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The complex governance of the 2030 Agenda and the steering effects of implementing the SDGs in Brazil (2015-2022)¹

*A governança complexa da Agenda 2030
e os efeitos-indutores da implementação
dos ODS no Brasil (2015-2022)*

*La gobernanza compleja de la Agenda
2030 y los efectos inductores de la
implementación de los ODS en Brasil
(2015-2022)*

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Thiago Gehre Galvão²
Rodrigo Correa Ramiro³

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Abstract

The 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were conceived to politically guide countries according to their interests. The implementation of this agenda in Brazil has oscillated between governance without government and complex governance with a social dimension. Based on a qualitative-interpretative approach, Brazil's adherence to the 2030 Agenda is discussed

1 Views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the text belong solely to the authors, and not necessarily to the author's current employer.

2 Doutor em Relações Internacionais pela Universidade de Brasília — UNB. Professor vinculado ao Instituto de Relações Internacionais da Universidade de Brasília e pesquisador associado do Earth System Governance Research Centre Brasília. (gehre.unb@gmail.com). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9951-288X>.

3 Doutorando em Relações Internacionais pelo PPG-IREL da Universidade de Brasília. Earth System Governance Research Centre Brasília.

(rodrigo.ramiro@gmail.com). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2274-8207>.

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in a polycentric and socially based process. The results indicate the role of the SDGs in guiding local discussions and actions, promoting institutional integration, the formation of an innovative network and an architecture of social governance of local governments and non-state actors.

Keywords: 2030 Agenda; Sustainable Development Goals — SDGs; Governance through Global Goals; Local and Regional Governments (LRGs); Voluntary Local Reviews (VLRs); Civil Society Organizations; Brazil.

Resumo

Agenda 2030 e os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS) foram desenhados para orientar politicamente países de acordo com a realidade local. A implementação desta agenda no Brasil oscilou entre a governança sem governo e a governança complexa com matiz social. A partir de abordagem qualitativo-interpretativa, discute-se a adesão do Brasil à Agenda 2030 em um processo policêntrico e de base social. Os resultados indicam o papel dos ODS em guiar discussões e ações locais, promovendo integração institucional, formação de uma rede inovadora e uma arquitetura de governança social de governos locais e atores não estatais.

Palavras-chave: Agenda 2030; Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável — ODS; Governança por meio de Objetivos Globais; Governos Locais e Regionais (LRGs); Relatórios Locais Voluntários (VLRs); Organizações da Sociedade Civil; Brasil.

Resumen

La Agenda 2030 y los Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible (ODS) fueron concebidos para orientar políticamente a los países de acuerdo con sus intereses. La implementación de esta agenda en Brasil ha oscilado entre gobernabilidad sin gobierno y gobernabilidad compleja con dimensión social. Un enfoque cualitativo-interpretativo discute la adhesión de Brasil a la Agenda 2030 en un proceso policéntrico y de base social. Los resultados indican el papel de los ODS en orientar las acciones locales, promoviendo la integración institucional, la formación de una red innovadora y una arquitectura de gobernanza social de los gobiernos locales y actores no estatales.

Palabras-clave: Agenda 2030; Objetivos de Desarrollo Sostenible — ODS; Gobernanza a través de Objetivos Globales; Gobiernos Locales y Regionales (GLR); Relatorios Locales Voluntarios (VLR); Organizaciones de la sociedad civil; Brasil.





Introduction

Brazilian experiences in implementing the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can help us understand the theoretical and practical elements of political mobilization, the social engagement of actors and resources, the building of flexible institutional arrangements and the processes of the internalization of global norms in the domestic sphere.

The central argument of this article is that Brazil has transitioned from governance without government for the 2030 Agenda to a complex governance design that implements the SDGs based on social aspects. This article presents an overview of Brazilian initiatives at the national level with a focus on strategic adherence to the international order based on the 2030 Agenda. It connects theoretical and conceptual elements to understand the Brazilian journey to engage in the governance of the SDGs, focusing on the role of the National Commission for the SDGs (CNODES), based on the experience of the Multiannual Plan with the SDGs and on Brazilian initiatives in building and adapting targets and indicators in the 2030 Agenda. Next, we highlight the institutional adjustments that took place to implement the SDGs in Brazil, correlating the process of incorporation in (i) Judiciary and Legislative initiatives, (ii) the articulations of civil society organizations, and (iii) the official monitoring of the SDGs in Brazil. Finally, we discuss how Brazilian local governments incorporate the SDGs, analysing the concept of incorporating them into political practice and evaluating the Voluntary Local Reviews (VLR) presented at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF).

