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# Democratic public action in times of crises: examining the resilience of Brazil's food and water policies

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## 1. Introduction

Since mid-2010s, Brazil has undergone important economic and political changes, whereby the country has regressed in terms of several policies, including food and nutritional security, social protection, territorial development, water management, and deforestation control. A common feature of most policies is their embeddedness in a broader institutional framework, established during the country's democratization process in the 1980s, and consolidated during the Workers' Party governments, particularly during Lula da Silva's mandates (2003-2006, 2007-2010) (Sabourin et al., 2020). Characterized by distinct degrees of participation, these policies have become an object of accountability in advisory forums and were marked by increased coordination between the federal and the subnational institutions (Arretche, 2012).

This regression process originated from the reduction in public spending in the early 2010s, justified by the effects of the 2008 global financial crisis in Brazil. Additionally, flawed

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economic measures, increasing social contestation, and the gradual rise of conservative groups of interest resulted in political tension, which culminated in Dilma Rousseff's impeachment in 2016. This political turn escalated after the election of the far-right candidate, Jair Bolsonaro (in 2018) for whom policy dismantling is a government strategy. Marked by a decrease in both the density and intensity of policies (Bauer, 2012), this large-scale dismantling reflects a major political change. The Bolsonaro administration worked on the centralization of decision-making and policy implementation, excluding civil society organizations, governors, and mayors from the policy process (Avritzer, 2017). Populist discourses were used to delegitimize the existing policies. The economic crisis was framed as moral, caused by corruption and attacks on family values by the Workers' Party, and its social effects were interpreted as proof of the state's inefficiency (Burity, 2020; Feres Júnior & Gagliardi, 2021; Milhorange, forthcoming).

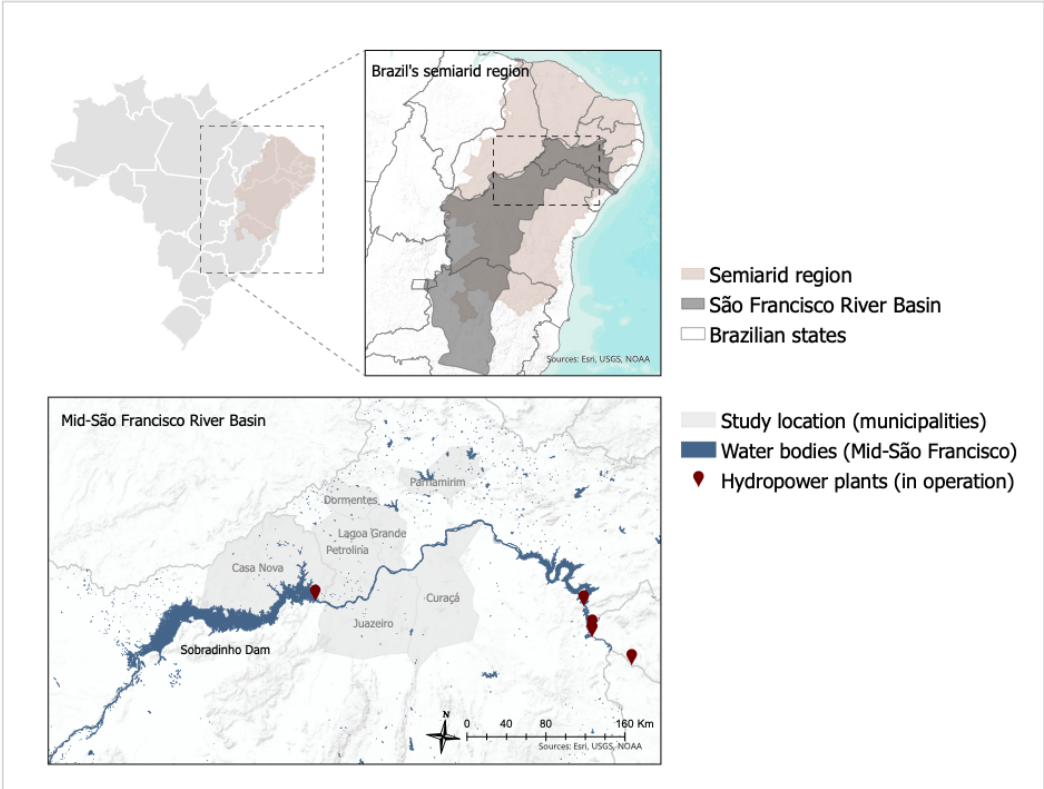
In addition to the economic pressure, Brazil has been fraught with other crises that have intensified social impacts and policy dismantling. For instance, environmental deregulation led to an unprecedented increase in deforestation rates and forest fires, pesticide pollution, and land conflicts (Andrade, 2020; Barbosa et al., 2021; Ferreira et al., 2014; Levis et al., 2020). The weakening of the National Health System and negation of the COVID-19 pandemic made Brazil one of the countries to register the highest absolute number of deaths (Abers et al., 2021; Ritchie et al., 2020). The suspension of indigenous special health districts strongly impacted indigenous populations, especially during the pandemic (Polidoro, 2020; Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2020). Likewise, the dilution of social protection and food support system, together with rising food inflation during the pandemic, exacerbated food insecurity (FAO et al., 2021; Galindo et al., 2022; Rede PENSSAN, 2021).

The dismantling strategies and their effects on Brazil have been addressed by a growing literature (Barbosa et al., 2021; Barcelos, 2020; Fernandes et al., 2017; Granemann, 2016; Macambira, 2020; Morais de Sa e Silva, 2021; Sabourin et al., 2020). However, the conjunction of different types of crises, attacks on democratic institutions, and populist problematizations of these crises to legitimize policy dismantling question the available responses and resilience of state bureaucracies, political actors, and the overall political regime (Bauer et al., 2021; Guedes-Neto & Guy Peters, 2021; Milhorange, forthcoming). This question has been

addressed by distinct views, presented in the next section, however, this debate is incipient for Brazil.

