that 15.5% of the Brazilian population – equivalent to 33.1 million people – were in a situation of hunger. The significant increase compared to previous years exposes the consequences of successive cuts in public policies aimed at food security (PENSSAN Network, 2022).

Hunger in Brazil takes on various forms and objective and subjective expressions. It can manifest as a total absence of food, a situation in which the individual experiences complete deprivation of nutrients essential to survival. There is also the so-called hidden hunger, when caloric intake is insufficient, leading to weight loss, decreased immunity and increased vulnerability to diseases. In many cases, this form of hunger is not noticeable at first glance, but it has profound impacts on the physical and mental health of the population (Monteiro, 1995).

There is also a more silent form of hunger, the one experienced by those who, even eating every day, consume ultra-processed foods, poor in nutrients and biological value. This inadequate diet compromises the functioning of the body, affects disposition, interferes with the ability to concentrate and directly impacts the performance of daily activities. It is a scenario that goes beyond simple access to food and involves multiple factors such as nutritional education, income, public policies and guarantee of social rights.

Josué de Castro was a pioneer in the debates on hunger in Brazil in the 1940s, however, his fight remains current, as the indices reveal that there is still much to be done. Despite the occasional advances over the decades, the country has not yet broken with the structures that perpetuate hunger and food insecurity (Vasconcelos, 2008).

It is noteworthy that the concept of food security emerged between 1914 and 1918, during the First World War, and was initially associated with the ability of countries to produce sufficient supplies for their own population, in order to avoid dependencies and external boycotts (Goulart; Ferreira; Borges, 2023). Subsequently, with the Second World War (1939-1945) and, above all, with the creation of the United Nations and the World Food Conference promoted by FAO in 1945, food insecurity came to be understood as the insufficiency of countries to guarantee adequate food to their citizens (Leão, 2013). This historicity reinforces that the debate on hunger and access to food transcends biological dimensions, also involving political, economic, and ethical aspects of life in society.

Given this scenario, it is essential to also discuss strategies to combat hunger in the context of the UN 2030 Agenda, which establishes 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Among them, SDG 2 – "Zero Hunger and Sustainable Agriculture" – seeks to eradicate hunger and promote resilient food systems. Unfortunately, the goals set were stagnant or in regression until 2022, reinforcing the urgency of more effective and continuous public policies aimed at universal and dignified access to food (Roma, 2019).

This study starts, therefore, from the need to understand how Brazil got to this point and what paths can be taken to reverse it. Through the analysis of texts, articles, books and recent studies, we seek to deepen the debate on hunger and food insecurity, understanding food not only as a physiological need, but as a universal, inalienable and essential human right to the dignity of life.

2 THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK

This is a descriptive, retrospective study with a qualitative approach, based on a historical series built from bibliographic and documentary research. The investigation focused on the analysis of materials that address the themes of hunger, food security and food insecurity in Brazil, seeking to understand both their historical aspects and their contemporary expressions.

The information was obtained from official sources available on public platforms of the federal government, such as institutional websites and social programs, as well as from

books, reports, and scientific publications focused on the theme of food security. Documents produced by civil society organizations were also considered, with emphasis on the reports of the Civil Society Working Group for the 2030 Agenda, which offer relevant analyses on the advances and setbacks in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals in the Brazilian context. In addition, academic articles available in scientific databases were included, regardless of the methodology used, as long as they contributed with significant information and concepts pertinent to the discussion. Maps and graphs complemented the material analyzed, enriching the understanding and presentation of the results.

The data analysis was carried out in the light of the concept of *Responsible Act*, by Mikhail Bakhtin (2010), which enabled an interpretative and critical reading of the phenomenon of hunger in Brazil. The choice of this reference stems from the need to understand hunger, not that it summons the subject and the collectivity to responsibility towards the other. From this perspective, the confrontation of food insecurity is situated in the field of the ethics of responsibility, showing that its persistence results not from natural factors, but from the action or omission of social and political subjects. Thus, hunger reveals itself as an expression of historical and structural choices that can both perpetuate inequalities and affirm human dignity and the universal right to adequate food.

