

# Management of food security actions during the COVID-19 pandemic

Fábio Resende de Araújo <sup>1</sup>

Dinara Leslye Macedo e Silva Calazans <sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte / Departamento de Administração Pública e Gestão social, Programa de pós-graduação em Gestão Pública, Natal / RN – Brazil

<sup>2</sup> Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Norte / Departamento de Ciências Administrativas, Programa de pós-graduação em Gestão Pública, Natal / RN – Brazil

This article aims to analyze the intervention strategies adopted by public management during the COVID-19 pandemic to reduce food insecurity, based on a case study in the Brazilian state of Rio Grande do Norte. The study used a qualitative approach based on Program Theory and the multiple streams model to analyze the actions. In the state, the pandemic brought a window of opportunity, showing the importance of public policy in the government agenda, such as the program “Restaurante Popular,” which offers low-cost meals, and favors quick response and adequacy of means of implementation. The study highlights best practices, inspiring actions all over the country.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; state governments; social politics; food and nutrition security.

## Gestão das ações de segurança alimentar frente à pandemia pela COVID-19

O presente artigo tem como objetivo analisar as estratégias de intervenção adotadas pela gestão pública frente à crise desencadeada pela COVID-19 para redução da insegurança alimentar, baseado em um estudo de caso no Rio Grande do Norte. Com abordagem qualitativa, foram utilizadas a Teoria do Programa e a abordagem dos múltiplos fluxos para análise das ações emergenciais. No estado, a pandemia confluía para uma janela de oportunidade, evidenciando o papel importante das Políticas Públicas na agenda governamental, como o Programa Restaurante Popular, e favorecendo a elaboração de respostas rápidas e de medidas de adequação na implementação da política. Conclui-se, neste estudo, que esta pode ser considerada uma boa prática e que ela pode servir de referência a outras ações semelhantes pelo país.

**Palavras-chave:** COVID-19; governos estaduais; políticas sociais; segurança alimentar e nutricional.

## Gestión de acciones de seguridad alimentaria frente a la pandemia de COVID-19

Este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las estrategias de intervención adoptadas por la administración pública frente a la crisis desencadenada por la COVID-19 para reducir la inseguridad alimentaria, con base en un estudio de caso en Río Grande do Norte. Con un enfoque cualitativo, se utilizaron la teoría del programa y el enfoque de múltiples flujos para el análisis de acciones de emergencia. En el estado, la pandemia se convirtió en una ventana de oportunidad, destacando el importante papel de las políticas públicas en la agenda gubernamental, como el Programa Restaurante Popular, y favoreciendo la elaboración de respuestas rápidas y de medidas de adecuación en la implementación de las políticas. Se concluye que esta puede ser una buena práctica y que puede ser una referencia para otras acciones similares en todo el país.

**Palabras clave:** COVID-19; gobiernos estatales; políticas sociales; seguridad alimentaria y nutricional.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the beginning of 2020, the World Health Organization declared a public health emergency of the highest level due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Given the risk of its large-scale dissemination, governments needed to take coordinated strategic actions to mitigate contamination by this virus (Crodal et al., 2020). By March, COVID-19 was characterized as a pandemic, with its origin and final extension as well as the discovery of vaccines and antiviral treatments still unknown (Chen et al., 2020).

Projections based on the first cases made by Imperial College London (Ferguson, Laydon, & Nedjati-Gilani, 2020), indicated that non-pharmaceutical interventions could be adopted to reduce its infection rate among the population in order to avoid the collapse of health systems. To achieve this, the practice of social isolation was adopted in various countries, paralyzing non-essential activities leading to significant social and economic costs which affected above all the socially vulnerable population. As protective and recuperative health measures were taken by governments, strategic decisions and alternatives were urged to guarantee the food security of the most vulnerable population.

In Brazil, the provisions for the social effects due to this calamitous situation, principally for the most economically vulnerable, reflect the profound social inequality in this country and highlight the important role of public policies in the strengthening of food security as a central element of social security. In this sense, understanding how food access programs respond to the pressures imposed by the COVID-19 crisis in the implementation of actions to meet the needs of the population most vulnerable to the pandemic is highly relevant to public administration and is summarized in this work through a study of the operationalization of the People's Restaurant Program (PRP) of Rio Grande do Norte (RN).