Therefore, this study examines the determinants and limits of resilience to democratic policy dismantling. With a focus on the country’s Northeast, semiarid region (Figure 1), the study analyzes two interrelated policies involving the participation of non-state actors: first, water governance in the São Francisco river basin, and second, water access and agroecology food support. This sheds light on the informal policy networks and the interactions between these networks and formal institutions to promote policy resilience. This notion is discussed in Section 2. Sections 3 reviews changes operated in two subsystems. It draws on the argument that the dismantling of policies, characterized by social participation principles and use of illiberal strategies to promote policy change, are gradually undermining Brazil’s democratic policy-making and policy regime. Section 4 presents policy changes observed for each case study and the main factors and limits of resilience to this process.

**Figure 1: Location of the study in Brazil’s Mid-São Francisco River Basin**



Source: Authors, based on ANEEL (2018) and ANA (2017)

## 2. Theory and scope

### 2.1. Policy resilience: a literature review

A call for more resilient policies has gained attention as contemporary policy-making has been challenged by an increasingly complex policy environment, growing uncertainty, and disruption in the democratic regimes. These have been described as “turbulent times,” considering that the public sector has struggled in responding to such events and their impacts (Ansell et al., 2021). Resilience has been applied to socio-ecological systems, referring to the systems’ ability to adapt in the face of external and internal perturbations (Folke et al., 2010). However, this external/internal distinction depends on the discipline and the analytical framework. For instance, in ecology, human actions are viewed as external drivers of the ecosystem dynamics. In political science, natural disasters, and health and economic crises are presented as external shocks, while policy reforms and ruptures are considered internal.

In this study, resilience to diverse types of shocks is reviewed through the policy lens. The economic crisis and the pandemic are used by populist leaders as a justification for policy dismantling and the application of measures that lead to democratic backsliding. The dismantling of several policies intensifies the social, economic, and environmental impacts of these crises. Nevertheless, “resilience” has been addressed by several literature streams and further conceptualizing it is not in the scope of this article<sup>5</sup>. This section reviews the main theoretical concerns to situate the contribution of the study in a policy process and political sociology perspective.

In the international organizations’ world, resilience became a new mantra for governing complexity. Several authors agree on the normative nature of “resilience-thinking” (Capano & Woo, 2017; Cleaver & Whaley, 2018; Howlett & Ramesh, 2022). For instance, the OECD has published numerous recommendations for increasing resilience in economic development and disaster management (OECD, 2014). The ready-made solutions include broad institutional attributes such as learning, adaptability, agility, and self-organization. However, critical scholars mention an oversight of important components of the policy process, such as power,

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<sup>5</sup> For a review of resilience, see: Capano and Woo (2017), Folke et al. (2010), Anderies et al. (2013).

knowledge, and agency (Cleaver & Whaley, 2018; Cote & Nightingale, 2012), which is key for this study.

From a functionalist view, resilience does not provide clear, operative indications for policy design (Capano & Woo, 2017, 2018; Howlett & Ramesh, 2022). These studies argue for the notion of robustness, which is defined as the capacity to maintain the functions of a system (policy, political system, organizational, or institutional) after periods of uncertainty. Based on a dynamic perspective, robustness is conceived as distinct from stability, which relates to the system's ability to maintain its actual state (Capano & Woo, 2017; Howlett & Ramesh, 2022). This literature stream seeks to identify an optimal balance in policy design between rigidity and flexibility, in other words, conditions under which a policy may "stick but not get stuck" (Jordan & Matt, 2014). Most of these studies are, hence, design-centered and emphasize institutional arrangement, especially its policy instruments and attributes.

In line with rational institutionalism, Capano and Woo (2017, 2018) suggest that robust policy design requires the presence of polycentric decisional processes, which may favor the institutions' ability to adapt to change (Anderies et al., 2013). However, while recognizing the importance of politics and power, these studies focus on the efficiency and effectiveness of governance arrangements, leaving politics in the background (Sørensen & Ansell, 2021). In addition, despite their concern for the temporal dimension of policy designs, these studies emphasize a short-term tactical level of instrument (mix) design and institutional rules (Rosenbloom et al., 2019).

Some of these concerns are addressed by Sørensen et Ansell (2021), who propose a conceptual framework for analyzing the robustness of the political system as a whole, understood as a property of its institutions (polity), political processes (politics), and policy instruments (policy). This framework identifies the conditions for ensuring "flexible adaptation" and "creative entrepreneurship," which enhances the political system's overall ability to absorb and thrive on political disruption rather than suppressing it. The distinction between polity, politics, and policy is useful for analyzing diverse levels of resilience; however, the overall property of the political system is a broader subject, which is beyond the scope of this study.

Emerging literature has addressed the resilience of state bureaucracies to democratic backsliding (Bauer et al., 2021; Bauer & Becker, 2020; Gomide et al., 2022; Morais de Sa e Silva, 2021). These studies distinguish illiberal policy changes, driven by populist leaders, from a regular transfer of power. Conceived as partially autonomous actors, bureaucrats confronted with challenges to their preferred policies are expected to respond in diverse ways (i.e., work, shirk, or sabotage). These studies indicate that if populist governments pursue their illiberal projects, bureaucrats are squeezed out of service in the long term. This means that state bureaucracies, *per se*, are not sources of resistance against illiberal rules; however, some institutional features may make them more resilient (i.e., the range of political institutions involved in bureaucratic oversight and control, social embeddedness of the bureaucracy, and professional standards of individual bureaucrats).

Several studies, with a focus on Brazil, align with this literature. Resilience is often conceived as the political resistance to dismantling under the Bolsonaro administration, for instance, the intentional action to preserve institutions (Almeida, 2020). While these studies are particularly concerned with the dismantling process, its stages, and consequences, they point to possible points of resilience such as the legislative and judiciary powers (Araújo, 2020; Zaremborg & Almeida, 2021), state bureaucracy (Gomide et al., 2022; Guedes-Neto & Guy Peters, 2021), and new subnational and international political alliances (Niederle et al., 2022; Sabourin et al., 2020). We intend to contribute to this academic endeavor, particularly to understanding the consequences and breadth of policy and institutional changes in Brazil since the arrival of the far-right political groups for the presidency.

