

## ARTICLES

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# THE ROLE OF THE MID-LEVEL BUREAUCRACY IN THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*A atuação da burocracia de médio escalão na pandemia de Covid-19*

*El papel de la burocracia de nivel medio en la pandemia de COVID-19*

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the performance of mid-level bureaucracy. This qualitative and exploratory investigation adopted the research strategy of a case study of the bureaucracy responsible for the social assistance policy of the city of Belo Horizonte, Brazil, in 2020. The research was conducted through bibliographic and documentary research and semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. The bureaucracy's perception of the changes in the intra-organizational dimensions of public administration caused by the pandemic was captured. It was possible to notice that the crisis affected the work system, the decision-making processes, the interactions with other actors, and the skills required for the performance of the functions of these government actors. The research showed that how the mid-level bureaucracy acted helps to understand the functioning of the service and the resilience of public policy in the context of crisis.

**Keywords:** mid-level bureaucracy, COVID-19 pandemic, crisis management, public administration, social assistance.

### RESUMO

*Este artigo explora os efeitos da pandemia de Covid-19 na atuação da burocracia de médio escalão. Trata-se de uma pesquisa exploratória e de cunho qualitativo que adotou como estratégia de pesquisa o estudo de caso da burocracia responsável pela política de assistência social do município de Belo Horizonte (MG), no ano de 2020. A investigação foi conduzida por meio de pesquisa bibliográfica e documental, além de entrevistas semiestruturadas e aplicação de questionários. Captou-se a percepção do setor da burocracia estudado sobre as mudanças impressas nas dimensões intraorganizacionais da administração pública pela crise pandêmica. Foi possível notar que a crise afetou o regime de trabalho, os processos de tomada de decisão, as interações com outros atores e as habilidades demandadas para o desempenho das funções desses atores governamentais. A pesquisa evidenciou que a forma como a burocracia de médio escalão atuou ajuda a compreender o funcionamento do serviço e a resiliência da política pública no contexto de crise.*

**Palavras-chave:** burocracia de médio escalão, pandemia de Covid-19, gestão de crises, administração pública, assistência social.

### RESUMEN

*Este artículo explora los efectos de la pandemia de COVID-19 en el desempeño de la burocracia de nivel medio. Se trata de un estudio exploratorio de carácter cualitativo, que adoptó como estrategia de investigación el estudio de caso de la burocracia responsable de la política de asistencia social del municipio de Belo Horizonte, en el año 2020. El estudio se llevó a cabo mediante investigación bibliográfica y documental, además de entrevistas semiestructuradas y cuestionarios. Se captó la percepción del sector burocrático estudiado sobre los cambios impresos en las dimensiones intraorganizativas de la administración pública por la crisis pandémica. Se pudo observar que la crisis afectó el sistema de trabajo, los procesos de toma de decisiones, las interacciones con otros actores y las habilidades requeridas para el desempeño de las funciones de estos actores gubernamentales. La investigación demostró que la forma de actuar de la burocracia de nivel medio ayuda a entender el funcionamiento del servicio y la resiliencia de la política pública en el contexto de la crisis.*

**Palabras clave:** burocracia de nivel medio, pandemia de COVID-19, gestión de crisis, administración pública, asistencia social.

## INTRODUCTION

The emergence of a coronavirus strain in China in 2019 marked a significant turning point. The COVID-19 pandemic, declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, has profoundly altered society's dynamics, bringing about substantial changes. The virus spread rapidly, infecting millions of people, causing thousands of deaths, and creating a pandemic scenario.

The public sector did not remain untouched by the crisis. Numerous studies have focused on understanding the decision-making process of different government regimes and the correlation between state capacity and government response (Greer, King & Fonseca, 2021). They have also addressed the strategies adopted and measures implemented by the Brazilian federal government to combat COVID-19 (Cimini et al., 2020; Fonseca, Natrass, Arantes, & Bastos, 2021; Ventura, Aith & Reis, 2021; Jaccoud et al., 2022). Additionally, the social impacts of the spread of the new coronavirus have been analyzed (Furtado et al., 2021).