Moreover, the PRP, examined in this study, is a policy made viable by outsourcing to nine meal suppliers, monitored by state planning, which operates in a decentralized fashion in 56 units within 34 municipalities. The manner in which this program in Rio Grande do Norte presents particularities in its implementation presents us with a practical example of how articulations between the public and private sector can be fundamental in this period of great food insecurity, providing us with a learning experience in face of the COVID-19 crisis.

This study seeks to analyze the strategies implemented to face this crisis on the state level within the context of the People's Restaurant Program. To achieve our overall goal, we seek specific objectives within the context of Rio Grande do Norte: 1) understanding the institutional arrangement of the public installation network of the PRP and 2) analyzing the implementation of actions to combat COVID-19 in the PRP.

To understand how actions were adapted to face the COVID-19 pandemic, the program was analyzed based on the concepts of Program Theory to understand the implementation elements in analyzing actions in an *in itinere* evaluation through Kingdon's (1984) multiple streams approach. We focused on the planning, coordination, operationalization, and target public dimensions to analyze the program's institutional arrangement. In each category we identified the subjects and how they organized themselves in the program's implementation. The analytical categories for the

program actions to confront the pandemic were problems, emergency planning, strategic priorities, operational support, the actions/causes matrix, monitoring and evaluation. The empirical evidence was extracted from normative decrees linked to the program published in the State's Official Diary about public administration deliberations concerning measures to combat COVID-19 within these inexpensive restaurants. We consulted tactical and operational level managers of the program to clarify and elucidate the facts described in the documents.

Therefore, this article presents a summary of the scenario of social vulnerability in Brazil, with the identification of problem flows, solutions and political pressures in Kingdon's approach, and their aggravation during the COVID-19 crisis, and then discusses the importance of the public policies of Food and Nutrition Security (SAN) as a combat measure from the perspective of the People's Restaurant Program in Rio Grande do Norte. The study highlights the main actions taken by public administration and the managerial instruments adopted, as well as the challenges posed by time pressure for responses in the face of the new coronavirus crisis.

## 2. COVID-19 AND THE SCENARIO OF SOCIAL VULNERABILITY IN BRAZIL

In Brazil, COVID-19 was characterized as a national public health emergency in February by Law no. 13,979/2020, whose regulation and operationalization are governed by Decree no. 356 (2020), which covers social isolation and quarantine measures. The Federal Congress (Decree no. 6, 2020), recognizing the state of public calamity in Brazil, required the State, based on its infrastructure and local characteristics, to strategically intervene in actions to confront the disease in its territories.

Within this context, the challenge facing governments is to reconcile actions dealing with health, the economy and social actions (Hafiz, Oei, Ring, & Shnitser, 2020). The precarious situation of the population with subsistence income, which is the most affected by this paralyzation of activities, requires crucial social protection measures, of which those concerning food are the immediate subject of this study.

The Human Right to Adequate Food (DHAA) foreseen in the Brazilian Federal Constitution, was embodied by the Food and Nutrition Security System (SISAN), instituted by Law 11,346 (2006). Constitutional Amendment 95 establishes a new fiscal regime in Brazil, instituting a ceiling for primary expenses which deals with net revenues, adjusting for 20 years of inflation. The measure has changed the size of the State, decreasing *per capita* spending on social policies with repercussions for the finances of the public policies of Food and Nutrition Security (SAN) and the effective implementation of the DHAA (Rossi & Dweck, 2016; Santarelli, David, Burity, & Rocha, 2019).

This weakening of the assistance network combined with recent austerity measures (Labor Reform of 2017 and the Retirement Reform of 2019), which though they have been passed mainly in the name of fighting fiscal imbalances and economic growth, have not resulted in an increase in Brazilian employment in recent years (Galvão, Castro, Krein, & Teixeira, 2019; Lobato, Costa, & Rizzotto, 2019). On the contrary, the number of unemployed and informal workers has grown (Passos & Lupatini, 2020).

In the middle of an increase in unemployment, a decrease in social protection, and greater potential for social inequality, the coronavirus has arrived in Brazil, making public planning more complex in

light of the crisis already underway. To Trevisan and Bellen (2008) public managers have limitations in making decisions and positioning institutions strategically in the midst of new events of this type, even if the change occurs within the organization itself. Matus (1991), in addressing Situational Strategic Planning, indicates that traditional models of planning do not consider uncertainty and sustaining governability during processes of change.