This study conceives resilience from two political perspectives: the capacity to oppose or minimize contradicting shifts, based on the actors' ability to preserve strong and ideologically cohesive coalitions (Sotirov & Storch, 2018), and the actors' ability to maintain (democratic) public action in particular policy fields. Light is shed on the political and cognitive dimensions of the policy process, with a focus on the collective action in policy implementation. From the above review, we acknowledge the conceptual problems associated with policy resilience, and use it as a heuristic lens and a starting point. We also acknowledge the relevance of examining resilience from an institutional and policy-design lens; however, we propose to highlight an overlooked aspect – the collaboration between state and non-state actors in implementing policy instruments despite efforts to dismantle them.

## 2.2. Data collection and analysis

The two cases selected are geographically bound to Brazil's Northeast semiarid region. This region is characterized by increasing occurrences of dry spells and severe droughts. Almost 40% of the region's population lives in rural areas and depends on rain-fed agriculture and pastures (Marengo et al., 2017). Several policies implemented since the early 2000s, in partnership with the civil society, sought to address the structural causes of vulnerability to drought: the centralized and technocratic governance of water, socioeconomic inequality, and unsustainable food production systems. This represented a paradigm shift vis-à-vis the historical tendency to concentrate water resources in large-scale reservoirs, often built on private land, and reliance on clientelist local politics, which reinforced power asymmetries and water use conflicts (Bursztyn, 2008; Lindoso et al., 2018). These policies became key targets of policy dismantling, and the Northeast region stood out for its opposition to Bolsonaro.

This research is based on a critical review of interviews conducted by the authors between 2018 and 2019 regarding the evolution of public policies for rural development, climate adaptation, and water governance ( $N = 88$ , semi-structured interviews with public, private, and civil society actors at all levels)<sup>6</sup>. These were complemented in 2022 with 15 in-depth interviews, an analysis of institutional documents, and participation in strategic meetings and analysis of their minutes (i.e., the São Francisco river basin's crisis room, agroecology, and food security online events).

## 3. Dismantling democratic policy instruments

Previous studies showed that while fiscal austerity and economic recovery justified state reforms in the early 2010s, Bolsonaro later exploited these rationales to foster change in Brazil's policy foundations – its definition of citizenship, development models, and democratic nature. These include the review of the historical rights of the minority groups and indigenous populations, environmental deregulation, promotion of an extractive land-use development

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<sup>6</sup> Project "Articulating policy mixes across scales & sectors to address adaptation to climate change" [ANR-17-CE03-0005].

model, and extinction of several participatory stances and democratic instruments (Milhorange, forthcoming). The last point is the focus of this study and is detailed below.

### 3.1. Centralizing decision-making and reducing transparency

Following the Rousseff impeachment in 2016, Michel Temer replaced 13 years of the Workers' Party administration with a conservative-oriented government. Temer used his first week in office to abolish the Ministry of Agrarian Development and reduce the scope of several social policies. In parallel, participatory councils were trimmed, with a sharp reduction in the number of meetings, which preceded Bolsonaro's decision to abolish them through the 2019 Presidential Decree n. 9.759. This closure include the National Commission on Agroecology and Organic Production (CNAPO) and the National Council for Food and Nutritional Security (CONSEA), an advisory body of the Presidency of the Republic and a resonance box of societal demands (Niederle et al., 2022; Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2020).

In other instances, certain participatory bodies were weakened or transformed. For instance, funds were significantly restricted for the territorial coordination platforms, such as the rural development municipal councils and the river basin committees. Note that these committees were regulated by law so they were not extinct; however, their operation was considerable hindered by lack of funds. Likewise, the Amazon Council was recreated in 2020 with military officers and headed by Bolsonaro's Vice-President, a General. In addition, the National Council for the Environment and the National Council for Water Resources reduced the participation of civil society members.

These changes distorted the essence of several policies whose consolidation was based on a decentralized and participatory approach. This is, for instance, true for the water management policy, consolidated in the 1990s with the establishment of the Water Law (n° 9433/1997). Its implementation has been based on the coordination between state and non-state actors within decentralized water resources councils and river basin committees. These participatory spaces helped neutralize the dominance of particular sectors by including all relevant water users in the decision-making process (Abers & Keck, 2013). The Water National Agency (ANA) was established in the same period, as an autonomous body related to the Ministry of Environment, to regulate water use in national domains, while the federal states regulated

water use at the regional level. The ANA is also in-charge of managing water crises and conflicts emerging from these events.

The dilution of participatory stances was accompanied by changes in centralizing decision-making and policy implementation. Regarding water management, these changes refer to the rules for allocating water use in times of drought. A major event occurred between 2012 and 2017, and the main regional reservoir – Sobradinho Dam – reached less than 20% of the total volume capacity in 2015. Regulations to prioritize hydropower production have impacted the water allocation for irrigation and other uses, producing conflicts between users (CBHSF, 2015; Milhorange et al., 2021). In this context, a “crisis room” was created by the ANA in 2013 to reinforce water management. Its design drew on the understanding that water crises should be managed in a participatory and transparent way as it depended on renewed agreements between water users. It brought together distinct institutional actors, i.e., national and subnational public servants, the São Francisco River Basin Committee, the National Electric System Operator, users’ sectors, universities, and NGOs (A. Lima, 2022).

Despite its positive results, the crisis room was bypassed in 2021 with the creation of the Chamber for Exceptional Rules for Hydroelectric Management ([CREG], Provisional Measure 1.055/2021), which centralized crisis management in the Ministry of Mines and Energy, and was justified by its proponents as a “decision to resolve things more quickly, given the national water crisis” (interview, March 18, 2022). This was perceived by most of the crisis room’s members as a means of favoring water allocation for the hydropower sector and loosening the environmental rules. For instance, it was defined as *“a setback and a disregard for the competencies of the ANA, the national environmental agency, federal states, and the electric system operator (...) CREG allowed, for instance, 20% of the reservoir’s capacity. We [the crisis room] would not have authorized it.”*

At the end of the same year, a new water bill (4,546/2021) was sent to Congress, without any debate or transparency about its content. Some of its objectives included creating a water infrastructure policy, regulating water services, detaching river basin committees from the implementation of water management plans, and establishing a water market as a response to water disputes in regions affected by droughts. This change was seen as *“a major setback that undermines the foundations of the [water and environmental] legislation being built for more than 20 years”* (interview, January 24, 2022).