This article contributes to existing studies by examining the effects of the pandemic on the municipal administration of Belo Horizonte, the capital of the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. Apart from being the sixth most populous city in the country (IBGE, 2022), the municipality stood out in its response to COVID-19 (Andrade et al., 2020; Ito & Pongeluppe, 2020), presenting one of the lowest mortality rates among the 14 Brazilian capitals analyzed (Brizzi et al., 2021). Despite the importance of analyzing health policies, this study sheds light on the effects of the pandemic on the performance of the mid-level bureaucracy responsible for assistance policies aimed at mitigating the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic.

The mid-level bureaucracy is understood as a group of “actors who perform a management function and intermediate direction (such as managers, directors, coordinators, or supervisors) in public and private bureaucracies” (Lotta, Pires, & Oliveira, 2014, p. 465). These managers regulate interactions, manage gaps between rules and practices, influence decisions, and possess a combination of technical and managerial skills (Cavalcante, Lotta, & Yamada, 2018). These skills and attributions were deemed fundamental during crises such as the pandemic.

As decision-makers constantly faced the urgency imposed by the pandemic on public management and street-level employees, direct interlocutors with the population found themselves in situations that demanded discretion and reinterpretation of services provided. The article raises the question: What about the managers who work at the intermediate level? How did COVID-19 change their performance? The general objective of this work was to investigate how the mid-level bureaucracy developed strategies to carry out their activities during the pandemic crisis. We conducted a case study focusing on social assistance policies developed by the Municipal Secretariat of Social Assistance, Food Security, and Citizenship (SMASAC) of Belo Horizonte. The study seeks to contribute both to the theme of the pandemic in public administration and the understanding of this relatively unexplored group of bureaucrats in the literature.

The article is organized into five sections, including this introduction. The second section discusses the theoretical dimensions and defined analytical categories, followed by the

methodology in the third section. The fourth section delves into the discussion of the results. Finally, the study concludes with final considerations.

## **THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: THE LITERATURE ON MID-LEVEL BUREAUCRATS AND CRISES MANAGEMENT**

As previously mentioned, mid-level bureaucracy is not an extensively discussed topic in the literature. The initial investigations started with the recognition that studies on the public policy cycle were based on overly linear and rational models, prompting researchers to explore different theoretical approaches (Pereira, Lotta, & Bichir, 2018). As these studies progressed, it became apparent that the complexity of reality made it impractical to apply a one-size-fits-all linear model to analyze concrete situations. Consequently, the focus shifted toward understanding the actors involved in the formulation and implementation stages of these policies.

Bureaucrats constitute the permanent body of the state, not elected through popular vote, and play a central role in public affairs (Cavalcante & Lotta, 2015). Bureaucracy, in terms of the state, is considered an apparatus for enhancing performance and ensuring republican accountability (Abrucio & Loureiro, 2018). Among these actors, the mid-level bureaucracy (MLB) is a segment of intermediate-level managers, distinct from the so-called street-level bureaucracy, responsible for policy implementation, and the high-level bureaucracy, responsible for policy planning and design. Despite being crucial players, analyses of mid-level bureaucrats have been overshadowed by the traditional focus on high-level and street-level managers. Nonetheless, there are compelling reasons to turn attention to the MLB: the production process of public policies has grown more complex in recent decades, and managing more horizontal organizational structures demands new forms of knowledge and tools to reduce information asymmetries (Pires, 2018).

Occupying an ambiguous position, the MLB is characterized by the notion of *métier flou*, a paradoxical definition proposed by Jeannot (2005 as cited in Pires, 2018). They possess specific know-how and a sense of belonging to a group, yet they perform diverse activities in relatively ephemeral positions without formal prescriptions. Consequently, intermediate-level actors play a crucial role in discovering and shaping their methods of acting and influencing, relying on their understanding of the action system and the political-institutional context in which they operate.

Thus, these actors link policy formulation and implementation, making them key players in executing policies and maintaining the democratic system. They establish the connections between high-level authorities and policy executors (Cavalcante & Lotta, 2015), operating in a privileged intermediary space and performing coordination functions.

The literature analyzes MLB performance based on the combination of relational dynamics, modes of action, and influence exercised in the management context (Cavalcante et al., 2018). The relational dimension usually refers to the vertical and horizontal interactions promoted by the MLB or in which it is involved. The performance dimension involves many activities that blend technical, managerial, and political aspects. Lastly, the influence dimension seeks

to explain the MLB's role in decision-making, considering technical and specialized skills, management capacity, organizational structure position, and conflict levels with professionals responsible for daily operations.