This article is methodologically based on a critical analysis of extensive academic literature on the implementation of the SDGs, theoretical studies on governance and public policy, and primary sources on legislation from the three levels of government and documents from the three branches. Through a qualitative content analysis, we analyse mechanisms and processes that forge Brazilian experiences, of state and non-state actors, in the 2030 Agenda. To this end, the academic literature on the 2030 Agenda was comprehensively reviewed. Particularly its implementation in countries in the Global South and official reports and documents on the implementation of the SDGs. In this last group, the following stand out: the documents prepared within the scope of the National SDG Commission and governmental institutions such as the Ministry of Planning, Institute of Applied Economic Research (Ipea), and the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE), in addition to the National and Local Voluntary





Reports, presented at the United Nations High Level Political Forum. The Spotlight Reports, produced by the Civil Society Working Group for the SDGs, are also worth mentioning. The review of the literature and documents was supplemented by semi-structured interviews with key actors, state and non-state, and analysis of public policies, national and local development plans, legislation, political speeches, and relevant news. The critical review of the literature, documentary investigation, and information extracted from the interviews formed the basis for analysing the Brazilian experience in governance and implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

A summary of the results highlight the following: (i) the impacts of political fragmentation around the governance of the 2030 Agenda in Brazil, without a National Commission to coordinate the implementation of the SDGs; (ii) the importance of the steering effects of the SDGs to redefine priorities of public policy, redirect the agency and rebuild structures as an innovative network, and (iii) the constitution of the architecture of social governance guided by local governments, parliaments, and civil society actors. In this context, non-state actors, mainly local and regional governments, and CSOs, have developed territorialization measures autonomously and implemented the SDGs in opposition to the Brazilian Federal Government.

Governance, the incorporation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has become the primary global reference to face most contemporary challenges for sustainability and social inclusion, as well as thinking about the future of humanity. It is a global design of “*integrated and indivisible*” objectives and goals, which are supposed to be for “*universal application*” but which must take “*into account the different realities, capacities and levels of national development and respecting national policies and priorities*” (UNGA 2015, 6).

In this case, the current international order was established through the cooperation and collaboration of a wide range of actors involving issues such as eradicating poverty and hunger, access to clean water and energy, fighting climate change, reducing inequalities, and empowering women and girls. This international order 2030 (Galvão 2020) has a defined time horizon for carrying out an ambitious and comprehensive agenda, organized into 17 Sustainable





Development Goals, 169 targets, and around 247 indicators (UNSD 2022). Political negotiations were aimed at integrating global objectives within nationally defined goals based on national interests and circumstances. The 2030 Agenda will arrive in territories around the world on the assumption that each government “*decides how these aspirational and global goals should be incorporated into national planning processes, policies and strategies*” (UNGA 2015, 13).

This connection between the global and the local perspective is theoretically expressed in the discussion on governance, which has spread in recent years as a niche for understanding global politics. The concept of governance originates in business management, “*corporate governance*”. It has been adopted by international organizations of a neoliberal nuance, such as the World Bank and the OECD, in the idea of “*good governance*” (Gonçalves and Inoue 2017). In a distinct approach, Ostrom (2010) inspired discussion on the notion of polycentric governance, in which a collective action is perceived at various levels, involving people, organizations, and companies with a certain degree of autonomy in their decision-making, engaged in efforts to organize a specific issue-area (Carlisle and Grubi 2019).

Rosenau and Czempiel (2000) present the concept of “*governance without government*” to state that many international matters can be organized without the direct action of national governments. Also, the idea of governance as an orchestration (Orsini et al 2020) is thought to build a platform through which multiple agents can manage, coordinate, and combine aspirations, objectives, goals, and political actions.

Finally, the complex governance approach (Kim 2020) highlights a pluricentric approach of networks shaped by fragmented connections and that organizes the relationships between relatively interdependent and autonomous actors. In this direction, governance has been reinterpreted to reach traditionally marginalized actors such as indigenous peoples and local communities, who come to be considered part of this fractal geometry of power relations (Schneider 2012) and characterize international politics in the 21st century.

For the debate on the SDGs, the theoretical framework provides a strategy for implementing the 2030 Agenda as *governance through global goals*, containing flexible institutional arrangements (Biermann and Kanie 2017; Vijge et al. 2020). The main characteristics of the governance strategy *through global goals* are (i) *voluntarism*, in the sense of making feasible aspirational aspects (intentions and desires) related to public policy goals (Vijge et al. 2020; Finnemore and





Jurkovich 2020); (ii) *flexibility* by building institutional arrangements to bring together public and private resources and to orchestrate efforts, at different levels to connect global norms to local interests (Abbott, Berstein and Janzwood 2020); (iii) *inclusion* in terms of the participation of different actors, mainly organized civil society, in the territorialization processes of the 2030 Agenda (Okereke 2019; Sénit and Biermann 2021); and (iv) *national leeway* to interpret and implement objectives, based on the local interests, priorities, and policies, considering the global goals' ambition (Gupta and Nilsson 2017; Okitasari and Katramiz 2022).