### 3.2. Disengaging civil society from policy implementation

The exclusion of civil society organizations from policy implementation was another dismantling strategy. It is worth mentioning that the São Francisco River covers 8% of Brazil's territory, with more than half of the basin in the semiarid region, where patterns of concentrated landholding have, historically, restricted water access. The civil society network, "Articulation in the Semiarid" (ASA), was key to the dissemination of rainwater catchment and storage cisterns since the 1990s. This experiment became a national policy in 2003 – the One Million Cisterns Program – which allocated public funds to the ASA and other civil society organizations for local-level implementation.

This implementation model faced criticism over time. In 2011, the national government decided to privilege the dissemination of plastic-made cisterns – rather than plate-made – as a means of scaling up their installation. This shift revealed political divergences. The plastic-made cisterns were criticized by the ASA as they were manufactured by foreign companies and their installation excluded the program's training component, along with the potential to develop the local economy, community mobilization, and agroecological practices. Furthermore, the ASA lost its monopoly in implementing water policy.

Rousseff's impeachment created a conflictive environment that led to the dehydration of the entire cistern program. Allocated funds were reduced and public calls for technical assistance no longer favored organizations based in the semiarid region. Moreover, NGOs were criminalized and accused of illegally profiting from public funds (Nogueira et al., 2020; Sabourin et al., 2020). The criminalization of civil society implementing partners was also observed in the case of public purchases of food products from family farmers, an initiative created to promote food security, respond to food shortages, and develop family farming and agroecology. A lawsuit against the civil society organizations participating in its implementation drifted into a process of disengagement, which led to a drastic reduction in public purchases and the number of beneficiary farmers (Niederle et al., 2021).

The objective of obstructing civil society groups' ability to implement projects was to weaken one of their main sources of financial resources. These changes initially relied on the argument of reducing public spending; however, subsequently, the populist narrative of the danger of a

“communist” ideology arising from the growing role of civil society in public management was mobilized.

### 3.3. Politicizing policy options and bureaucracy

Bolsonaro’s inclination to govern using presidential decrees, and letting Congress and the Supreme Court decide whether to accept some of the daily policy decisions reinforced the gradual judicialization of policy implementation. Drawing on an anti-system narrative, this government contradicted Brazil’s multi-party alliance presidentialism (Vilhena, 2018). Despite the highly conservative Congress, parliamentary alignment with the executive body was far from automated and several projects, dependent on congressional approval, were paralyzed in the first year of governance. Budget allocation negotiations, through parliamentary amendments and political appointments, emerged as a crucial issue for political support (Avritzer, 2021; Couto, 2021). Note that from 2016 to 2020, the amount of parliamentary amendments increased in nominal values by 362% (CGU, 2022).

This process contributed to politicizing policy design and implementation. For instance, regarding the diminishing funds and limited role of the ASA in the installation of rainwater cisterns, parliamentary amendments were increasingly used to ensure the program’s implementation. However, the side-effect was to favor the dissemination of plastic-made cisterns by public-private agencies outside the scope of the Cistern Program and to politicize the selection of beneficiaries depending on the political support for the Congressmen issuing the amendments (Ferreira, 2021). Furthermore, the government shift resulted in an overt conflict between the Bolsonaro administration and several Northeast governors and civil society organizations, several of whom were aligned with the Workers’ Party or other left-wing movements.

In parallel, delegitimizing discourses were used against agroecology movements. This led to the exclusion of “agroecology” and “climate change” from national policies (Niederle et al., 2022; Sabourin et al., 2020). Additionally, the main instrument of agroecology policy – the Ecoforte program – was administratively paralyzed, and its public food purchases component was reduced. Ecoforte was an innovative program aimed to strengthen the territorial

networks of farmers, civil society organizations, and bureaucrats involved in the promotion of agroecology, guided by a territorial development perspective (Schmitt et al., 2020).

Additionally, the politicization of the COVID-19 pandemic by Bolsonaro impacted social and food policies. Social movements were excluded from policy implementation and had to contest a powerful discourse that denied the existence of the crisis (Abers et al., 2021). In 2021, more than 50% of Brazil’s households faced food insecurity due to the economic crisis, food inflation, school and food markets’ closure, and policy dismantling (FAO et al., 2021; Galindo et al., 2022; Rede PENSSAN, 2021).

These changes have been followed by a partial capture of the state bureaucracy. In 2020, more than 1,500 military officers were appointed to the sector ministries, ousting technical civil servants from these management positions (Sabourin et al., 2020). Note that politicization of personnel or norms and reduction of accountability or pluralism of political spaces are particularities of populist governments (Bauer & Becker, 2020). As a result, in Brazil, public servants have been subject to intimidation and decision-making paralysis (Morais de Sa e Silva, 2021).

3.4. Synthesis: illiberal dismantling, coalition politics, and crises

It is evident that formal – and sometimes thickly institutionalized – policies and institutions do provide some stability; however, this does not prevent dismantling, instability, or other types of changes. The main changes described in this section are summarized in Table 1. The results show that the dismantling of democratic instruments has progressed. Fund reduction, change in procedural rules, administrative paralysis, membership revision of participatory instances, and change of implementing partners are some of the dismantling tactics that did not require major legal changes. In other cases, the publication of presidential decrees and politicization of both state bureaucracy and policy goals were undertaken.

