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## History and challenges of Brazilian social movements for the achievement of the right to adequate food

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### ABSTRACT

The historical struggles that Brazil faced to overcome malnutrition coincided with the empowerment of civil society and social movements which played a crucial role in the affirmation of health and food as social rights. After two decades under military dictatorship, Brazil went through a redemocratization process in the 1980s when activism emerged to demand spaces to participate in policy-making regarding the social agenda, including food and nutrition security (FNS). From 1988 onward institutional structures were established: the National Council of FNS (CONSEA) convenes government and civil society sectors to develop and monitor the implementation of policies, systems and actions. Social participation has been at the heart of structural changes achieved since then. Nevertheless, the country faces multiple challenges regarding FNS such as the double burden of disease, increasing use of pesticides and genetically modified seeds, weak regulation of ultra-processed products, and marketing practices that affect the environment, population health, and food sovereignty. This article aims at examining the development of the participatory political system and the role played by Brazilian social movements in the country's policies on FNS, in addition to outlining challenges faced by those policies.

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During the last few decades the process of political redemocratization in Brazil included the strengthening of civil society organisations and the achievement of institutional spaces for social control of public policies. In parallel with the construction of the Brazilian Unified Health System (UHS, or SUS in Portuguese), Food and Nutrition Security (FNS) became a field of outstanding activism.

Public policies and activism in FNS in Brazil have to deal with complex population health patterns and trends. Comparisons between the 1970s/1980s and the 2010s reveal a reduction in malnutrition among children and adults in all social strata and geographic regions (Monteiro, 2009), which parallels an increase in obesity. However, among the poorest sectors of society, malnutrition coexists with overweight (Monteiro, Mondini, De Souza, & Popkin, 1995). Nationwide survey data for 1974–5 and 2008–9 indicates that overweight nearly tripled among men (from 19% to 50%) and almost doubled among women (from 29% to 48%). As a result, the prevalence of overweight became at least three times higher than that of malnutrition (Conde & Monteiro, 2014).

Disability-Adjusted Life Year (DALY) data reveal that Brazil faces a double burden of diseases: on the one hand, the presence of nutritional deficiencies, infectious diseases, maternal and perinatal conditions and external causes (responsible for approximately 25% of DALYs); on the other hand, high rates of non-communicable chronic diseases (about 75% of DALYs) for most of which overweight is an important risk factor (Leite et al., 2015).

Throughout the second half of the last century, initiatives aimed on tackling malnutrition and macro- and/or micronutrient deficiencies as well as aiming to prevent overweight were mostly focused on health education and communication approaches. In relation to overweight, consisting of recommendations to reduce the intake of calories, fat and carbohydrates and increase energy expenditure through physical activity. However, the effectiveness of these strategies has proven to be limited. Actions taken at national level have not shown effective results in Brazil (as in no other country) in ensuring energy balance at appropriate levels (Curioni & Lourenço, 2005).

The United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (Sustainable Development Goals/SDGs), and more specifically, the United Nations Decade of Action on Nutrition (2016–2025) call for national and international efforts for the adoption of participatory, structural, and sustainable solutions that can correct failures, prevent the sabotage of food systems and link sustainable and coherent food production, distribution and consumption methods with health and nutrition. In both agendas, the concept of sustainability goes beyond the environmental dimension and includes social and economic sustainability and equity promotion, in addition to the strengthening of local production and distribution processes. (Dangour, Mace, & Shankar, 2017). It is also important to engage people in expanding their concerns from the individual benefits of foods to a broader recognition of the systemic effects of their eating practices on planetary health, and of other dimensions of eating such as its socio-political transformative act.

This article aims at examining the development of the participatory political system and the role played by Brazilian social movements in the country's policies on FNS, in addition to outlining challenges faced by those policies.

## Development of the FNS concept

The concept of FNS in Brazil is the result of a process of historical construction strongly influenced by social participation. In Brazil and worldwide, during the 1950s food security had a narrow focus on increasing food availability through the expansion of agricultural production; thus, food insecurity was defined as resulting from insufficient food production. This premise was used to justify the productivity increase in the 'Green Revolution' model – i.e. investments concentrated in agricultural technology, monocultures, mechanisation and pesticide use. However, this model failed to address the problem of hunger and resulted in adverse social and environmental impacts such as rural flight, threats to biodiversity, soil and food contamination and increased dependence on large corporations (Burity et al., 2010, p. 11). At that time, the Brazilian population had an epidemiological scenario with low life expectancy at birth, high infant mortality rates, malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, especially among children and women of childbearing age (Batista Filho & Rissin, 2003).