This study drew upon crisis management literature to comprehend the development of the MLB's activities during the pandemic. Therefore, possibilities for action and integration of the mid-level bureaucrat could be delineated.

A crisis can be understood as a situation where a sense of urgency prevails due to rapid and drastic changes, making it impossible to predict ensuing events and their outcomes. Surprise characterizes the dynamics of a crisis, and urgency is a defining element. It can be a short chain of events significantly disrupting or weakening the balance and effectiveness of a system, occurring in days, weeks, hours, or years (Farazmand, 2017).

There is accumulated knowledge on emergencies such as earthquakes, hurricanes, volcanic eruptions, humanity crises, and natural or man-made disasters (Farazmand, 2017). A pandemic like COVID-19 fits this description.

According to Farazmand (2017), effective crisis management requires an accurate and timely diagnosis of problems' criticality and the dynamics of subsequent events. The author emphasizes that knowledge, skills, courageous leadership, risk-taking, vigilance, motivation, a sense of urgency, commitment, creative thinking with a long-term strategic vision, and attention to daily operational imperatives are essential. Managers must be willing to review established norms, culture, rules, and procedures that might hinder adaptation to change.

In public administration, it is vital to recognize that crises alter stable organizational behavior and centralize decision-making. The sense of urgency demands immediate attention, action, and reaction, testing the competency of governments, often organized based on a Weberian-type bureaucracy with rigid rules and procedures.

Henderson (2017) outlines key areas for policymakers and national and global bureaucracies committed to disaster reduction:

- Governance of organizational, legal, and political structures;
- Identification, assessment, monitoring, and early warning of risks;
- Knowledge management and education;
- Reduction of underlying risk factors;
- Preparation for effective response and recovery.
- The five points for improving crisis management proposed by Henderson are:
- Decentralization of mitigation and preparedness at the local level;
- Nationally aggregated response and recovery;
- Integration between crisis management and routine administration systems;
- Emergency management capacity as part of an overall administrative reform;
- Development of citizen capacity in crisis management.

According to Col and Chu (2017), successful crisis management involves public managers' planning, scientific knowledge and community involvement. When public administrators, scientists, and the population work harmoniously, the community's self-sufficiency, well-being, and future orientation are enhanced, increasing chances of survival and prosperity. A shared perception of imminent risk develops, and actors assume the responsibility and challenge of raising awareness of their environment, creating response plans to prepare the community for potential disasters and minimize economic impacts.

Stanley and Waugh (2017) emphasize that successful crisis managers demonstrate professionalism through coordination, knowledge, and commitment. Political acumen is also valuable, as governments tend to collaborate more with the private sector to optimize resource utilization in the community.

Crisis managers act as catalysts to eliminate inconsistencies between government agencies, working not in isolation but in coordination with all other departments and agencies in government. To be effective, emergency managers must understand the intergovernmental environments in which they operate, be proficient in available tools, and be aware of the hazards they may face. Political skills are of paramount importance to integrate emergency management into society effectively.

It is also worth mentioning that, according to Farazmand (2017), the transformation of social systems is subject to the cycle of chaos/disorder/order. Stability and balance carry potential forces of change and disturbance, leading to instability and disorder in the political, organizational, economic, and institutional systems. Therefore, the key for managers to understand and manage change is applying non-linear and multi-causal or non-causal thinking in organizations and social systems.

Based on the reviewed literature, it was possible to delineate the typical characteristics and competencies of the mid-level bureaucrat and those emerging in crisis contexts or that need reinforcement in such situations. Thus, the review culminated in defining two analytical categories and some variables, as follows:

- Performance of the mid-level bureaucracy: relational dynamics, performance (activities and technical, managerial, and political arrangements developed), and influence (decision-making, technical and specialized skills, management capacity).
- Institutional context: governance of organizational, political, and legal structures; mobilization of pre-existing capacities; involvement of the population and centrality in the agenda; diagnosis of criticality and dynamics of events; revision of norms, rules, culture, and procedures.

## METHODOLOGY

Given the contemporary nature of the COVID-19 pandemic and the outlined objectives, exploratory qualitative research was conducted through a case study to gain deeper insights into

the performance of mid-level bureaucrats in a crisis and emergency context, which is particularly relevant in a case such as this pandemic.