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were an innovative approach to sustainable development. They established flexible governance structures based on clear and concise goals with an outstanding communicative appeal, stimulating the mobilization of myriad actors until 2015. However, the MDGs were formulated with a top-down and technocratic approach, mainly by the OECD countries and international organizations (De Jong and Vijge 2021). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) overcome this pitfall by advancing the inclusion of various actors, especially in the 2030 Agenda negotiation process; improving the concept of sustainable development by integrating four dimensions (economic, environmental, social, and institutional); and implementing a universal agenda that covers both developed and developing countries (Kanie et al., 2017; Dryzek and Pickering, 2019).

Governance through global goals is concerned with including goals in a social narrative capable of articulating shared values and identities, and then mobilizing support and motivating action. Indeed, there is a risk of complacency, once the targets are set, there may be an incentive for authorities not to invest time and energy to achieve them. Because the bonus of stating ambitious targets had already been earned, and the costs of non-execution will be incurred in the future (Young 2017; Finnemore and Jurkovich 2020).

In the Brazilian case, however, we found the emergence of another possible framework, which we call *complex governance of a social nature*, hereafter *social governance*. That is, the mobilization and engagement of state and non-state actors in a hybrid model of orchestration to implement the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, starting from the bottom up, with the possibility of effective participation of civil society, corporations, and subnational entities.

While the strategy of *governance through global goals* allows States and other actors to implement the SDGs based on their ambitions and interests according to their priorities (Vijge et al. 2020), *social governance* reflects a complex process





of territorialization of the goals of the 2030 Agenda, through multiple ways of interpreting and translating global standards into local circumstances (Galvão 2019). On the other hand, the paradigm of *social governance* adopts a critical perspective on the dominance of positions of the Global North in international negotiations. The social governance framework of analysis challenges the opacity in dealing with social issues and in absorbing the interests of marginalized population groups, such as indigenous peoples and traditional communities. Also, it points out the responsibilities of developed countries in socio-environmental crises; and warning about the more systemic risks of not considering social impacts in the debate on planetary boundaries (Dryzek and Pickering 2019; Biermann et al. 2022).

The *social governance* of the 2030 Agenda in Brazil has been guided using political instruments (advocacy initiatives) and cultural manifestations in the realm of art, education, and communication to induce the process of implementing the SDGs. Brazilian social governance of the 2030 Agenda galvanizes the mobilization of actors and resources and ensures the capacity to participate in building, implementing and monitoring the agenda. In this case, we affirm that the social governance of the 2030 Agenda is connected to the idea of a *culture of the SDGs* that serves as a guide for planning and actions by different governmental and non-governmental actors.

The culture of the SDGs is manifested concretely in three layers: visibility, that is, the use of markers (images, sounds), creating symbolic trails highlighting values and principles of a specific SDG and advertising about the 2030 Agenda; visualization, that is, organizational communication and public relations aimed at communicating actions and practices related to the SDGs specific targets and indicators; and vocalization, that is, the use of art and communication tools to embed political messages of advocacy on behalf of the 2030 Agenda implementation (Galvão and Ceccato 2021; Cabral and Galvao 2022).

Finally, social governance encapsulates a conception of incorporation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs in the different *locus* of governmental and non-governmental decision-making in society. Incorporation is understood as a three-layer complex process of institutional adequacy, identity redefinition, and discursive-practical embedding. Incorporation demands adjusting the institutional mission, objectives, and daily routines to the goals of the SDGs. Also, it requires redefining the social identity based on the relevance of SDGs on the specific social role of individuals and organizations. Finally, incorporation involves the





use of rhetorical, discursive elements to inspire new generations to promote territorial transformation (Galvão and Ramiro 2023).

Brazil's engagement in the Governance of the SDGs

The country's experience in setting international environmental and development agendas since the 1970s, the process of institutionalizing the 2030 Agenda on a national level, and the virtual abandonment of the SDGs by the Brazilian government are the object of the analysis in the following subsections.

International Proactivity in a domestic changing context

Brazil has historically been an active actor in international discussions on environmental issues, since 1972, at the Stockholm Conference, hosting the Rio 92 Conference and developing a sense of leadership by mixing diplomacy with technical expertise in this path (Lago 2006). Brazil actively participated in updating norms and practices related to the global agenda, paving the way from Rio + 20 to the post-2015 Agenda, with renewed ambitions to expand the concept of sustainable development to include the economic and social dimensions as well as the environmental ones.