By the 1980s, an international social movement<sup>1</sup> had gained strength to broaden the concept of food security, incorporating other dimensions such as sufficiency (protection against hunger and malnutrition), access to safe food (biologically or chemically uncontaminated), quality (nutritional, biological, sanitary and technological) and food appropriateness – i.e. food produced and consumed in an environmentally sustainable, socially just, culturally acceptable manner, incorporating the idea of access to information. (Burity et al., 2010, p. 12; Maluf, 2007, p. 20).

A milestone in this process was the Food Security Treaty, which resulted from civil society's demands and was achieved at the World Civil Society Conference during the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), or Eco '92. The 3rd item of the Food Security Treaty emphasises that

the world food insecurity problem is a result of an undemocratic and inequitable distribution of and access to resources (such as land, credit, information and incentive), rather than a problem of global food production. As a result, there is a concentration of production in certain regions and in the hands of fewer and fewer intensive producers, to the detriment of the other regions, small scale farmers and local food security (Food Security Treaty, 1992).

The Brazilian concept of FNS considers the dimensions of food security, food safety and the result in terms of the human process of eating (i.e. nutrition and health) to be inextricably linked. Integrating the human process into the concept includes the socioeconomic and cultural aspects expressed by culture and food heritage. There is also a dialogue with another concept – that of food sovereignty – in order to assert the right of peoples to define their own policies and sustainable food production, distribution and consumption strategies. It seeks to protect and promote food production based on small and medium producers, respecting cultures and the diversity of peasant, fishing and indigenous modes of agricultural production.

The concept of FNS approved at the Brazilian 2nd National FNS Conference (2004) was influenced by contributions from both social movements and governmental agencies:

Food and Nutrition Security is the fulfilment of the right of everyone to regular and permanent access to quality food in sufficient amounts without compromising access to other essential needs, based on health-promoting dietary practices that respect cultural diversity and are socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

Thus, the Brazilian concept of FNS considers the dimensions of food security, food safety and the result in terms of the human process of eating (i.e. nutrition and health) to be inextricably linked. Integrating the human process into the concept includes the socioeconomic and cultural aspects expressed by culture and food heritage. There is also a dialogue with a more recent concept – that of food sovereignty – in order to assert the right of peoples to define their own policies and sustainable food production, distribution and consumption strategies. It seeks to protect and promote food production based on small and medium producers, respecting cultures and the diversity of peasant, fishing and indigenous modes of agricultural production.

This understanding of what FNS means gave rise to the concept of appropriate and healthy food:

Healthy and appropriate eating is the fulfilment of a basic human right, with the guarantee of permanent and regular access, in a socially just manner, to a dietary practice that is appropriate to the biological and social aspects of individuals, according to their life cycle and special dietary needs, based on traditional local references. It must meet the principles of variety, balance, moderation and pleasure (taste), the dimensions of gender and ethnicity, and environmentally sustainable means of production, free of physical, chemical and biological contaminants and genetically modified organisms (CONSEA, 2007).

The concept adopted by the Ministry of Health in 2013 incorporates additional aspects:

Adequate and healthy eating is understood as the dietary practice that is appropriate to the biological and socio-cultural aspects of individuals as well as to a sustainable use of the environment. Thus, it must be in accordance with the needs of each phase of life and with special dietary needs; referenced by food culture and by gender, race and ethnicity; accessible from a physical and financial standpoint; harmonious in quantity and quality; based on adequate and sustainable production practices; and with minimal quantities of physical, chemical and biological contaminants (Brazil, 2013).

## History of social movements linked to FNS in Brazil

Over time, the FNS concept has been refined as the involvement of civil society in formulating public policy increased. Brazil has been under long periods of dictatorship (1937–45 and 1964–85) during which decision-making processes and the management of the social welfare systems were restricted to large federal bureaucracies.

Societal aspiration for democracy, coupled with a social security financing crisis and the economic recession of the 1980s drove social demands, bringing together public health academics and professionals, labour unions, and grassroots movements (Paim, Travassos, Almeida, Bahia, & Macinko,

2011). In 1986, the 8th National Health Conference outlined the principles for the construction of Brazil's Universal Health System (UHS, SUS in Portuguese). Subsequently, the National Constituent Assembly (1987–8) defined the legal basis for the UHS, detailed by Organic Health Laws 8.080 and 8.142 of 1990): health as a fundamental human right, and food as a determinant of health (Brasil, 1990a, 1990b); the UHS national directorate was given the role of formulating, evaluating and supporting food and nutrition policies.