The operationalization of the case study followed the stages proposed by Toledo and Shiaishi (2009). Firstly, the case unit was delimited, focusing the research on the performance of mid-level bureaucrats in executing the assistance policies of the municipality of Belo Horizonte throughout 2020. The research employed a mainly qualitative approach involving theoretical review, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings.

With the research theme defined and the case unit delimited, bibliographical research was conducted, favoring two main literatures: mid-level bureaucracy and crisis management. The literature review extracted key ideas that contributed to defining the analytical categories, as explained in the previous section.

Recognizing the challenges of investigating an ongoing phenomenon like the COVID-19 pandemic is essential. The first difficulty lies in delimiting the time frame. Additionally, practical difficulties arise when conducting fieldwork. The research addresses the first challenge by focusing on 2020, the initial period of the pandemic, which allows an understanding of the impacts on the performance of the MLB during its most critical phase. A search was conducted on the Municipality of Belo Horizonte's website for secondary data to comprehend how the MLB acted during the defined time frame. The search included legislation, technical notes, reports on measures adopted, budget statements, and management balance sheets. This information served as supplementary material for analyzing the case.

Regarding the second limitation related to primary data collection, interviews, and questionnaires were conducted. The interviews took place between October 25 and December 1, 2021, with nine mid-level managers at SMASAC, including six directors, one chief advisor, and two central-level managers (as shown in Table 1), using the Zoom platform due to the COVID-19 pandemic's ongoing isolation scenario. Only one interview was conducted in person at the interviewee's request. The selection aimed to ensure representativeness across all areas of the secretariat, including managers from social services, food security, citizenship policies, administration, finance, and communication.

Table 1. Profile of the interviewed managers

INTERVIEWEE	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	AREA OF ACTIVITY	HOW LONG THE INTERVIEWEE OCCUPIED THE MANAGERIAL POSITION DURING THE 2017-2020 LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S TERM
A	Social service	Tenured, hired through examination	Social service	Three or four years
B	Law	Tenured, hired through examination	Food security	Three or four years

(continua)

(conclusão)

Table 1. Profile of the interviewed managers

INTERVIEWEE	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	AREA OF ACTIVITY	HOW LONG THE INTERVIEWEE OCCUPIED THE MANAGERIAL POSITION DURING THE 2017-2020 LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S TERM
C	Journalism	Politically appointed	Institutional activities	Two or three years
D	Public management	Politically appointed	Citizenship	Less than one year
E	Biology	Politically appointed	Food security	Three or four years
F	Administration	Tenured, hired through examination	Institutional activities	Three or four years
G	Administration	Tenured, hired through examination	Food security	Three or four years
H	Administration	Tenured, hired through examination	Institutional activities	Three or four years
I	Fashion design	Politically appointed	Citizenship	Three or four years

Source: Elaborated by the authors

Simultaneously, the questionnaire was administered during the same period, electronically using Google Docs. Thirteen mid-level bureaucrats in social service responded (as shown in Table 2). The interview script and questionnaire were developed based on the previously defined analytical categories.

Table 2. Profile of the managers who responded to the questionnaire

RESPONDENT	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	HOW LONG THE RESPONDENT OCCUPIED THE MANAGERIAL POSITION DURING THE 2017-2020 LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S TERM
1	Psychology	Politically appointed	Three or four years
2	Social Service	Tenured, hired through examination	One or two years
3	Social Service	Tenured, hired through examination	Three to four years
4	Psychology	Politically appointed	Three to four years

(continua)

(conclusão)

Table 2. Profile of the managers who responded to the questionnaire

RESPONDENT	EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND	EMPLOYMENT STATUS	HOW LONG THE RESPONDENT OCCUPIED THE MANAGERIAL POSITION DURING THE 2017-2020 LOCAL GOVERNMENT'S TERM
5	Social Sciences	Tenured, hired through examination	Three or four years
6	Psychology	Politically appointed	Less than one year
7	Social Service	Politically appointed	Three or four years
8	Psychology	Tenured, hired through examination	Three or four years
9	Psychology	Politically appointed	Less than one year
10	Psychology	Tenured, hired through examination	Three or four years
11	Social Service	Tenured, hired through examination	Three or four years
12	Social Service	Tenured, hired through examination	Three or four years
13	Psychology	Tenured, hired through examination	Two or three years

Source: Elaborated by the authors

It should be noted that despite the survey being conducted in 2021, the participating managers worked during the 2017-2020 administration. All respondents held their declared positions for nine to 12 months in 2020. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, most managers held their positions for almost the entire period from 2017 to 2020.