The difficulty becomes clear when one tries to resolve problems without clear explanations in the middle of a game in which those who govern cannot be sure of the results of their actions, and depend on factors which by their nature are out of their control in solving complex problems (Matus, 1991). Relating intention and realization can contribute to an evaluation of the effectiveness of actions in relation to the complexity of the intervention (Brousselle, Champagne, Contandriopolos, & Hartz, 2016; Jannuzzi, 2014). Actions related to COVID-19 require coordination between various actors: governmental and non-governmental entities, central and subnational governments, and public and private institutions. This is therefore characterized by inter-sectoral relationships which have systemic repercussions.

Driven by the crisis, the pandemic has imposed a reordering of the government's agenda, requiring decisive actions in the midst of various flows of problems and alternatives, which reconcile these possibilities with various political interests in a process of mutual adjustment (Capella, 2007; Secchi, 2012).

In the Northeast, the Interstate Sustainable Development Consortium (Consórcio Nordeste), consolidated as a public management mechanism has become stronger during the COVID-19 scenario due to its cooperation between state governments and the adoption of common strategies in this battle, based on the understanding of the gravity of the moment and the motto “[...] the most important decision is to take care of the lives of people” (Letter from the Governors of the Northeast, 2020, p. 1).

In order to get the poorest part of the population to adhere to distancing measures, it has been necessary to prioritize social protection actions, as a way to soften the financial shocks which have diminished the income of these individuals. The readaptation and the broadening of emergency policies for immediate access to basic needs, which includes the food and nutrition security policies in states and municipalities, has imposed itself as an alternative capable of mitigating the negative effects of the pandemic.

### **3. PUBLIC FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY POLICY AS A MEASURE TO COMBAT THE CRISIS: THE CASE OF RIO GRANDE DO NORTE**

In Rio Grande do Norte, the People's Restaurant Program (PRP), implemented in 2002, is one of the public policy strategies to combat poverty and guarantee the DHAA in the state. The relevance of the program is perceived in a clear manner, because it is part of the strategic axis of the 2020-2023 Multiyear Plan, which figures among the main goals of the State Secretariat of Labor, Housing and Social Assistance (SETHAS) – the managerial body of Social Assistance Policy within the Unified System of Social Assistance (SUAS). The consistent place of Food Security on the agenda of the government of Rio Grande do Norte indicates the state's leading role in the small area open to this subject on the federal level.

The PRP participates in the Food and Nutrition Security System (SISAN) through a network of Public Installations (EP) which provide meals to the socially vulnerable population subsidized mainly by the government and symbolically by the population. Its operationalization is decentralized in 56 units in 34 municipalities managed by nine outsourced companies. Each company has autonomy in the buying of its supplies and the personal management of these installations according to the contractual requirements of the program. This action is the responsibility of the Coordinating Body for Social Development (CODES) on a central level, with the outsourced companies in each municipality being co-responsible for the execution of the program. CODES monitors and evaluates the policy which includes unit inspections. In terms of the social control of the PRP, this is frequently performed by the State Council for Food and Nutrition Security (CONSEA) which includes the program in its meetings and actions.

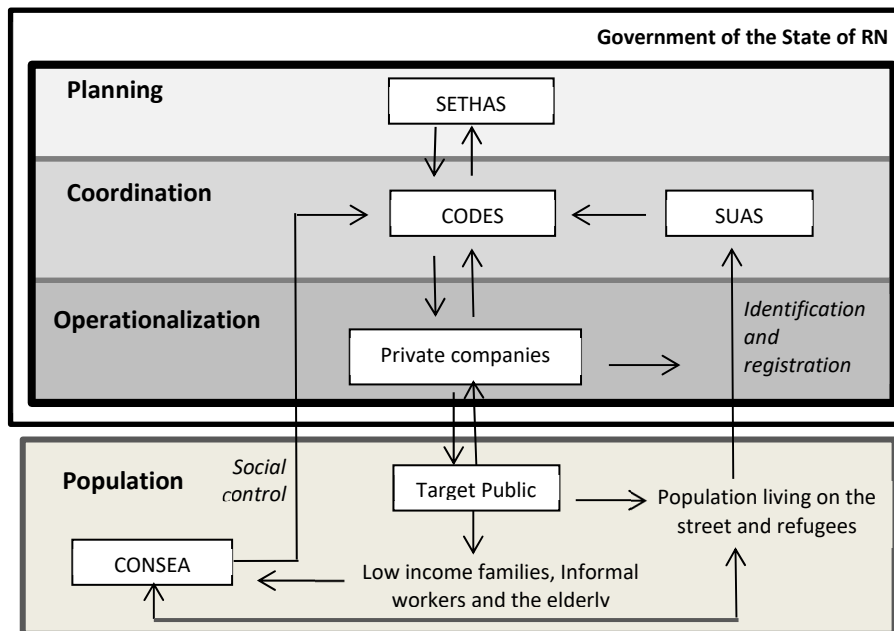
The state of Rio Grande do Norte, through State Decree no. 29,524 (2020), regulates temporary measures of social distancing to confront the emergency situation caused by COVID-19, and prohibits certain activities such as operating restaurants. The public installations which serve the PRP and 42 thousand people daily, had to adapt their functional structure due to the imminent risks of contagion in the application of this policy.