**Table 1: Main dismantling strategies**

	<b>Water management</b>	<b>Water and food access</b>
<b>Funds reduction</b>	Fund reduction for civil society participation in the river basin committees and advisory councils, and	Fund reduction for the Food Purchase Program (PAA), Cisterns

	implementation of the water law (especially, the São Francisco revitalization program).	Program, and technical assistance public calls.
<b>Extinction of participatory spaces</b>	Dismantling of the National Councils for Water Resources and the Environment (decrees 9.759 and 9.784/ 2019), but recreation with different membership.	Extinction of CONSEA, CNAPO, territorial development councils, and school feeding advisory group, among others (2019, decrees 9.759 and 9.784).
<b>Change in decision-making arenas, membership, or coordination rules</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Creation of the CREG, bypassing the crisis room (provisory measure 1055/2021).</li> <li>- Increase in the number of government and private representatives and reduction of civil society members in the National Councils for Water Resources and the Environment (decrees 9806/2019; 623/2019; 11018/2022).</li> <li>- Displacement of the ANA from the Ministry of Environment to the Ministry of Regional Development.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Downgradation of the Ministry of Agrarian Development to the Secretariat for Family Farming and Cooperativism, and subordination to the Ministry of Agriculture (Decree 9.667/2019).</li> <li>- Subordination of the Ministry of Social Development to the Ministry of Regional Development.</li> </ul>
<b>Capturing of state bureaucracy/administrative paralysis</b>	Change in high-level officers of the ANA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Paralysis of the National Agency for Technical Assistance and Rural Extension, and the Ecoforte Program.</li> <li>- Harassment of public servants of the former ministries of agrarian and social development.</li> </ul>
<b>Change in policy goals</b>	The new water bill is expected to change the main goals of the 1997 water law (4.546/2021).	Review of specific public policies oriented towards family farmers and minority groups, exclusion of short-circuits food supply and social mobilization to install rainwater cisterns, and rejection of the notion of agroecology.

Source: Authors' elaboration

This revealed strong coalition politics. In the case of water management, the regulation of river flows to prioritize hydropower production impacted water allocation for agriculture, human use, and biodiversity (Milhorance et al., 2021). However, the energy sector leveraged political resources, thanks to the 2020–2021 hydropower crisis in the Southeast region – the country’s economic heart – to set the policy agenda. This was led by a downgradation of environmental concerns in the Bolsonaro administration (Barbosa et al., 2021; Ferreira et al., 2014; Viola & Franchini, 2014). The 1997 water law had wrested power over the water policy from the hands of the energy sector and placed it with the Ministry of Environment and water users. The new water bill went the reverse way. As interpreted by an interviewee, *“certain sectors [the energy sector] do not want to fight the conflicts over water as equals; they have economic power and want this economic power to influence the decisions”* (interview, February 18, 2022).

The 2003 election of Lula da Silva to the presidency allowed civil society actors to occupy strategic positions in the state, such as in the Ministry of Agrarian Development and the Ministry of Social Development. This strengthened the food security agenda, based on a multidimensional, rights-based approach, and encouraged a combination of structural and emergency measures. Some of the key instruments included conditional cash transfers, public food purchases from family farmers, and distribution of food products to social protection networks such as schools (i.e., PAA and School Feeding Program [PNAE]). This movement gradually integrated environmental concerns; agroecology programs, such as Ecoforte, being important examples of this process. However, this coalition lost political weight and legitimacy. Agribusiness and other economic groups have historically held considerable power; however, the growth of commodity exports in the 2000s became a source of power (Lima, 2021; Pereira et al., 2020). These groups joined Bolsonaro’s conservative alliance, which was also a critique of the participation of social movements in policy decisions (Niederle et al., 2022).

In addition to political shifts, external shocks are conceived in literature as factors of change (Weible & Sabatier, 2018). This was evidenced in the case of water management. The economic recession intensified competition for public budgets and battles over regulation decisions (Sabourin et al., 2020). Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic reopened the debate on the need to strengthen social protection and establish restrictive beneficiary selection criteria

(Chaves, 2021). An additional element, specific to Brazil, relates to the role of populist discourses in framing the crises as a result of precedent policies (Feres Júnior & Gagliardi, 2021). This aligns with the studies that conceive crises as subjects of struggles, rather than “exogenous shocks,” to provide an understanding of their causes and legitimize alternative political orientations (Hassenteufel & Saurugger, 2021).

#### 4. The role of informal networks on policy resilience

This section examines the factors of resilience to the types of dismantling discussed above. The democratic backsliding literature highlights the role of administrative orders, political support, trust in institutions, and the basis of their ideation (Bauer & Becker, 2020; Knill et al., 2009; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). This study sheds light on a specific factor: the role of informal and practical interactions between the state and non-state actors’ networks.

##### 4.1. Activating policy networks and trust relationships

There is a shared perception that despite the water policy’s achievements over more than 25 years, it lacked a framework for dealing with droughts, an essential element for water management in the semiarid region. This policy and its instances – committees, councils, and agencies – were designed to make mid- to long-term decisions in the context of average river flows. The short-term perspective of dealing with recurrent droughts was integrated with the creation of the crisis room. This instrument was positively evaluated by most of its members, and the implemented measures were considered effective in keeping the São Francisco river basin in a better situation than other basins in the late 2010s (Lima, 2022).

According to the interviewees, the crisis room allowed the strengthening of relationships based on information-sharing and practical actions. Its marginal position in the water institutional framework was seen to “*ensure greater capillarity and build trust.*” The crisis room underpinned a learning process – managing intensifying droughts and working together. As mentioned by one of its members, “*trust is the key and a part of the learning process. In the beginning, there was so much conflict (...) then we tried to show our facilitating and technical role and trust was gradually built. (...) if we lose trust, the crisis room can no longer exist*” (interview, February 16, 2022). According to these members, to constantly review water

allocation and mitigate conflicts, decision-making must be informed, transparent, and participatory.

This aligns with Abers and Keck's (2013) view regarding Brazil's river basin committees. They argue that by experimenting and resolving local problems, actors can build networks and capabilities, which are instrumental in building trust and organizing capacity for future collaboration. The river basin committees worked best when their members constructed an interpretation of their tasks that pointed to concrete actions. For these authors, institution building is a relational process that occurs through human action and involves disparate activities such as creating and disseminating ideas, struggling over legal designs, experimenting, accumulating technical and organizational resources, and building networks of support for the implementation of those ideas and instruments. Likewise, Ansell and Gash (2008) mention face-to-face dialogue, trust-building, and shared understanding as the key to collaborative processes.