A qualitative approach was employed to analyze the collected data, supported by categorizing defined themes. The information gathered from interviews, questionnaires, and documentary research was systematized to facilitate the analysis of changes that occurred in 2020, focusing on the MLB's performance.

## RESULTS

The declaration of a public health emergency in March 2020 and a public calamity in April of the same year due to the COVID-19 pandemic brought significant changes to the planned activities of the Belo Horizonte City Hall for the last year of municipal management 2017-2020. Specific legislation on COVID-19, published in the Official Gazette of the Municipality in 2020, showed that the municipality had implemented comprehensive measures to prevent the virus's spread.

SMASAC is responsible for planning, coordinating, and executing municipal policies on social assistance and sustainable food and nutrition security, and coordinating activities related to the policy of guaranteeing equal rights and citizenship for the preservation, defense, and inclusion of individuals (Belo Horizonte, 2017). This led to the publication of ordinances introducing changes in its attributions.

When observing the performance of mid-level bureaucrats, the first analytical category of the study, it is clear that the crisis affected the activities developed, the decision-making processes, the interactions with other actors, and the required skills to fulfill the functions of these governmental actors.

In terms of relational dynamics, new partnerships were established. While some interviewees (A and G) noted improved internal dialogue due to strengthened cooperation, there were reports of worsened dialogue with external sectors outside the secretariat due to interrupted communication channels. However, this perception was not unanimous. Interviewee E, for example, reported that policies for supplying and promoting agroecology maintained dialogue with other secretariats, which was important for the continuity of uninterrupted actions and the gradual resumption of paralyzed activities. Regarding activities carried out and their arrangements, both the interviews and questionnaire responses pointed out remote work and new technologies and tools as two main changes since the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Interviewees C and E mentioned that the team had no experience with remote work. The online format led to more meetings than face-to-face, resulting in a more exhausting routine. Unlike face-to-face work, telework had no clear beginning and end points, with daily routines starting with the arrival of the first message and ending when the last one was answered. According to Cavalcante et al. (2018), the third dimension of bureaucrat performance involves the influence exercised in the context of management, encompassing decision-making, skills required for activities, and management capacity. In decision-making processes, perceptions showed at least three aspects: a sense of urgency guiding decisions, affected collegiate spaces, and decision concentration in higher instances.

Managers were demanded to offer quick responses, receiving calls or messages asking for immediate decisions. Therefore, the usual decision-making procedures, which encompassed deliberation and participation of policy councils, went through changes and were even interrupted. Among interviewees, only managers in the human rights area reported working closer to their teams and strengthening collegiate decision-making spaces to deal with themes with convergent subjects.

Averch and Sluhy (1985; 1997, as cited in Farazmand, 2017) note that crises drive the concentration of decisions at higher levels since lower levels of the bureaucracy may lack the necessary information or awareness of greater political or social constraints. Interviewee A's report supports this hypothesis, citing the discussion on the Belo Horizonte Aid program created by Municipal Law No. 2021 to support families in extreme poverty, poverty, and social insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic (Belo Horizonte, 2021) as an example of decisions heavily concentrated at the top.

Another change in decision-making was the need for mid-level bureaucrats to get involved with activities not previously developed. For instance, interviewee F mentioned situations in which they had to dialogue with external actors and represent the executive branch in making urgent decisions, which was unusual and affected the autonomy of these government managers. Negotiations with partner supermarket chains to distribute basic staples are examples of such situations.

*We had a job demand that needed a quick response, and we were given compatible work conditions – autonomy, a condition for dialogue, response, and decision-making – which perhaps in a normal process would not have been offered. So, at various times we went out to talk to suppliers or other direct and indirect [local government] agencies that were not part of our work process. This was given to us as a task, as attribution, and it was delegated, and this drastically changed our routine because, at times, we found ourselves alone in some urgent processes and decisions. At different times, we represent the city hall itself, for example, when we call supermarkets to dialogue [on the distribution of food staples]. It is something that would not be natural for this level of management. It was the main impact we suffered, and we had to adapt to this condition because this would be an important condition of this pandemic cycle (Interviewee F).*

However, in other situations, the change in bureaucrats' autonomy occurred in the opposite direction, as managers became more distant from decisions concentrated at the top, such as those related to the Belo Horizonte Aid institution. Thus, increased autonomy was not the norm for all MLB sectors and actors.