In the mid-1990s, driven by popular support for the impeachment of President Collor (due to corruption charges) and for the Ethics in Politics Movement, the Citizenship Action against Hunger and Poverty and for Life (CAHPL) was organised through local committees that developed grass-roots actions. The decentralised committees included varied sectors of Brazilian society, and their degree of capillarity at the organisation's peak period was unprecedented at that time. CAHPL's main impact was to broaden the agenda of the fight against hunger in Brazilian society and to mobilise many thousands of people in actions to donate food to vulnerable groups (CONSEA, 1994; Silva & Gomes da Silva, 1991). During the same period, the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) launched the Hunger Map (Peliano, 1993).

The political effervescence resulting from the presidential impeachment process helped supporting the proposal for a national FNS policy, and led to the creation of the National Food and Nutrition Security Council (CONSEA) in 1994 (Decree 807). The CONSEA's objectives were: a) to develop guidelines for the Plan to Combat Hunger and Poverty; b) to design an appropriate strategy for its execution; c) to mobilise necessary resources to meet these objectives; d) to encourage partnership and integration among public, private, national and international agencies in order to ensure the mobilisation and streamlining of resource use as well as the complementarity of the actions developed; e) to coordinate public awareness campaigns to combat hunger and poverty in order to coordinate government and civil society efforts; and f) to encourage and support the creation of state and municipal committees to combat hunger and poverty (Maluf, 2007).

In 1994, the 1st National Food Security Conference (NFSC) was held. Its theme was 'Hunger – a National Issue'. The NFSC had specific objectives: a) to discuss the concept of food security as a component of a national project to transform the reality that produces and reproduces hunger, poverty and exclusion; b) to reach a consensus on priorities and guidelines for policy formulation and the proposal of intervention instruments; c) to discuss the process of citizenship building; d) to identify alternatives and promote the exchange of experiences in development in civil society; and e) to identify new forms and mechanisms of partnership and coordination between governmental and non-governmental actions with a view to building a new relationship between the government and civil society (CONSEA, 1994, 1995).

In this NFSC, a broader concept of food security was adopted as a set of principles, policies, measures and instruments to permanently ensure that all Brazilians have access to food at affordable prices, with the quantity and quality necessary to meet the nutritional requirements for a dignified and healthy life as well as other rights of citizenship. In addition, the final report mentions the need for sustainable economic and social development that should include the consolidation of the agrarian reform process (CONSEA, 1995).

However, President Cardoso abolished CONSEA and established the Community Solidarity Program (CSP), which focused on actions to combat poverty in municipalities (Decree 1.366, 1995). The CSP's objective was to 'coordinate government actions aimed at serving the portion of the population that does not have the means to meet its basic needs, and especially to fight hunger and poverty' (Silva, 2001).

The CSP priorities were: a) reducing infant mortality; b) food; c) supporting elementary education; d) urban development; e) generating employment and income; and f) professional training. According to critics, CSP transferred the responsibility for social policies to civil society (e.g. NGOs) on the grounds of solidarity, which resulted in fragmented, selective and narrowly-focused actions (Silva, 2001, pp. 76–77). weakening actions' alignment actions and delaying public policies.

The CSP was not structured as a traditional governmental programme but rather as a strategic proposal to combat poverty, ‘a multi-purpose program’ that encompassed emergency and structural programmes, inserting itself into social policy without exhausting it (Burlandy & Labra, 2003, p. 124). Its guiding axes were: a) the articulation, coordination and convergence of government social actions for municipalities and the poorest population groups, with the simultaneous implementation of the greatest possible number of actions in these localities, seeking complementarity and synergy; b) decentralisation; c) the restructuring of the administrative apparatus to avoid overlapping actions; d) the allocation of resources with transparent criteria; and e) the promotion of solidarity as a value capable of mobilising government partnerships with civil society in order to raise resources for tackling poverty. (Burlandy & Labra, 2003; IPEA, 1996).

This structure introduced civil society into the management of policies and programmes in a unique way. Montaña (2002) claimed that this kind of civil society protagonism is linked to the ‘third sector’ concept, derived from the fragmentation of society into three spheres: the state (‘first sector’, the political sphere), the market (‘second sector’, the economic sphere) and civil society (‘third sector’, the social sphere).

In 1998, the federal government established the Active Community Program within the CSP framework. This programme was based on the principles of Integrated and Sustainable Local Development and aimed to maximise the resources of communities themselves in the fight against poverty, thus making municipalities self-sufficient (IPEA, 1996). In the area of food and nutrition, programmes were selected such as the Programme to Combat Maternal and Child Malnutrition, and Food Stock Distribution.