The crisis room favored both institutional and personal interactions. In contrast with the National Water Resources Council, which is eminently formal, this space was considered more flexible and partially informal. For some of its members, this informal character was convenient, *"the crisis room is innovative in the sense that it recognizes that we can conduct public policies without necessarily institutionalizing every instrument by law, decree, ordinance, or mandatory instruments (...) this is key to adapting the water policy to the 21<sup>st</sup> century; the climate change century"* (interview, January 24, 2022). Such enthusiasm regarding non-coercive frameworks might reflect an alignment with liberalizing narratives and should be nuanced in the context of policy dismantling. However, trust in the water allocation rules, built on personal relations, was considered key to supporting the crisis room in the light of the CREG creation.

Importantly, the informal nature of the crisis room allowed it to escape the attention of the national government in the initial dismantling phases. This distinguished water management from the food access policy, which was fraught with an aggressive dismantling strategy, particularly towards the state-civil society coordination platforms. Dismantling affected most of the food and agroecology programs, particularly PAA and Ecoforte (Niederle et al., 2022). While the school feeding program was initially less impacted, given its high capillary in municipal administrations, the purchases from family farmers gradually decreased after the

civil society lost its monitoring role with the extinction of the CONSEA (OAE, 2021). Interviewees recall that the CONSEA was strategic in daily implementation public policies and its extinction hindered cross-sectoral policy coordination, public call monitoring, and updating of implementation options, among others. For instance, the installation prices of the rainwater cisterns were not updated to inflation, which made its implementation unfeasible.

Despite the constraining environment, networks of state and civil society actors were activated during the pandemic to implement food emergency measures, which merged with political mobilization to prevent dismantling (Abers et al., 2021). In contrast with the water management networks, the long history and density of, and the ideological cohesion of the policy networks in food security reinforced its mobilization capacity. Actors committed to these policies and who participated in their development carried out several initiatives inspired by the same implementing principles to circumvent dismantling. For instance, the ASA members encouraged municipal administrations to continue buying food products from family farmers and distributing them to vulnerable students. Numerous grassroots movements – including the ASA, Agroecology National Association, Landless Movement, and Small Farmers Movements – launched food support initiatives following direct purchases from family farmers. Funds were collected from diverse sources and the initiatives reached the urban vulnerable population who were not the main beneficiaries of the PAA.

Additionally, the Bank of Brazil Foundation (FBB) reinforced emergency food relief measures, in partnership with 97 institutions, based on the PAA purchase model. This strategy received R\$ 58.3 million and benefited more than a million people (FBB, 2022). As informed by the FBB officials, this initiative aimed at supporting vulnerable populations and purchasing from vulnerable farmers whose commercialization was impacted by the pandemic and the PAA constraints. The organizations selected to integrate with this initiative had previously participated in the Ecoforte Program (partially funded and implemented by the FBB). This choice was justified as it was important to trust the organizations to quickly organize product delivery and honor advance payments. As explained, there was a mutual learning process between the FBB and these organizations:

*“Resilience derives from previous learning processes. That is why we can be resilient: we have the experience, technical argument, and ability to slowly solve the issues. (...) In the beginning, it was difficult to understand what an agroecology network is. This*

*was a civil society vocabulary. However, [by participating in Ecoforte], we now understand it. (...) and the notion of agroecology networks started to be diffused inside the organization [FBB]. (...) today we understand this public [agroecology/family farming organizations], and when there is a demand, we know who to approach. (interview, February 24, 2022)*

Therefore, the existing collective action routines, built over 20 years, were adapted to the new situation, and implemented mechanisms. A shared understanding of principles and routines, collectively established rules, and trust – based on frequent interactions between institutional actors, but on personal relations – have been key to organizing policy alternatives.

Nevertheless, despite their relevance, the results of these initiatives were uneven across the country. Regional asymmetries within the organization and response capacity were mentioned by several interviewees as the reason. In some states of the Northeast semiarid region, the historical role of grassroots organizations and territorial development initiatives in reinforcing social capital shaped their mobilization ability. However, the continued process of policy dismantling and budget reduction hindered the ASA's presence at the territorial level. Hence, regional inequality tends to increase due to dismantling. As summarized by a public servant, *“the territorial disparity is especially strong in the context of [policy] dismantling. There are territories in which actions were totally dismantled, and territories where these actions were maintained even in the absence of public policies. Federal state policies are also related to this [situation]”* (interview, January 25, 2022).

## 4.2. Leveraging institutional, financial, and political resources

### 4.2.1. Institutional activism

The formation of strategic networks of public servants and non-state actors for policy design and decision-making was noted in the development of Brazil's water policy. Activist, personal, and professional networks are important components of the bureaucratic logic, even in the more technocratic parts of the state. Drawing on institutional activism, Abers (2021) analyzed the collective action in the defense of contentious causes conducted within the boundaries of state institutions. These causes are not necessarily progressive; they can involve resistance to change. Moreover, diverse locations in the state institutions and civil society networks might

give bureaucrats access to different combinations of institutional and relational resources. These patterns of activism have been observed in different policy fields, such as environmental protection and women's health, and apply to both water management and water and food access policies.

Even though the São Francisco crisis room was initially spared by the dismantling strategies, when the drought in the Southern region reached the energy sector, the CREG circumvented it. In a context of eroding trust, informal coordination between national bureaucrats and federal states, civil society, and the Senate became important responses to the imminent changes in the water policy. For instance, national public servants mentioned that they shared viewpoints and information with federal states' actors before the crisis room meetings as they could not publicly advocate for them. Moreover, they discreetly lobbied to Congresspeople to obstruct the governments' attempts to make the CREG permanent. Given the conflictive environment of the Bolsonaro administration, these bureaucrats prevented attracting attention.