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The history of human food follows the evolution of the species itself. About 200 thousand years ago, the diet was composed of fruits, roots, fish, mollusks and game meat, obtained according to the availability of nature. These human groups, with nomadic habits, moved in search of food, using gathering and hunting practices, and later incorporating cooking as a mark of cultural transformation (Chagas, 2020).

With human evolution, hominids began the process of baking and cooking food, and for thousands of years these were the eating habits of beings. They had the need to move around to look for food, whether they were gathering and/or hunting (Chagas, 2020). Approximately 10 thousand years ago, significant changes in the way of eating had again occurred, agriculture became part of the routine of individuals. Now they could grow their own food and build their permanent residences, thus ceasing to be nomads. They settled in the vicinity of rivers and lakes, growing different cereals, such as rice, corn, wheat and barley, they also began the process of raising animals, leaving the culture of hunting (Chagas, 2020).

Although there are currently large offers of industrialized and highly processed foods, there are still regions, especially in Brazil, with a minimum food supply, often caused by climate or socioeconomic conditions. The climate and the quality of the soil affect the planting and the quantity of the harvest, which means that in many regions, especially where the soil is arid, the supply of food is scarcer. When analyzing the socioeconomic issue, the country faces great inequality, since food is destined for places where the economy is favorable to large companies, excluding, so to speak, those regions where the financial return is not as expected. Due to this fact, large regions of the country have restricted access to food, even industrialized, processed or ultra-processed foods.

Ending hunger and food insecurity in the country is something that should be seen as a priority due to the diversity of soil, climate and also social inequality. The eradication of hunger is a goal of several public policies, as can be seen in the highlight that the 2030 Agenda brings in SDG 2 – "Zero Hunger and Sustainable Agriculture" (Rome, 2019).

In addition, it is essential that the topic be brought to the stage of debates and resolutions, since food is the basis of human survival, as pointed out by Carneiro (2017, p.1) below:

Food is, after breathing and drinking water, the most basic of human needs. But since "man does not live by bread alone", food, in addition to being a biological necessity, is a complex symbolic system of social, sexual, political, religious, ethical, aesthetic meanings, etc.

Hunger and food insecurity are among the most urgent and persistent global public health challenges. Recognized as significant causes of mortality, these conditions disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations, especially children. It is estimated that, annually, about six million children lose their lives as a result of hunger.

Data from the PENSSAN Network (2022) reveal that, at the height of the crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil, food insecurity reached 55.2% of the Brazilian population. Historically more vulnerable regions presented alarming rates: in the North, 18.1% of households faced severe hunger, and in the Northeast, 13.8%, corresponding to almost 7.7 million people. These numbers are directly related to the discontinuity of structuring public policies between 2019 and 2022, when there was a serious setback in public policies aimed at combating hunger and food insecurity in Brazil. The extinction of the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (Consea), right at the beginning of the

Bolsonaro government's term, represented not only the disarticulation of an important space for social control, but also the sign of an institutional dismantling of programs historically aimed at promoting the human right to adequate food (Castro, 2019). Without Consea, the main means of dialogue between civil society and the State for the formulation of Food and Nutrition Security (FNS) policies was lost.

During this period, the number of Brazilians in a situation of hunger more than doubled, reaching about 33 million people, according to estimates by the PENSSAN Network. This escalation is therefore directly associated with the withdrawal of resources from social programs and the lack of coordinated action by the federal government during the COVID-19 pandemic. There was also the discontinuity and emptying of policies such as the Food Acquisition Program (PAA), replaced by "Alimenta Brasil", with a smaller scope and significantly reduced resources (Salles-Costa et al., 2019).

The most recent UN data indicate that, in 2021, 828 million people were still living in a situation of hunger (Wu et al., 2014). These figures reveal an alarming and contradictory scenario, in which global food production is sufficient to feed the world's population, but unequal distribution and exclusionary economic policies prevent universal and equitable access to food.