One of the notable advances over previous development agendas has been the increase in stakeholder participation, mainly through the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (OWG-SDG). It was responsible for ensuring the participation of state and non-state actors in formulating and implementing the 2030 Agenda, and was formed by around 70 countries, including Brazil. The Group worked between 2013 and 2014 to propose designs for the 17 SDGs. Experience was gained from Rio-92, with Agenda 21, the political engagement of Brazilian diplomacy on sustainability matters, and the mobilization around the implementation of the MDGs and gave Brazil the material conditions to lead this new development agenda.

The OWG-SDG Final Report (UN 2014) was presented at the UN General Assembly in 2014 and formed the basis of the 2030 Agenda, which was approved the following year. On the one hand, it was considered the most extensive intergovernmental consultation in the history of the United Nations (Kanie et al. 2017), with the engagement of civil society and interested actors. On the other





hand, the least developed countries were still underrepresented in the negotiations on the agenda and the localization processes (Sénit and Biermann 2021).

The auspicious international context for Brazilian leadership in the 2030 Agenda met a not-so-favourable one at home. Brazil lived through one of the most turbulent moments in its history, which has affected the country's international insertion, and changed its proactive international profile in the environmental and human rights arenas: the international shrinkage and the decline of the Workers' Party's power project (Lessa and Cervo 2014; Lessa, Becard and Galvão 2020).

Between 2013 and 2018, the country went through a period of high political turmoil, defined by: the outbreak of popular demonstrations, anti-democratic political manoeuvres, a corruption crisis led by Lava-Jato investigation, the misuse of social media to disseminate disinformation, a presidential impeachment, the rise of a conservative provisional government, and political polarization that culminated with the election of President Bolsonaro in 2018 (Singer 2013; Santos and Jalalzai 2021). The considerable Brazilian participation in the production of the 2030 Agenda was not immediately consolidated in the national governance of the SDGs, and the Federal Government's actions to internalize the SDGs were erratic.

About the National SDG Commission — CNODS

After the official launch of the 2030 Agenda at the UNGA meeting in September 2015, countries committed to establishing an instrument capable of organizing the implementation of the SDGs in their territories. In Brazil, the National Commission for the SDGs (CNODS) was formed almost two years after the 2030 Agenda was adopted, in response to pressure from civil society in the context of political turmoil (Nilo 2016), and during Michel Temer's provisional government. CNODS was responsible for "*internalizing, disseminating and providing transparency to the process of implementing the 2030 Agenda*" from a collective structure of reference for Brazilian democracy, the councils, of an advisory nature, and part of the structure of the Government Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, "*for articulation, mobilization, and dialogue with federative entities and civil society*" (Brasil 2016).

CNODS had sixteen members selected by public notice for a two-year term, with permanent assistance from the Institute of Applied Economic Research (Ipea) and the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) (Ramiro 2021). CNODS would orchestrate the implementation of the SDGs, including the





territorialization strategies, the definition of local goals and indicators, the participatory processes, forms of implementation, follow-up, and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda (CNODS 2017, 9)⁴. Regarding the results of the actions, Araújo (2020, 138) highlights that CNODS, “despite its timid successes, did not live up to this trajectory [of the Brazilian participation in the 2030 Agenda]”. After CNODS had been operating for two years, it was dissolved by Decree 9.759/2019 (Brasil 2019), along with more than a hundred collegiate bodies, significantly reducing social participation in public policies related to sustainable development. If, on the one hand, the dissolution of CNODS removed an institutionalized space from organized civil society, which influenced the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Brazil, on the other hand, it opened space for other initiatives to erupt from the bottom up in the decision-making chain.

The SDGs and the Multi-Year Plan (PPA)

In 2015, while the final negotiations on the 2030 Agenda were taking place, the 2016-2019 Multi-Year Plan (PPA) was disclosed by the government to Brazilian society. Once both strategic planning instruments came into force in January 2016, there was no direct link between them. The alignment between the PPA and the SDGs was checked by the Ministry of Planning, involving around 250 civil servants from 29 Federal institutions (MP 2018).

A high convergence between both instruments was confirmed. Indeed, it was found that 95% of the SDG targets had some of the PPA attributes related to their fulfilment, and each of the 2016-2019 PPA programs have attributes related to some SDGs. This alignment of PPA and SDG attributes allow the 2030 Agenda to be incorporated at a Federal Governmental level. This process also allows the SDG Agendas to be monitored in 2018 (based on 2017 data) and the convergence to the CNODS 2017-2019 Action Plan (MP 2018).