In the food policy, "personal commitments" and ideas were put forward to preserve the policies facing dismantling or paralysis due to the pandemic. "A great convergence of ideas" between the FBB officials and the agroecology movements was mentioned. As summarized by a public servant:

*"Resilience is much more about people who keep the debate alive inside the organizations, it is not in the presidency of the Foundation (...). It is in people who are holding on and working there. When a moment like this [the pandemic] comes, they are the ones who are requested by the president (...) and inside the ministries, there are also public employees, and a manager, swimming against the tide." (interview, February 24, 2022)*

Nevertheless, in the Ministries of Agriculture and Social Development, intense turnover and personal harassment prevented most actions from continuing:

*"The Ministry [of Agriculture] had, I do not know how many, secretaries of food security. (...) You cannot count, it is an infinite number. Nobody gave continuity to the work. (...) And it is intentional. (...) There is a dismantling policy that includes the dismissal of managers.*

*And those who are there cannot say anything. Imagine, Maria<sup>7</sup>, who was a secretary of the government, was denounced in a newspaper that she benefited from the ASA. A suspicious little local newspaper. Her union responded, and they removed the article. But even today they are still persecuting and campaigning through a digital militia style” (interview, February 18, 2022).*

A common point shared by most public officials was their “silent” activism, “*we are acting to get around this situation before people even realize that this has been a [response] process*” (interview, February 24, 2022). Despite the limitations of this type of engagement in a context of undemocratic attacks on the state bureaucracy, public officials and civil society used their relational and institutional resources to prevent change and implement some of their preferred policies through alternative means. Abers (2021) argued that when these activists are in opposition to the government, the political opportunities are likely to be foreclosed or require disruptive actions. In the cases analyzed here, bureaucratic action was limited or concealed.

#### *4.2.2. New funding partnerships*

Engagement with new funding partners was another strategy to preserve food policies in the semiarid region. As explained by the ASA members, since 2016, they have been meeting European partners, cooperation agencies, and multilateral organizations, such as the FAO and IFAD, to discuss the Cistern Program. The Consortium of governors from the Northeast region was also shortlisted as potential funding and political partners. The collaboration with international agencies resulted in new projects, while the results of subnational alliances were limited.

The “Project Planting Climate Resilience in Rural Communities of the Northeast” was approved in 2020 by the Green Climate Fund. Coordinated by the IFAD, the project promotes continued support for water-harvesting cisterns (IFAD Brazil, 2020), and has gradually led to the reframing of the cisterns into a climate adaptation instrument, making them eligible to access international climate funds. Thus, the project is expected to assure continued support for the implementation of public policies aligned with the Cisterns Program.

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<sup>7</sup> Fictitious name

Note that the IFAD has been working in Northeast Brazil since the 1980s, supporting family farming, disseminating rainwater cisterns, and promoting the access of rural populations to public policies (IFAD, 2016). Nevertheless, the deteriorated finances of these states and the political “misalignment” between the national and state governments became a “substantial risk” for contracting the IFAD’s concessional loans. Therefore, the IFAD established a new funding mechanism, involving the Brazilian National Bank for Social and Economic Development (BNDES), which ensured “operational independence for the participating states” (IFAD, 2016). This significantly reduced the risk of loan denial by the federal government – a US\$ 25 million IFAD loan to Ceará state was rejected in 2019 by the Ministry of Economy, which was justified with technical considerations; however, the fact that Ceará was ruled by the Workers’ Party was mentioned in interviews as a political factor for the denial.

Moreover, the mobilization of financial resources was complemented by the “Drylands Adaptation Knowledge Initiative” and the “Sahel One Million Cisterns.” Both projects draw on a south-south cooperation approach. The former is funded by the IFAD and promotes experience sharing in Latin American semiarid regions (i.e., Brazil, Argentina, and El Salvador). The latter is funded by the FAO and promotes the ASA experience in West Africa. For the ASA members, these initiatives reinforce their legitimacy *“in terms of political, technical, and methodological ability, both internationally and nationally.”* (interview, February 9, 2022)

In addition, the fact that Ecoforte was funded by the FBB, BNDES, and Amazon Fund, rather than direct funding from the public treasury, protected it from an active dismantling strategy (Niederle et al., 2022). As mentioned above, the FBB promoted initiatives for food purchases from agroecology networks, whose funds were increased during the pandemic.

Although, the creation of new funding mechanisms and international partnerships provided the ASA and the food policy networks with financial resources to partially continue their actions, this was insufficient to ensure their consistent presence at the territorial level of the semiarid region.

#### 4.2.3. Coalition-building

Despite the diverse types and degrees of responses discussed in this section, there is a general perception among actors consulted that if the illiberal dismantling process is durable, short-term actions would be insufficient. As mentioned by a public officer,

*“We realize that maybe it [the response] is not strong enough to survive dismantling. When there is a structured dismantling, it is hard. Dismantling is much easier than building something. It is difficult to say that we are going to have enough strength to survive a structured dismantling. But what is also positive and reassuring is that if there is this concern about dismantling, this is a sign that something important is also being built”* (interview, February 18, 2022).

Therefore, building new coalitions and strengthening old ones became the main foundations for leveraging political resources. Drawing on Sotirov and Storch (2018), we argue that coalition politics is important for resistance to dismantling and illiberal changes.