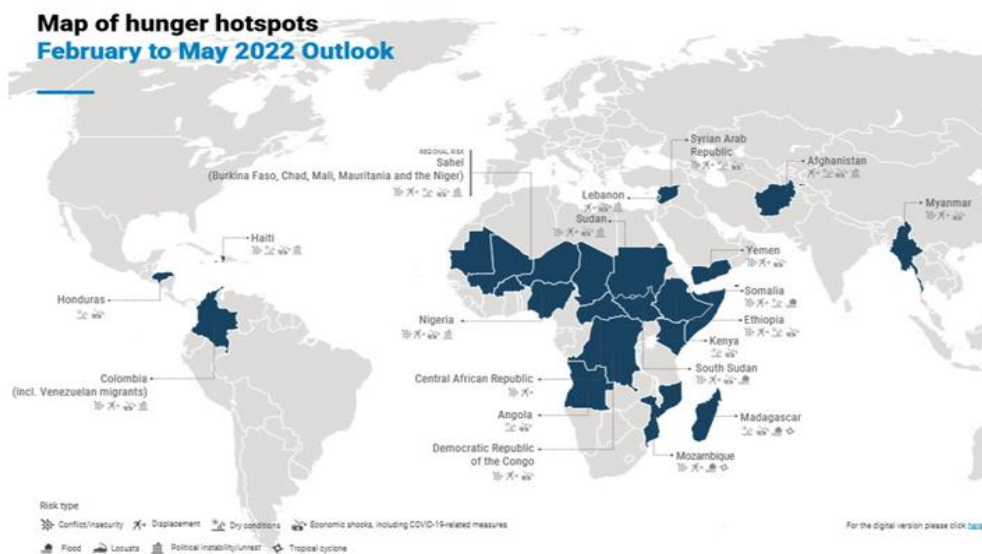
In the Brazilian context, the situation is equally worrying. According to the Brazilian Research Network on Food Sovereignty and Security (PENSSAN Network), in 2022, a significant portion of the country's families faced some degree of food insecurity. These data show the worsening of social inequalities and the weakening of public policies aimed at guaranteeing the human right to adequate food (PENSSAN Network, 2022). It is, therefore, not only a nutritional crisis, but a structural one, which requires integrated, continuous and ethically committed responses to life and human dignity. In the light of the concept of *Responsible Act*, proposed by Bakhtin (2010), such a scenario calls on the State and society to assume concrete responsibility towards the other, recognizing that omission in the face of hunger is also a form of action. Thus, understanding food insecurity from this perspective means affirming that each political, economic, and social decision carries unrepeatable ethical implications, capable of perpetuating exclusion or promoting social justice and human dignity.

In 2022, according to the Global Report on Food Crises (FAO, 2023a), 70.3 million people in the world were in a situation of moderate food insecurity, characterized by difficulty in regular access to food in adequate quantity and quality. In the same period, the document

estimated that 21.1 million Brazilians experienced severe food insecurity, a condition that translates directly into the experience of hunger. The 2022 World Hunger Map (Figure 1) illustrates the spatial distribution of this phenomenon.

Figure 1

World Hunger Map 2022



FONTE: Food and agriculture organization (2022).

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2022).

The areas highlighted in blue on the Map (Figure 1) indicate regions at high risk of acute food insecurity, resulting from interlinked factors such as armed conflict, population displacement, economic shocks, prolonged droughts, political instability, and extreme weather events. This visualization reinforces the complexity and interdependence of the determinants that aggravate hunger in the contemporary global scenario.

The 2023 edition of the report reveals that between 691 and 783 million people went hungry in 2022, with an average of 735 million. These data represent an increase of 122 million people compared to 2019, that is, before the COVID-19 pandemic. Importantly, there are many places in the world facing increasingly larger and deeper food crises. Progress in reducing hunger was observed in Asia and Latin America, but hunger was still increasing in West Asia, the Caribbean and other sub-regions of Africa in 2022 (FAO, 2023b).

In view of this alarming global scenario, it is clear that food insecurity is not a phenomenon restricted to certain regions, but crosses different national contexts, assuming particular contours in each reality. In the case of Brazil, understanding the worsening of this

situation requires a historical look, especially because the Covid-19 pandemic intensified existing vulnerabilities and highlighted the fragility of social protection policies.