As noted by Valente (2002), the CSP gradually distanced itself from civil society, and its main limitations were: (1) its different institutional format and lack of managerial support: it lacked the tools and adequate institutional space to implement its proposed actions; and (2) representativeness: it lacked the legitimacy of the broader civil society. It was not possible to advance the understanding and institutional fulfilment of the social demands of population segments that were not organised to put pressure on the government. Therefore, the CSP objectively failed to achieve social impact and change local realities (Burlandy & Labra, 2003).

In 2003, President Lula instituted the Zero Hunger Program and reinstated CONSEA: its presidency must be exercised by a representative of civil society and the secretariat exercised by the Minister for Food Security and Fight against Hunger. Since then, CONSEA has been a key player in the process of institutionalising FNS in Brazil. It operates through permanent commissions, that is, micro-structures organised around strategic issues, in charge of elaborating ideas and proposals to be presented at CONSEA plenary sessions. Four national conferences held to date generated a political process leading to the approval of the FNS Organic Law (2006), the National FNS Policy (2010); a constitutional amendment that included food as a social right; and two national FNS plans (2012–15 and 2016–19). In addition to actively participating in restructuring the National School Meal Program, it has promoted debates about the enforceability of the right to food, pesticide use and genetically modified seeds, and the nutritional needs of indigenous and traditional communities, among other issues.

## National achievements in the FNS field

The process of specifying the human right to adequate food in the international sphere gave momentum to movements seeking to legally recognise this right at the national level. In 1966, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), adopted by UN General Assembly Resolution No. 2200-A (XXI) had affirmed the right to food in its broadest sense (Article 11). Brazil is a party to the ICESCR and in 1992 was incorporated into national law by Decree No. 591. The country is also involved in the recognition of this right by means of the 1969 American Convention on Human Rights (Pact of San José), ratified by Brazil in 1992, and the Additional Protocol to the American Convention on Human Rights in the Area of Economic, Social and Cultural



Rights of 1988 (San Salvador Protocol) which refers to the right to food in its Article 12 (internally promulgated by Decree 3.321 of 1999).

The concept of the human right to adequate and healthy food is gaining momentum as a result of national and international social movements' demands. For example, the non-governmental organisations FoodFirst Information and Action Network International, the World Alliance on Nutrition and Human Rights and the Institut Jacques Maritain coordinated the development of the Code of Conduct on the Human Right to Adequate Food in 1997, to be included in the United Nations and the Food and Agriculture Organization agendas. In 1999, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights drafted General Comment 12 on the Right to Adequate Food, which emphasises the broadest concept of FNS.

With the resumption of CONSEA in 2003, the creation of a legal and institutional framework to protect and promote the Human Right to the Adequate Food was advocated. In 2006, the Organic Law of Food and Nutrition Security (Law No. 11.236), established the National Food and Nutrition Security System (NFNS) and defined universality, equity, autonomy, social participation and transparency as its principles.

The NFNS brings together various government sectors to coordinate FNS policies (Leão & Maluf, 2012, p. 30). The following are the main bodies that manage the NFNS at the federal level:

- The National Conference on FNS: 2/3 of its participants are from civil society and 1/3 are from the government; It occurs every four years to recommend guidelines and priorities to CONSEA for the national FNS Policy and Plan and to evaluate the NFNS;
- CONSEA: 2/3 of its advisors are from civil society and 1/3 is from the government; it is a direct advisory body for the presidency of the republic. It proposes guidelines and priorities and suggests the budget required to implement the FNS Policy and Plan;
- The Inter-ministerial Chamber of Food and Nutrition Security (ICFNS): composed of Ministers of State and Special Secretaries; it prepares the FNS Policy and Plan based on CONSEA's guidelines.

Initiatives derived from the work of CONSEA and ICFNS include the 1st and the 2nd National Plan of FNS (2012–2015 and 2016–2019). Of utmost importance has been the interaction between the National School Meal Program and the National Program to Strengthen Family Agriculture: legislation passed in 2009 (Law 11,947) established that at least 30% of food purchased for the school meal programme (in natura or minimally processed) must come from small family farmers.

Of no less importance was the publication of the Food and Nutritional Education Reference Framework for Public Policies (Brasil, 2012) and the new Food Guide for the Brazilian Population (Brasil, 2014) based on FNS principles, which achieved international recognition.

## **Challenges for the FNS agenda: political context, regulation, public-private relations**

In the current political context of Brazil, similarly to the prevailing context of an increasing number of countries worldwide, public policies have been strongly influenced by private interests of large corporations (Stuckler and Nestle, 2012).