In the water management field, coalition building faces challenges. Intraregional competition and conflict over the diversion of the São Francisco river have characterized the politics of the basin committee since its creation in the early 2000s (Abers & Keck, 2013). Most committee stakeholders have been fighting over whether water should be allocated for energy production, irrigation of cash crops, or fish farming. Meanwhile, the ASA and other grassroots movements have advocated for a completely different development paradigm, based on the idea that the population needs to adapt its practices to the semiarid land and its climate. Despite these oscillating dynamics, divergences are currently considered secondary compared to changes in the new water bill:

*“Since I started working with water management, the challenges were to advance the creation of the committees, have resources to build basin plans, (...) qualify the allocation of water, and strengthen the policy framework. (...) We faced the ordinary challenges of implementing a public policy based on social participation. And today, more than 20 years later, we realize that all this work can disappear. (...) We realize that it is necessary for everyone to join hands, even with so many conflicting interests, because what is at stake is something much bigger: it is Brazil’s water policy. The water management model, promising social participation, is under threat from the water bill.*

*(...) the overall policy, the overall structure, its instruments, its system of governance, everything is at stake” (interview, March 4, 2022).*

Thus, the São Francisco river committee started mobilizing its members to resist policy change. It first looked for internal support and then sent a protest letter to the Ministry of Mines and Energy. Public statements, a working group, and a national seminar denounced the lack of social participation (CBHSF, 2022a, 2022b). The committee also facilitated the coordination of subnational secretaries. As noted, *“the very instances, whose role is being questioned by the new water bill, are becoming stronger as they mobilize to coordinate actors and seek solutions. (...) The state councils of water resources are discussing the policy again; they are paying attention to the challenges of implementing this policy”* (interview, March 4, 2022). In addition, the committee has lobbied in the National Congress for obstructing the bill.

Differently, the food security field is marked by a long history of mobilization and resistance. As summarized, *“dismantling has been significant, but there is a social trajectory that cannot be erased. What has been accumulated will return at some point, as long as there is a democratic government. In many states, we can see that many public policies have been maintained”* (interview, February 21, 2022).

A dense list of strategies has been evaluated. For instance, a dialogue platform was established by the Workers’ Party agrarian secretariat to monitor the situation of the rural population during the pandemic. This alliance brought together civil society actors, such as the Brazilian Forum for Food and Nutritional Sovereignty and Security, the National Agroecology Association, and the grassroots movements (i.e., Landless Movement, Family Farmers Union, and the Small Farmers Movement). Distinct bills were elaborated, including emergency measures to support family farmers to mitigate the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic (law 14.275/2021).

Strategies to reinforce the coalition were also established – mobilization of municipalities around the issue of food security and campaigns to influence municipal elections, mapping of local agroecology initiatives and actors, consolidation of the People's Conference on Food Security and Nutrition, the establishment of the School Feeding Observatory, and publicity campaigns involving artists and public personalities to support their cause, among others.

In parallel, the lobby towards the National Congress intensified – the ASA launched a Parliamentary Front to defend the Cistern Program, agroecology movements engaged in a campaign with the Workers’ Party to defend the PAA, and a broader left-wing movement was mobilized to assure the continuity of school meals during the pandemic. As a result, in 2020, the National Congress approved the use of the PNAE’s resources to distribute food to the families whose children studied at public schools (Law 13.987/2020) and the PAA received an additional R\$ 500 million (provisional measure nº 957/2020). Finally, formal denunciations of violation of the human right to food led the matter to the Supreme Court, along with coordination with the public defenders’ office. The mobilization of pre-established networks were significant, although their results to date have been uneven.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper reviewed some of the features of the undemocratic dismantling in Brazil. This process has been led by, what Hinterleitner and Fritz (2022) call, conflictual forms of politics, characterized by populism, polarization, exclusion of policy actors, and norm erosion. Here, dismantling can be understood in the broader context of political shift under rising conservatism. Politics, policy, and polity are, hence, intertwined in this process that requires further research efforts. While the degree of institutionalization is recognized as a factor of stability and resilience to dismantling, this does not prevent changes in policy budgets, actors involved, goals and instruments, arenas of decision, functioning rules, or daily management, which may de-characterize policies, and the broader regime that these policies sustain. The role of administrative orders, political support, trust in institutions, and their ideation basis have been presented in the literature as elements of resilience to democratic backsliding. This study sought to contribute to this debate by shedding light on the ability of informal policy networks to establish implementation alternatives and coalitions to resist change and promote new political responses.

In the two cases, policy instruments such as the crisis room, river basin committees, policy advisory councils, and direct support to agroecology networks helped develop dialogue, trustworthy relationships, and learning of implementing practices that were valuable in raising informal (relational) resources and maintaining some of the functions of the policies being

dismantled by the executive body or paralyzed by the COVID-19 crisis. Features such as informality, capillarity, flexibility, and practical interactions were considered relevant for reinforcing collective action and building an interpretation of the concrete policy problems; in contrast with more formal instances such as the National Council for Water Resources.

Drawing on Abers (2021; Abers et al., 2021; Abers & Keck, 2013), we identified different combinations of relational and other types of “power resources” (i.e., institutional, financial, and political). In the São Francisco water management, despite the weakening of participatory instances since 2019, the crisis room initially went unnoticed. Consistent efforts to dismantle the decentralized water governance became visible in 2020 in the face of the energy crisis in the Southeast region. State and non-state actors committed to the crisis room and the water law leveraged institutional and political resources to preserve the recently established drought management system and prevent change. The coalition behind this process has been slightly diffused, given the historic divergences regarding water management priority. This differs from the food security coalition, traditionally marked by deeper ties, political action at the national and subnational levels, and ideological convergence. This helped fast mobilization for organizing and implementing new arrangements, identification of financial and institutional partners, and standing against the national government. However, this network was directly targeted by the strongest dismantling and delegitimizing strategies.

In this sense, the study holds a greater degree of agency in the debate on policy resilience, and what does not disregard structural elements as the distribution of resources for collective action is related to these structures. Furthermore, the extent to which actors are restricted in their capacity to reorganize and respond to change was made evident in the study. The reproduction of regional inequalities and the inability of policy networks to respond indefinitely to dismantling were the main points. To use the resilience vocabulary, cohesive networks are expected to deal with some degrees of shocks; however, their ability to absorb or overcome a strong and illiberal dismantling movement is limited. Long-lasting responses may start with coalition mobilization for political changes. Additionally, more than resisting to change, these networks currently seek to promote new solutions and instruments for their policy agendas.

Regarding the politicization of the economic, climate, and pandemic crises, although the interpretative dimension has been highlighted, the material dimension of these crises should

not be neglected. Further analysis is welcome on the ways that democratic policies may respond to diverse kinds of crises.

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