With the coming of the pandemic, issues related to food insecurity were debated, which constituted an opportunity to legitimize the importance of social programs as well as the need to strengthen them. Kingdon (1984), in the multiple streams model, considers moments of crisis to be “windows of opportunity” which are expressed by the convergence of streams. In this case, we may perceive that the problem (pandemic, unemployment and food insecurity among the most poor), solution (need for isolation measures and social policies to diminish the impact of the crisis), and political tension (national mood influenced by pressure groups representing various actors) streams converged leading to the recognition of the relevance of this moment.

The PRP, consolidated within the state public agenda of Rio Grande do Norte, adapted itself to these circumstances weighing technical viability, tolerable costs and protection measures against COVID-19 to continue to meet the needs of its beneficiaries during the crisis. Measures were taken along three axes: a) deliberative and decision making, with the publication of intentions by SETHAS/RN through normative regulations; b) managerial, for the eligibility of the beneficiary population determined by the government, whose actions are managed by CODES with help from SUAS; and c) operational, with the hiring through bidding of private companies specialized in collective food management, keeping in mind the supplying of meals, with specific targets for attendance in each installation.

The program counted on the existing institutional arrangement (Figure 1) and emphasized the definition of priorities to reduce the population’s food insecurity and social vulnerability during this period.

**FIGURE 1** INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENT OF THE PUBLIC INSTALLATION NETWORK AND THE FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY PROGRAM IN RIO GRANDE DO NORTE



Source: Research data (2020).

Given the technical specifications of the production and distribution of meals, it was possible to give more discretion to managers in the implementation during this adverse scenario. To define the priorities and analyze their budgetary impact, a strategy was defined to assure access, guarantee supply and maintain the quality of the program’s meals during the crisis, considering the practical difficulties and solutions already known by the operators. The managers on the tactical level had to deal with the compatibility of what was recommended and what was possible, because it is on this level of action in the implementation, in which, according to Secchi (2012, p. 46) “intentions are transformed into concrete actions.”

The tendency for the size of the beneficiary population to increase was discussed, given the expected effects, such as a decrease in income and greater unemployment, however budgetary restrictions were imposed. The meal targets for each installation with the companies could not be renegotiated due to the bureaucratic nature of the bidding contracts, and thus the original contracts were maintained. However, the identification of people living on the street was redefined as an eligibility criterion exempt from paying the value of the meal. The technical board of the SUAS articulated with community and social control associations to map and register these people in various municipalities: since it was not possible to measure ahead of time the number of people to be served, a system of control was required along with a restructuring of the public funds already invested in the program.

CODES considered the human, material, financial and organizational support necessary for the development of the actions to be performed by the companies within the local management of the installations during the change in the operational dynamics of the program, which included the

management of information. Thus, a communications plan was established for the various interested parties (Hafiz et al., 2020; Jannuzzi, 2014), which sought to provide transparency to these processes and the responsibilities of the actors involved, contributing to the people's adherence to necessary measures (Crodal et al., 2020; Wilder-Smith & Freedman, 2020).

On one hand, companies were notified through circulars about the necessary changes and the need to comply with the new rules (Circular no. 3/2020/SETHAS). On the other hand, users received this information through the state government's social networks, with support from the communications board, as well as reports on network television. The local team in each restaurant informed the public of the new meal service conditions in the installations through radio programs and traveling loudspeakers, among other methods. All the determinations emitted by SETHAS directed towards users and the management companies were forwarded to CONSEA, in order to publish this information, support the identification of groups in vulnerable situations, and exercise social control to guarantee the DHAA.