This situation is no different in the FNS field, where an example of such conflicts between public and private interests in Brazil has been observed in relation to the National Technical Biosafety Commission (NTBC). Academics and civil society organisations have pointed out the NTBC tendency to echo arguments made by the marketing teams of companies that produce pesticides and genetically modified organisms (Zanoni et al., 2011). This situation has turned Brazil into the largest consumer of pesticides in the world (ASP-TA, 2010), in addition to approving the use of pesticides that are banned in other parts of the world, such as Europe.

The political strategy of large economic conglomerates dealing with unhealthy products (e.g. tobacco, alcohol and ultra-processed foods and beverages) to avoid regulations that would reduce their profits have been widely documented in the case of the tobacco industry (Ulucanlar, Fooks, & Gilmore, 2016) and have been also increasingly documented in the food and nutrition field (Brownell & Warner, 2009; Gomes, 2015). These companies, as well as the organisations related to them (Gomes, 2015), act not only at the national level, but also in the sphere of the United Nations by funding activities and playing a role that sometimes can compete with the role of Member States (Mialon, Swinburn, Allender, & Sacks, 2017).

A frequent strategy of such corporations and related actors to distort, weaken or avoid regulatory policies is to propose public-private interactions so called 'partnerships' with regulatory authorities (Burlandy et al., 2016; Gomes & Lobstein, 2011; Richter, 2004), such as the voluntary agreement between the Brazilian federal government and the Brazilian Food Industry Association to reduce sodium content in processed and ultra-processed food and drink products (Martins, 2014). In addition to its dubious effectiveness, this agreement has several potentially negative side effects. While explicitly attacking government policies aimed at promoting adequate and healthy food, the industry can guarantee a seat at the table in negotiating regulatory policies (Kearns, Schmidt, & Glantz, 2016). Thus, an ambiguous message is conveyed to the public that ultra-processed products should be avoided (according to the recommendations of the Dietary Guidelines for the Brazilian Population), yet the public may perceive such products as recommended for consumption, since they see government and manufacturers negotiating voluntary reformulations of such products, when government's recommendation is for their avoidance (Monteiro and Cannon, 2012).

In 2016, several soft drink industry trade associations opposed the adoption of the Bill 430/2016 which would tax soft drink, claiming that it will lead to job and income losses ("ALIANZA LATINOAMERICANA," 2015). Through this discursive strategy, the industry tries to represent legitimate interests of various sectors of society (Ulucanlar et al., 2016).

Therefore, it is necessary to adopt mechanisms to identify and analyse conflicts of interest in order to safeguard public health (Mialon, Swinburn, & Sacks, 2015; Pralle, 2006). In 2013, several Brazilian scientific societies, professional associations, researchers, and health professionals gathered at the 'Front for Regulation of the Public-Private Relationship in Food and Nutrition', aimed at increasing awareness about conflict of interests related to the Brazilian FNS agenda (Frente pela Regulação, 2013).

While Brazil stands out as a reference in social participation and control in relation to FNS actions, the established participatory bodies have not been sufficient to avoid the deleterious political influence of agribusiness and big food companies. For example, in the 2014 general elections, the financing of electoral campaigns by large ultra-processed food companies outpaced that of all other business sectors (Abramo, 2014).

In order to face such challenges, it is needed a constant dialogue and coordination among social movements, through the actions of structured national councils and by strengthening civil society organisations truly engaged with the FNS agenda. Active social control coupled with partners such as universities are also needed to defend FNS.

Initial steps towards the implementation of intersectoral public policies need to be strengthened, in line with the spirit of the United Nations SDGs. This 2030 Agenda states as its Goal 2: 'End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture (...)' Also, that 'it is time to rethink how we grow, share and consume our food. If done right, agriculture, forestry and fisheries can provide nutritious food for all and generate decent incomes, while supporting people-centred rural development and protecting the environment.' (<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/hunger/>).

In comparison with the previous Millenium Development Goals, the process leading to the SDGs involved more consultations to governments, academia and civil society. The achievement of these objectives requires efforts aimed at deepening their discussion and implementation under



democratic principles. The structural causes underlying the set of challenges expressed in SDGs require paradigm shifts in the development models of most countries, including Brazil.

## Note

1. According to Blumer (1939),

Social movements can be viewed as collective enterprises to establish a new order of life. They have their inception in the condition of unrest, and derive their motive power on one hand from dissatisfaction with the current form of life, and on the other hand, from wishes and hopes for a new scheme or system of living

## Disclosure statement

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