Most bureaucrats emphasized the need for new skills related to people management. The ability to welcome and show empathy was crucial to address the demands brought by the team due to the impacts of the pandemic on the lives of the beneficiary population of SMASAC services.

Regarding the institutional context, the second analytical category defined in the study, various issues were addressed in the interviews and the questionnaire, including the diagnosis of the situation, governance, mobilization of pre-existing capacities, revision of norms and procedures, involvement of the population, and centrality in the agenda.

In terms of budgetary aspects, the most significant increase in expenses of the agency occurred in actions created to face COVID-19, especially those aimed at emergency shelters for homeless people and other vulnerabilities, social assistance actions of the Protection in Situations of Public Disasters and Emergencies, reinforcement of health care for senior citizens, and food and nutritional security actions for public school students and the partner network for vulnerable families.

To implement such changes, SMASAC established new guidelines for the continuity of social assistance and food and nutrition security policies. Internally, a working group was set up to organize the gradual return to face-to-face work and the improvement of teleworking in the municipality's Unified Social Assistance System. Essential services had to run safely, with the department's units instructed to suspend collective activities and visits to units serving those at a higher risk from COVID-19. Furthermore, the permanence and agglomeration of people in

collective environments were restricted, and remote coexistence strategies, such as telephone contact, video calls, social networks, and emails, were developed.

Many managers had to rely on pre-existing knowledge to make immediate changes and guide teams during the initial moments when the new work guidelines were still unclear. The research participants highlighted skills and attitudes such as adaptation, teamwork, technical autonomy, flexibility, ability to deal with pressure, resilience, dialogue, and cooperation as pre-existing capabilities of the SMASAC team that were mobilized to address the crisis.

Mastery of technical-bureaucratic content was deemed essential for performing the manager's role. With the rapid transition from in-person to remote work format, the mastery of work processes became crucial to define new ways of conducting, supervising, and monitoring the progress of activities.

The accurate and timely diagnosis of the situation contributed to the effectiveness of the crisis response and MLB performance, which plays a crucial role in discovering and building its forms of action and influence through its reading of the system of action and the political-institutional context in which it operates (Pires, 2018). This accurate reading of the context was evident in the speech of interviewee B:

*I was not as attentive to the [Official Gazette of the Municipality] DOM as I am today. I followed the news from the newspaper through the SMASAC news clipping. Not now, my whole team follows it. [...] For example, when fuel [prices] increased too much, I already thought: "Oops! There may be a truckers strike again. If there is a truck drivers strike, how are we going to supply the restaurant?" So we are thinking ahead. [...] I'm going to commit [the resource for payment of] what can be stored now because I won't be sold if there's a strike in 15 days or a month. So this issue of monitoring everything increased with the pandemic. (Interviewee B)*

In the successful experiences highlighted in the literature, citizens were present not only in the knowledge of situations involving the crisis but also felt empowered to act in the context of the crisis (Col & Chu, 2017). However, in the evaluation of almost all managers who contributed to the research, there was an increase in the vulnerability of the public served by the secretariat, which affected their ability to participate, as reported by interviewee I:

*People called me at dawn, wanting to know about the food staples because, initially, the system faced many obstacles. [...] It was all very fast. Belo Horizonte acted very quickly, and traditional peoples and communities are a priority public for this food security action. [...] There were lists and lists [of beneficiaries] arriving, and we had to do the verification ourselves. [...] Only two people were working, and we put almost 2,000 people [in the system] alone. We answered people on cell phones, on WhatsApp, and my number, which was already known, became even better known. I received calls at 1 am. People were so desperate and fragile that they didn't think this was not the right time to call someone (Interviewee I).*

The excerpt demonstrates that, as pointed out by Interviewee D, digital exclusion is evident. It results from the population's vulnerability and hinders access to public services. For example, people in severe need and entitled to food staples experienced many difficulties accessing the registration

system and receiving the benefit. Against this backdrop, it is worth asking how a relationship can be established in which citizen-users are active subjects of measures to face the crisis.