Some advancements in Brazilian public policy management came from the PPA-SDG alignment. Mainly the dialogue with public policy councils within the scope of the social participation strategy of PPA (Ramiro 2021). The SDG Agendas provided a comprehensive view of the relationships between the PPA and the

4 Among the main actions of CNODS, expressed in its Action Plan 2017-2019, the following stand out: (i) the alignment between public policies, provided for in the PPA, and the SDGs, creating SDG Agendas in the Integrated Planning and Budget System (SIOP), led by the Ministry of Planning, Development and Management (MP); (ii) the adaptation of the SDG targets to the national reality, led by IPEA; and (iii) the definition of national indicators for the SDGs, in a process led by the IBGE.





SDGs, which could be aggregated or disaggregated as required for the analysis (MP 2018). It could also give visibility to which extent the Federal Government's actions have contributed to the achievement of each of the SDG goals. Finally, an indirect effect of aligning the PPAs with the SDGs was to promote awareness of the SDGs, promoting the coordination of the policy between different bureaucracies in the Executive branch.

Some obstacles remained, such as the inability to make methodological improvements, given that the 2018 Report was the only one published. The President's opposition to the agenda prevented the previous experience of PPA-SDG being aligned to support the preparation of the 2020-2023 PPA; and the intentional political blockage of new management ideas based on the SDG.

The 2020-2023 PPA presented by the Federal Executive to the Parliament did not refer to the SDGs and was amended to include the following general guideline: "*pursuing the goals of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals.*" This parliamentary amendment was clearly insufficient to affirm the country's commitment to the 2030 Agenda, and the only mention of the SDGs in the 2020-2023 PPA was subject to a presidential veto, demonstrating the virtual abandonment of the 2030 Agenda by the Brazilian government.

Adaptation of 2030 Agenda targets and indicators to the SDGs in Brazil

The creation of CNODS with its Strategic Planning, as well as aligning the PPA-SDG, has generated a steering effect, especially regarding the social accountability of Brazilian public policies. On that matter, it was crucial to adapt the global goals and targets to the Brazilian reality. Resolution A/RES/70/01 specified that each government must define "*its own national goals, guided by the global level of ambition, but taking into account national circumstances*" (UNGA, 2015). The Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA) led the process of adapting the SDG targets to the national reality, so avoiding reducing the ambitions of the global targets, maintaining a coherent and integrated agenda, and, whenever possible, aligning the SDG targets with national policies, plans, and programs. That effort resulted in the following structure of targets: 39 maintained the original wording, two were considered not applicable to Brazil, 128 adapted to the Brazilian reality, and eight new targets were proposed to the original targets. Thus, the proposal increased the number of targets from 169 to 175 (Ipea 2018).





With the adaptation of the targets, it was necessary to move forward in adjusting the national indicators to that global framework. The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE)⁵ use its statistical expertise and intellectual capabilities to build databases to carry out this task. IBGE then formed 17 working groups, one for each SDG, coordinated by specialists from the institution on the various SDG themes and with other information-producing institutions taking part, such as ministries, and regulatory agencies. This process⁶ culminated in the odsbrasil.gov.br platform. Under the coordination of the IBGE, different government institutions produce the indicators from their databases and make them available on the platform, allowing the collection and presentation of the SDG indicators. It becomes a statistical and geospatial database to facilitate the sharing, visualization, and dissemination of SDG information in Brazil.

The platform continues to operate, but the process of centralizing and publishing information faces some challenges, namely (i) the turnover/lack of stability of human and financial resources; (ii) the complexity of the 2030 Agenda, which requires different methods and sources (censuses, sample surveys, administrative records, registries, satellite images, among other sources); (iii) the need for a consolidated information system, in different territorial areas and encompassing its various dimensions, to allow the construction of global, regional, national, municipal or other indicators of areas (Kronenberg 2019).

The IBGE regionally led the process of producing indicators for the 2030 Agenda since the beginning of the activities of the IAEG- SDGs, continuing the work developed within the scope of the MDGs. Thus, the IBGE's role as an information provider predates the institutionalization of the SDGs in Brazil and continues after the Federal Government's virtual abandonment of the 2030 Agenda. Despite this continuity, an unprecedented cut of resources to produce data, such as the failure to carry out the National Population Census (Garcia 2021), and a direct opposition between the Presidency and the information-producing bodies, as is the case of the National Institute for Space Research (INPE) (McKenzie et al. 2019), hampered the development of SDG indicators.

5 It is worth remembering that the IBGE represented the Mercosur countries and Chile in the Interagency Group of Experts on SDG Indicators (IAEG- SDGs) since its creation in March 2015. The IAEG- SDGs was part of the 2030 Agenda negotiation structure to develop and implement a global framework of indicators to monitor the SDGs.