It should be noted that all the economic conditions of the national territory, which were already in crisis, worsened at the beginning of 2021. Brazil has become an epicenter of the pandemic, with the failure of the health system and orphaned of economic and social policies capable of promoting the basic rights of its own (Santos et. al., 2019). However, the creation of the project called Emergency Aid, instituted by Law No. 13,982 of 2020, which filled, in a way, a gap in social protection for the so-called informal workers, as long as they met some criteria and conditions stipulated to enjoy such a resource (Cardoso, 2020). It should be noted, however, that the program was conducted in such a way as to respond, to a large extent, to immediate political interests, more focused on maintaining government support than on the consolidation of a structuring and lasting social policy. The Social Assistance Policy, as well as the workers who were responsible for the execution of the program, did not receive any specific training to put it into practice and consider its execution.

Such conduct reveals a political action detached from its ethical dimension (Bakhtin, 2010). This is because, by prioritizing circumstantial and electoral objectives, the State failed to fully assume its responsibility towards the other, that is, towards the populations in a situation of greater vulnerability. From this perspective, the omission or insufficiency of an ethical commitment to the community demonstrates that hunger does not result from natural causes, but from historically situated political and social choices, which can both perpetuate exclusion and promote human dignity.

In the midst of the situation of impoverishment, deaths from covid-19 and the return of unemployment and hunger to the country, the Emergency Aid played an urgent and necessary role, at its peak. It served 67.9 million workers, guaranteeing minimum subsistence levels (Beghin, 2021) and money for informal workers and the unemployed. Its scope and popularity converged to the definition of a brand for the government and to the alteration of social values of reading the condition of poverty.

After a period marked by the dismantling of social policies, the year 2023 represented a turning point, characterized by the resumption of programs aimed at food security and social protection. In 2024, the first results of these actions began to materialize. According to data from the Federal Government, about 24.4 million people left the condition of severe food insecurity in the first year of the current administration, signaling the direct impact of the restructuring of public policies on the lives of the most vulnerable population. These

advances reflect the effort of the Brazilian State to reposition the country in the fight against hunger and in the search for the realization of the human right to adequate food (Brasil, 2024).

Although recent advances signal a repositioning of the Brazilian State in the fight against hunger, understanding this phenomenon requires the resumption of the historical path that formed its structural roots. In this sense, the contribution of Josué de Castro, recognized as one of the greatest Brazilian intellectuals in the field of food and nutrition, gains centrality. Physician, geographer, professor and social scientist, born in Recife in 1908, Josué de Castro achieved national and international prominence with the publication of *Geografia da Fome* (1946). In this work, the author broke the silence around hunger by treating it as a social construction, and not as a natural phenomenon, unveiling its structural and historical causes. Through an innovative approach that articulated geography and socioeconomic analysis, it denounced the living conditions of the majority of the Brazilian population, especially in the poorest regions, consolidating a theoretical and political framework for confronting food insecurity (De Castro; Branco, 1952).

In his work, Josué de Castro introduced the concepts of food areas, endemic hunger, epidemic hunger, malnutrition and the Brazilian food mosaic. From these categories, he drew the first map of hunger in Brazil, revealing how regional disparities directly impacted access to food. The food areas were defined by typical diets based on local resources and sociocultural aspects. On the other hand, the areas of endemic hunger had populations with nutritional deficiencies linked to precarious dietary patterns and vulnerable lifestyles. In malnutrition, persistent nutritional imbalances stood out, while the concept of food mosaic illustrated the diversity of regional diets, shaped by natural, economic, and historical factors.

Josué de Castro's contributions are still current, as they show that hunger in Brazil is a political, historical and unequal issue (De Castro; Branco, 1952). He stated that hunger, poor nutrition and nutrition are not natural phenomena, but social ones and, therefore, only social and collective actions are capable of transforming the universal human right to food into reality (Pinheiro; Carvalho, 2010).

To understand the problem of hunger in Brazil in a contextualized way, Figure 2 brings a timeline over the last decades, in order to show how the different public policies were implemented with the objective of facing hunger and malnutrition, marking significant stages in the national trajectory of combating food inequalities. This timeline highlights not only the

advances, but also the setbacks and persistent challenges in guaranteeing the human right to adequate food.

Figure 2

Timeline



Fonte: Elaborado pelo Autor

Source: Prepared by the Author.