In summary, it was possible to observe that, due to the pandemic, SMASAC concentrated efforts and resources on emergency food provision and social protection actions, especially those aimed at the most vulnerable public. Despite noting a few changes in the programmatic structure of the budget, the crisis imposed the creation of specific actions to face COVID-19 and the reallocation of resources for these actions. In the face of the new demands generated by the pandemic, these alterations directly affected the performance of mid-level bureaucrats, altering relational, performance, and influence dynamics.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research aimed to understand the strategies developed by the mid-level bureaucracy to function during a pandemic crisis. Two analytical categories were used to comprehend and systematize the changes and strategies implemented: the performance of the mid-level bureaucracy and the institutional context. In summary, changes were observed in the relational, performance, and influence dynamics of the MLB, and organizational adaptations were made to ensure emergency food provision and social protection for the most vulnerable, which became central objectives for SMASAC during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In general terms, the study confirms aspects addressed in the existing literature on crisis management. The sense of urgency and unpredictability of events and outcomes (Farazmand, 2017) remained evident in the research and significantly impacted the new work context.

Regarding the performance of the MLB, as perceived by the managers, the crisis affected the work regime, decision-making processes, interactions with other actors, and the required skills for their functions. In relational dynamics, the crisis brought about changes in established partnerships, with some continuing, others being interrupted, and even new ones being formed. It is worth noting that, in some cases, mid-level bureaucrats had to extend their roles beyond the back office of public administration and engage in dialogues with external actors, something previously reserved for high-level bureaucrats.

Regarding MLB's performance, managers appeared to play the role of catalyst, as pointed out by Stanley and Waugh (2017). Their focus was on eliminating inconsistencies between new rules and team practices. This action, characteristic of the mid-level, links high-level guidelines to the operationalization of public policies by the street-level bureaucracy. In the context of COVID-19, where urgency and unpredictability were prevalent, this interlocution seemed even more critical to ensuring the continuity of SMASAC's programs and services. The MLB adopted strategies such as using existing knowledge to make immediate changes and guide teams when new work guidelines were unclear. Additionally, they developed skills such as adaptation, teamwork, technical autonomy, flexibility, ability to handle pressure, resilience, dialogue, and cooperation. Accurate and timely diagnosis of situations also contributed to developing new forms of action and influence.

The study also revealed that, during crises, the MLB tends to focus on coordination and mobilization actions. Being somewhat shielded from the urgency faced by frontline and high-level actors, the MLB concentrates on vital actions and processes to restore the functioning of policies.

Regarding the institutional context, the crisis affected the capacity of public administration to respond to challenges. Initially, the service capacity dropped due to the struggle to adapt to telework, but internal reorganization allowed public policy to be redirected. The research demonstrated how internal changes in the modus operandi of provision contributed to changes in service delivery and highlighted the MLB's role in ensuring service resilience in this context.

Existing literature on crisis management suggests that successful management involves developing citizens' capacity and actively involving them as strategic actors (Col & Chu, 2017; Henderson, 2017). For the public assisted by SMASAC, their vulnerability raised questions about establishing a relationship where citizen-users actively participated in facing the crisis, an aspect worth exploring in future research along with people's resilience.

The study's focus on the pandemic and its impact on intermediate-level managers of assistance policies in Belo Horizonte contributed to understanding a critical area of public policies that guarantee minimum survival conditions for a significant portion of the Brazilian population, especially during times of crisis that exacerbate social inequality.

Furthermore, the research provided an integration of theoretical perspectives on MLB and crisis management. It is expected that the woven considerations will contribute to a deeper understanding of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on MLB's performance and, consequently, the performance of public authorities in this regard.

However, it is essential to acknowledge that the perceptions captured are from a limited group of mid-level managers responsible for a specific municipal public policy sector. Due to the exploratory nature of the research, its findings cannot be generalized. Therefore, further studies focusing on MLB in other sectors and policies during the pandemic are crucial for advancing knowledge on this subject. It is hoped that the presented considerations will contribute to this objective and help uncover aspects of the performance of intermediate-level bureaucrats and, consequently, the back office of municipal management during atypical situations.

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## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

The authors declare no conflict of interest

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTION**

Flávia Alves Guimarães: Project administration; formal analysis; conceptualization; writing (first draft); research; methodology.

Letícia Godinho de Souza: Writing (revision and edition); supervision.

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