6 In this context, three meetings were held to support the discussion of the new development agenda, which took place in June 2015, and two after the CNODS were established, in September 2017 and April 2018, to consolidate Brazilian information and make it available to the public.





Complexity shaping Brazil and the SDGs governance

The governance of the 2030 Agenda and the implementation of the SDGs in Brazil was, therefore, an orchestration of key-actors such the Ministry of Planning (Economy), IPEA, IBGE and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Itamaraty), responsible for connecting global dictates to national interests, with other state and non-state actors. With the dissolution of the CNODS, a virtual abandonment of the 2030 Agenda followed at the Federal Government. It was expected that the SDGs would have lost their steering-effect power. However, Bolsonaro's decommitment with the 2030 Agenda opened space for many other actors to play a leading role. Emphasis is given to the experiences of the Judiciary, the Legislative, subnational entities, and organized civil society.

Other branches seek to balance the absence of the executive in the 2030 Agenda

The Judiciary is one of the most active public branches in the 2030 Agenda implementation. Promoted by the National Council of Justice (CNJ), it involves the entire Judiciary System and brings together a series of actions related to the 2030 Agenda. The pioneering approach in institutionalizing the 2030 Agenda has led to indexing its database with 80 million cases for each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. Based on the identification of the most judicialized matters in each segment of the Judiciary and the Single Procedural Table (TPU), action strategies are sought based on SDG objectives and indicators (Corrêa 2021). In this process, the Federal Supreme Court (STF) tests an Artificial Intelligence tool developed to support the classification of cases in Justice according to the SDGs. Compared to the other branches, the Judiciary is one that most mobilize attention to the 2030 Agenda at a national level. The STF presidency supports the incorporation of the SDGs at the institutional mission and objectives, at the rules of the Judiciary and at the discursive and practical commitments to the SDGs implementation in Brazil.

In the Legislative Branch, the main initiative is the Joint Parliamentary Front in Support of Sustainable Development Goals (JPF-SDG), composed of 209 parliamentarians, 200 deputies, and nine senators from 12 parties, predominantly left and center-left, but with participants from across the political spectrum, all except the extreme right, with the 27 federation units represented.





The Front's work has focused on dialogue with civil society, particularly with the Civil Society Working Group for the 2030 Agenda (GTSCA 2030). The presentation of PL 1308/2021 by the JPF-SDG coordinator, Deputy Nilto Tatto, from the Worker's Party is worth noting. The proposed Policy for promoting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development intends to bind the government to adopting the objectives and goals of the agenda in the preparation of plans, programs, and policies in an integrated manner and throughout the public policy cycle, from scheduling to monitoring.

Since May 2021, the project has been blocked by the Committee on the Environment and Sustainable Development of the Chamber of Deputies, headed by Carla Zambelli from the Social Liberal Party, the far-right party from which President Bolsonaro was elected, and which has not progressed. Strange associations with the 2030 Agenda and *left-wing globalism*⁷, the lack of political support from a set of parliamentarians who could push the SDGs forward due to the wide-ranging connections with their political agendas, and since a clear budgetary linkage with the SDGs cannot be created, it has prevented the Brazilian Parliament making the 2030 Agenda the fuel for economic, environmental, social and institutional transformations in the country.

Society pushes towards SDG implementation

The JPF-SDG became a site of political resistance, a trench to inspire and coordinate SDG localization experiences and broaden the national dialogue on the 2030 Agenda. This process was mainly due to pressure from the Organizations of Civil Society (OSC) and social movements which acts as a pulsating force (Hochstetler 2012) in implementing the SDGs in Brazil. Likewise, as the governance without government of the 2030 Agenda in Brazil was consolidated, various social articulations emerged to compose this complex social mosaic, in which society, concerned with the country's economic, social and environmental trends, articulates its own initiatives.

Despite a certain degree of fragmentation/dispersion in the process of implementing the SDGs in Brazil — due to the inaction of the Federal Government

7 The term "left-wing globalism" is used pejoratively, imprecisely, and vaguely by individuals associated with the far-right movement to misinform and persuade their peers that multilateralism and its institutions pose a threat to national sovereignty. In this article, its use aims to illustrate the far-right's approach towards international agendas, in general, and the SDGs, in particular.





— a network of actors such as civil society organizations, the private sector, local governments, and the academy is working through training, mobilization, good practices and the exchange of experiences. These networks — such as “estrategias ods”, “rede ods brasil” and “movimento ods” — act, both on national and international levels, interacting with the UN Global Compact and regional social participation mechanisms. In addition, we highlight the Civil Society Working Group for the 2030 Agenda (GTSCA2030), which has become the leading platform for unifying transformative actions based on the SDGs and for criticizing the government’s implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Brazil. Therefore, the follow-up to the Post-2015 Agenda negotiations provided these CSOs and social movements with the possibility of renewing their political credentials of engagement in the global development agenda, promoting actions to disseminate and monitor the SDGs in Brazil.