On July 28, 2025, during the 2nd UN Food Systems Summit in Addis Ababa, the report "The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2025", confirmed that Brazil has once again left the Hunger Map, FAO's global indicator that considers countries with more than 2.5% of the population in a situation of severe malnutrition, based on the three-year moving average for the period 2022-2024, which recorded the malnutrition indicator (PoU) below 2.5% of the Brazilian population. This level represents a significant reversal in relation to the previous three-year period, which reached 4.1% (about 10.1 million persons) in 2019-2021, and to the critical year of 2022, when the index reached 4.2% (Brasil, 2025).

According to SOFI 2025 data, the proportion of the Brazilian population in severe food insecurity also fell, reaching 3.4% in the 2022–2024 triennium, an important setback from the peak of 7.3% in the 2019–2021 period. This reflects more than 14 million people lifted

out of severe hunger in just two years, in addition to a reduction in moderate and severe insecurity, which fell to 13.5% of the population (about 28.5 million) by 2024 (Brasil, 2025).

As much as Brazil's exit from the Hunger Map represents a significant achievement, it is not enough to ensure full food security. FAO warns that, although current data indicate less than 2.5% of the Brazilian population in a condition of severe malnutrition, structural inequalities, food inflation and barriers to access to nutritious diets persist. An indicator of this scenario is the proportion of people unable to acquire them, since, although it decreased from 29.8% in 2021 to 23.7% in 2024, it still reveals a significant portion of the population in a situation of vulnerability. In this sense, it is essential to continue investing in intersectoral policies, in food sovereignty, and in the expansion of social participation, in order to ensure that this achievement is effective, lasting, and comprehensive (Brasil, 2025).

The trajectory of hunger in Brazil reveals itself as a persistent socio-historical and political phenomenon, shaped by historical legacies, regional inequalities and the absence or discontinuity of effective public policies. Although recent advances point to a resumption of commitments to food security, as shown by the 2025 data, reality shows that millions of Brazilians remain in a situation of food insecurity, many to a moderate degree, others in a serious condition.

Public policies to combat hunger cannot be restricted to emergency responses, but need to be continuous, structured and integrated with other social areas, such as health, education, housing and employment. The fight against hunger requires the strengthening of a social protection network that recognizes food as a right and not as a privilege. The historical experience and intellectual production of names like Josué de Castro are still fundamental guides to understand that, more than fighting hunger, it is necessary to confront the causes that perpetuate it, including poverty, the concentration of income and land, structural racism and state negligence.

4 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

It is concluded that hunger in Brazil is a structural phenomenon that goes beyond the mere scarcity of food, revealing itself as an expression of historically rooted social, economic and political inequalities. The analysis, based on the contributions of Josué de Castro and Bakhtin's concept of Responsible Act, reinforces that hunger should be understood as a social construction, the result of political choices that, over time, sometimes promoted advances, sometimes resulted in setbacks. Such an understanding shows that overcoming

them cannot be restricted to emergency measures or projects guided only by immediate political interests, but requires an ethical and political commitment to the life, dignity and fundamental rights of the population.

The results show that, despite recent advances linked to the resumption of public food security policies, significant barriers persist related to the unequal distribution of wealth, restricted access to healthy diets, and the insufficiency of long-term strategies. This scenario reveals the need to strengthen structuring policies, with an emphasis on food sovereignty, the strengthening of family farming, distributive justice and the active participation of civil society as co-responsible in the formulation and inspection of public actions.

Thus, the eradication of hunger will depend on structural and intersectoral actions that articulate health, education, work, environment and rural development, guided by the principle of human dignity. Placing the fight against hunger at the center of the political debate and aligning it with the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda is an essential step to consolidate food as a universal and inalienable human right.

Facing hunger means, therefore, more than meeting an immediate need: it is about building a project for a fair, solidary and democratic society, capable of promoting full citizenship and dignified lives for all Brazilians. From this perspective, the fight against hunger must be understood as a responsible and ethical act, in the Bakhtinian sense, which requires the State and society to assume a concrete responsibility towards the other. This implies recognizing that every political or social decision related to food security carries irreversible consequences, and can perpetuate exclusion or, on the contrary, affirm human dignity and the universal right to adequate food.

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