To implement the aspects of an operational nature, they developed a public-private partnership that went beyond current contractual issues, and required investment from extraordinary private resources as well as the involvement of employees and the standardization of the services offered by these nine companies to the population under their current contracts. The need to rely on trust given the impossibility of effective supervision *in loco* constituted another challenge, counting on the support of instances of social control. The customer service channel remained active to receive complaints and information, and it was also used to clear up the doubts of the population.

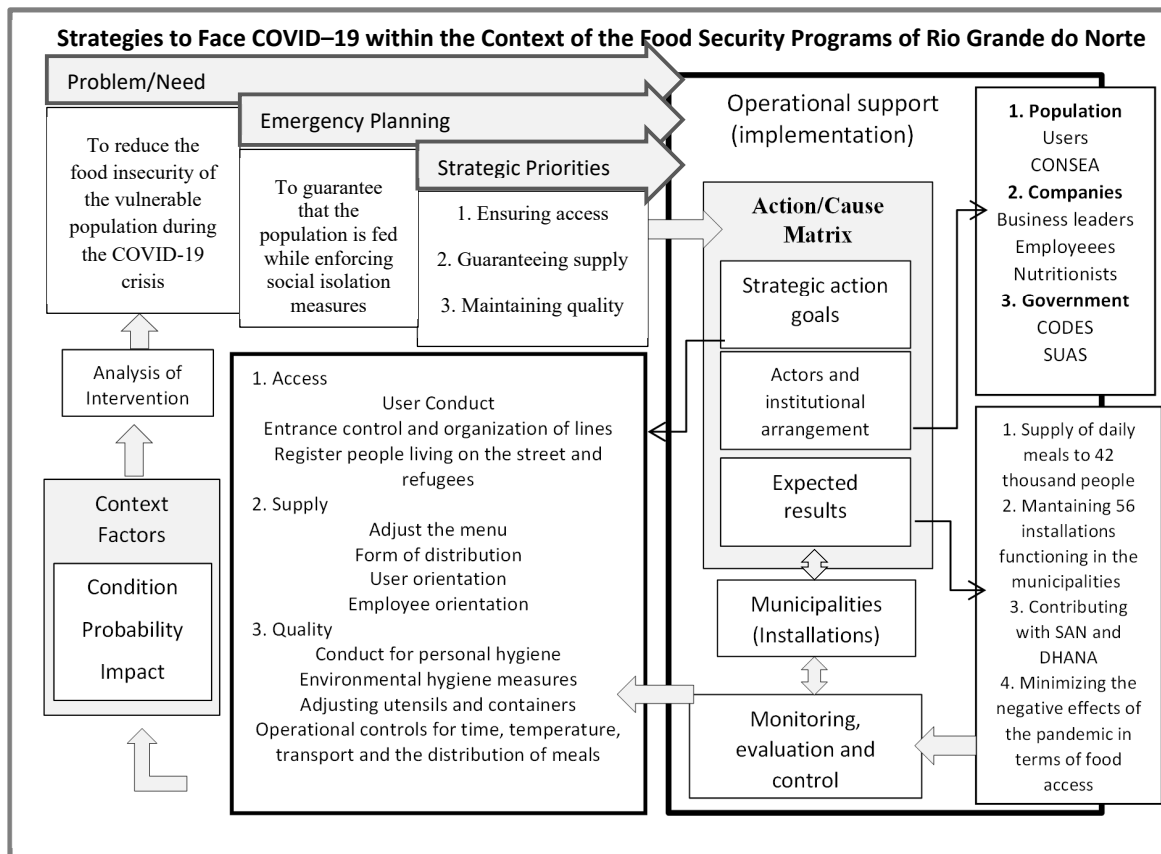
In this sense, the decisions taken by the public administration treated the process of "[...] implementation as a political arena with reciprocal relationships [...]" (Mota, 2020, p. 138), highlighting the importance of the coordination of the flow of management actions governing food security in the face of COVID-19 (Figure 2).

To ensure access to food, the utilization of the public installations in each municipality to supply meals was established, with an adjustment in hours and the application of measures to minimize the propagation of the virus. The orientation of the users on the premises in terms of prevention measures was the responsibility of the companies (Circular no. 3/2020/SETHAS).