Regarding the follow-up actions, we highlight the role of the Spotlight Reports as the most valuable instrument for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Brazil. Produced since 2017 by GTSCA2030, they encapsulate a historical series revealing the immense challenges that Brazilian society faces in multiple dimensions and connections to achieve sustainable and inclusive development. The Spotlight reports are built from official data and scientific information from several specialized organizations. They have been portraying the advance of “*laws and norms explicitly against the SDGs*” (2017), making remarkable efforts to fight for human rights and the socio-environmental issues left behind. The urgency of “*changing the direction of Brazil*” (2018), heading towards unsustainability and setback, and moving away from a sustainable future (2019) coming up against the framework of “*Misgovernance of the SDGs*” (2020). In the context of worsening social conditions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Brazil would no longer be a reference in the proposition of “*global solutions to [become] a problem for the world*” (2021). The Spotlight report indicates, therefore, how the country left the group of countries with the most protagonists in the socio-environmental arena in the world to become part of the “*vanguard of a setback*” worldwide (2022).

One of the main functions of the Spotlight Report would be to antagonize the National Voluntary Report (RNV), an official document presented by countries at the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF), which has taken place annually since 2016. The only Brazilian RNV was presented in 2017 and was prepared by the Presidency of the Republic without the participation of government agencies and





civil society (Brazil 2017). It showed an optimistic scenario of the achievements and potential of the country. On the other hand, the Spotlight Report highlighted a scenario of unsustainability and fear in which *“the populations in greater vulnerability and the environment are, of course, the most affected”* (GTSC A2030 2017, 3). The GTSCA2030 has become the authentic Brazilian voice in the UN HLPF. The Brazilian government should have presented the 2nd VNR in 2019 but withdrew from presenting it a few months before the event. The GTSCA2030 kept its promise to show the world the 2030 Agenda being implemented in Brazil.

The prominent role of Brazilian Local Governments

Local and Regional Governments (LRG) play a key role in incorporating the SDGs worldwide, particularly in federal states such as Brazil. The trend of cities to assume more ambitious commitments than countries (Van der Heijden 2018) was confirmed in the Brazilian case of 2030 Agenda localization. SDGs induced multiple initiatives such as training, communication campaigns, alignment of instruments for planning and management, sharing of knowledge and methodologies, repositories of best practices, actions to raise the awareness of other actors, as well as the development of monitoring and evaluation systems. Indeed, *“metropolitan areas and regions are making significant progress and have already become engines of positive change. The role of global networks was also crucial in ensuring the exchange of information and broad commitment to the SDGs at regional and international levels”* (UCLG 2017, 62).

Brazilian subnational entities have navigated the 2030 order individually and in associations. Groups such as the National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM), the Brazilian Association of Municipalities (ABM), and the National Front of Mayors (FNP) function in the social governance scheme as a *hub* for the dissemination of ideas and practices connected to the SDGs, centralizing the 2030 Agenda in its actions (Guia 2017).

With the establishment of parameters for measuring and monitoring the implementation of the 2030 Agenda in Brazil at national and subnational levels, it was hoped that Brazil could become a ‘showcase for good practices’ for the world. On that matter, stands out the Sustainable Development Index (IDSC). However, of the 46 countries that submitted a voluntary national review to the HLPF, Brazil presented only one — the National Voluntary Report in 2017. This fact paved the way for Brazilian subnational entities to gain relevance during the





HLPF meeting. At this point, the 9 Voluntary Local Reports (VLR) from Brazilian municipal entities presented between 2017 and 2021 are evaluated.

Firstly, we highlight the diversity of Brazilian subnational experiences, ranging from the municipality of Barcarena/PA, an Amazonian site with 100 thousand inhabitants, to three of the largest cities in the country, São Paulo/SP, Rio de Janeiro/RJ, and Belo Horizonte/MG, whose metropolitan regions add up to more than 40 million people.

Second, from a discursive point of view, it is possible to affirm that the SDGs have affected subnational entities. There is a common language among the VLRS derived from the international agenda, primarily due to the UN's legitimacy in leading and orchestrating the 2030 Agenda. The concepts of an integrated and indivisible Agenda capable of promoting institutional integration, political coherence, and social mobilization were widely used. The principle of "leaving no one behind" has great appeal in a continental and unequal country like Brazil and is present in all documents, both in the opening political statements and the technical content. Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda visual identity permeates all VLRS and is used in monitoring and evaluation tools, especially the 17 SDG icons.

Third, the 2030 Agenda implementation initiatives have strengthened partnerships between state, non-state, international, national and local actors. Partnerships with higher education institutions, regional research foundations, social organizations, international organizations (UN-Habitat and UNDP), international programs (UNESCO Global Action Program) and transnational networks of cities such as ICLEI (Governments of Sites for Sustainability), and the Union of Ibero-American Capitals (UCCI). It is worth highlighting the prominent role played by the private sector, particularly local business associations, in internalizing the SDGs into their practices, participating in local governance, and in transnational networks such as the Global Compact (Llanos et al 2022).

Fourth, the existence of institutional memory in sustainability has triggered a dual learning process. Past experiences in implementing development agendas, particularly Agenda 21 and the MDGs, and participation in related agendas such as the Paris Agreement and the New Urban Agenda, has created spaces of experience for subnational entities to move forward in interactions with the local governance of the SDGs. Given that subnational entities act as units of the global governance system (Van der Heijden 2018), it is evident that they are both influenced by international regimes and influence the direction of global politics. Therefore, the implementation of the SDGs in the localities is closely





connected to a history of encounters with the international ones.

Fifth, there is an apparent *steering effect* of the 2030 Agenda in the institutional integration of the SDGs in some Brazilian municipalities. In all cases evaluated, actions to train servers, awareness, and dissemination of the 2030 Agenda were reported, as well as government measures to align local planning instruments, both strategic and medium-term, such as the PPAs, and management with the SDGs. In addition, many interagency working groups, task forces, and commissions have been created to enhance institutional integration and policy coherence.

The coordination of the SDGs, in general, is linked to the Mayor's Office or the Secretary of Planning or Finance, strengthening the notion that the SDGs are not just an environmental or international agenda but represent a broader notion of a sustainable development agenda that needs institutional integration. So far, the municipality of São Paulo/SP and the State of São Paulo have established a formal commission to govern the SDGs. Finally, monitoring and evaluation tools were developed as in the cases of São Paulo, Niterói, and Belo Horizonte.

However, the historical shortcomings, especially in smaller municipalities, should be highlighted in terms of human and budgetary resources and their impacts on engagement with Agenda 2030. This issue is partially alleviated through partnerships with other levels of government, the private sector, transnational networks (ICLEI, UCLG), and international organizations (UNDP).

The analysis of the nine VLRs presented by Brazilian subnational entities indicates a process under construction. There are apparent steering effects of the 2030 Agenda on the discourse of local governments as well as some advances in institutional integration, mainly through the coordination of intersectoral working groups, alignment with planning and management instruments, development of monitoring and evaluation tools, but less evidence of impacts on policy coherence. The reported initiatives on social participation and partnerships require further investigation to assess their degree of inclusion and permanence over time.

Final remarks

SDG implementation in Brazil has fluctuated between governance without government to an arrangement of social governance. This has occurred by building a network to orchestrate the territorialization of the 2030 Agenda integrating multiple levels of initiatives supported by subnational, national and international





agents. The leading role that some Brazilian municipalities took in describing experiences permeated by autonomy in the conformation of local initiatives to implement the SDGs.

Brazil's active participation in the design of the 2030 Agenda does not imply the country's leadership in implementing the SDGs. The main explanation was the lack of commitment of national leaders to the SDGs. Despite being a signatory to UNGA Resolution 70/01, Bolsonaro's government virtually abandoned the 2030 Agenda by dismantling the CNODS; vetoing the PPA's alignment with the SDG; and ignoring the targets and indicators adapted to be used in Brazilian public policies for monitoring and evaluation. The rise of a government that was averse to multilateralism, with anti-scientific positions, and who decided to dismantle institutions that were responsible for implementing SDG correlated actions, has complicated the incorporation of the 2030 Agenda in Brazil.

This turbulent situation of insufficient progress and flagrant setbacks on the SDG implementation has triggered a social engagement to occupy this vacuum. CSOs have been working in networks connected with local governments and international organizations to evaluate Brazil's performance (failure) in the 2030 Agenda. Subnational entities are also implementing the SDGs against the national executive's wishes. The 2030 Agenda territorialization occurred through the initiative of regional and local associations and individual enterprises of subnational governments and civil society organizations.

The territorialization of SDGs is recent, and the analysis of VLRs only represents a tiny fraction of a broader process. Several initiatives developed by Brazil were not systematized in the VLRs or under the GTSC A2030. In general, from the cases studied, it is possible to be pessimistic regarding the limited capacity of the 2030 Agenda to induce local transformations through sustainability; or to be more optimistic given that it is a process under construction, with practical and discursive impacts, followed by institutional and normative effects.

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