In terms of guaranteeing the supply of food, the form of meal distribution was altered: meals were prohibited from being prepared in the restaurant and entrance control was performed in their interiors for distribution to appropriate containers with consumption far from gatherings and the circulation of people. The menus were adapted to the new reality of consumption, opting for preparations with less risk of provoking food outbreaks. The adjusted quantity of the meals was redefined in accordance with nutritional planning.

To maintain the quality of the meals, from a sanitary aspect, a packaged meal was adopted with discardable utensils as described by Abranches, Oliveira, and Santos (2020) in relation to contamination by SARS-CoV-2 due to surface contact with utensils. Environmental and personal hygienic measures were increased, emphasizing the fulfillment of adequate conditions in terms of time and temperature in the transport and exposition of food (RDC no. 216, 2004). In this sense, the assembling and distribution of meals has to be concomitant, based on the time that the restaurant opens.

**FIGURE 2** IMPLEMENTATION OF ACTIONS TO FACE COVID-19 IN THE FOOD SECURITY PROGRAM OF RIO GRANDE DO NORTE (2020)



Source: Research data (2020).

In the monitoring of the program, the emphasis is on the need for corrective actions to meet established targets, which has proven to be appropriate for short-term results (Jannuzzi, 2014). Performance criteria, important for the fulfilling of the contract requirements for outsourced public administration services (Marinho, Andrade, Marinho, & Mota, 2018), which are normally used, have been restricted to the accompaniment of emergency measures imposed by the circumstances and the expected products of these actions: maintaining the public installations open to the target public and achieving the daily meal targets. That being so, possible situations of the invalidity of programmed actions should be considered (Matus, 1991) which may lead to contexts of inconsistencies, shortages, or waste in the actions taken to meet each target.

The real access of the population which did not need to pay for the meals, could have added private interests, with exaggeration due to the low level of control, since it was not possible to also verify their impact on the fulfilling of fiscal and budgetary legislation. It is not possible to ignore the increases in operational costs for these companies, mainly due to the discardable utensils, which could be putting some pressure on the proper functioning of the public installations.



Considering that the negative effects of the absence of systematic supervision, despite their relevant impacts are unlikely to occur as well as the ending of contracts, the application of penalties or the closing of restaurants, could exercise some degree of coercion on supply companies (Casula, 2017). In fact, the norms elaborated by the regulators in terms of supply company behavior, contributed to the good governance of the endeavor as a whole.

It is possible that the distancing measures to avoid gatherings have not been sufficiently observed by the local teams. In this case, the normative acts directed at companies are to be intensified as well as the means of communication, awareness and collaboration needed on the part of users.

In relation to the achieving of quality targets, the announced changes in the menu, meal transport, and orientations in terms of the later consumption were considered sufficient. Likewise, when an employee presents symptoms of contamination or establishes contact with a suspected infected individual, provisions have been made for the company to substitute the agent (Abranches et al., 2020), keeping the team with a sufficient number of people to produce and supply the meals.

We may conclude that all of the emergency actions demand a continual relationship strategy between the public and private environments requiring support from private investors for the actions taken to mitigate the negative effects of the current situation.

#### **4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS**

The intervention performed by the state of Rio Grande do Norte to confront the spread of COVID-19, through the Food and Nutrition Security Program from an “action” perspective, has contributed to the assertiveness of the managerial instruments used, producing efficiency in keeping with the scale and complexity of the strategies prioritized in the face of the operational challenges posed by sudden execution.

The internal structural capacity of the PRP in municipalities and the already consolidated communication between the actors involved before the crisis, has favored the taking of action in this scenario, giving agility to the state bureaucracy involved.

This also highlights paradoxically a positive aspect of the pandemic as a window of opportunity in maintaining the elevated importance of food access programs developed by the public sector, encouraging the public and academic debates necessary to legitimizing social policies in Brazil, and encouraging private organizations to adopt joint measures with the public sector. Maybe the experience which has served as the object of this study can serve as a reference for similar actions throughout this country.

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### Fábio Resende de Araújo



<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8268-0078>

Ph.D. in Administration and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Public Administration and Social Management in the Graduate Public Management Program at UFRN. E-mail: [fabio.resende@ufrn.edu.br](mailto:fabio.resende@ufrn.edu.br)

### Dinara Leslye Macedo e Silva Calazans



<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4884-8599>

Ph.D. in Administration and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Administrative Sciences in the Graduate Public Management Program at UFRN. E-mail: [dinaraleslye@yahoo.com.br](mailto:dinaraleslye@yahoo.com.br)