

# Brazil's National School Feeding Programme: Leveraging public procurement to drive sustainable food systems transformation

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IIPP CASE STUDY

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## Brazil's National School Feeding Programme: Leveraging public procurement to drive sustainable food systems transformation

IIPP School Meals Case Studies Series

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### About our school meals work

This case study is part of a wider project on school meals led by Professor Mariana Mazzucato and her team at the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, with funding from the World Food Programme. The project examines how school meals can be used as a strategic demand-side policy tool within mission-oriented industrial strategies, shaping markets for sustainable and healthy food children while supporting broader food system transformation. The insights from this work informed the report *A Mission-Oriented Approach to School Meals: An Opportunity for Cross-Departmental and Multi-Sector Industrial Strategy*, published in September 2025 by Professor Mariana Mazzucato and Sarah Doyle.

For more information on our school meals work visit:  
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/research-projects/2026/jan/mission-oriented-approach-school-meals>

Read the 'A Mission-Oriented Approach to School Meals' Report:  
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/publications/2025/sep/mission-oriented-approach-school-meals>

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# Brazil's National School Feeding Programme: Leveraging public procurement to drive sustainable food systems transformation

## IIPP CASE STUDY

# BRAZIL

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The Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose (IIPP) at University College London (UCL) brings together cutting-edge academic theory with teaching and policy practice, to rethink the role of the state in tackling some of the biggest challenges facing society.

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## Preface: The market-shaping potential of school meals

In its current form, the global food system is unsustainable. It fails to reliably feed billions of people and, as the world's population grows, food insecurity, hunger, and malnutrition are expected to become more acute. These challenges are not only social and ecological, but also economic. The ways in which food is produced, processed, distributed, consumed, and disposed of contribute to rising temperatures and shifting weather patterns, extreme weather events, land degradation, disruptions to the global hydrological cycle, and food waste. Together, these dynamics undermine long-term productivity. The global food system is responsible for an estimated one-third of global greenhouse gas emissions, is the primary driver of biodiversity and ecosystem loss, and is a major contributor to land degradation and the global water crisis (United Nations, 2024b; FAO et al., 2024; FAO, 2023; Climate Action, 2024; Mazzucato et al., 2024). These issues are further exacerbated by increasing market concentration and a focus on short-term shareholder returns (Keenan, Monteath, and Wójcik, 2023).

Achieving the second United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 2), to “end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture” (United Nations, 2024a), requires a fundamental transformation of the global food system. This transformation will depend on cross-sectoral innovation and investment. For governments, it will also require coordinated action across departments, supported by new economic approaches. Governments can translate food system challenges into market opportunities for firms willing to innovate and invest alongside the public sector.

One powerful yet underutilised lever for doing so is school meal procurement. A growing number of countries are implementing school meal programmes, which now reach approximately 466 million children, making them one of the most widespread social safety nets globally (WFP, 2024).

School meal procurement can be structured to create demand for food that is healthy, sustainable, appealing and accessible, rather than prioritising the lowest-cost options alone. By requiring private sector bidders to invest and innovate, well-designed procurement can reshape local economies and food value chains, resulting in a more diverse, competitive, innovative, and values-aligned supplier base. Pursuing this approach requires governments to confront vested interests that benefit from the current structure of the global food system, while collaborating with actors willing to support its transformation.

In this context, school meal procurement has the potential to play an instrumental role in food system transformation, but only if it is designed as part of an ambitious, mission-oriented industrial strategy. A mission-oriented approach sets clear, ambitious, and measurable goals that address market opportunities while tackling pressing social and environmental challenges. By aligning public and private investment around shared missions, this approach seeks to stimulate cross-sectoral innovation and long-term value creation (Mazzucato, 2021; Mazzucato, Doyle, and Kühn von Burgsdorff, 2024).

Historically, mission-oriented approaches have been associated with space and defence policy. The United States Apollo Programme, for example, mobilised

multiple sectors to achieve the goal of landing a human on the moon, generating technological breakthroughs, innovation spillovers and wider economic benefits (Mazzucato, 2021). Today, this approach can be applied to social and environmental challenges, linking access with innovation and connecting the welfare state with the innovation state.

To implement mission-oriented industrial strategy effectively, public sector tools and institutions must be aligned with mission goals. Public procurement is a particularly powerful but underutilised instrument. By creating demand for goods and services that address defined challenges, such as access to healthy and sustainable food, procurement can catalyse innovation and investment, reshape markets and value chains, and generate broader economic benefits, including productivity gains, employment, and growth (Mazzucato, Doyle, and Kühn von Burgsdorff, 2024; Mazzucato, Spanó, and Wainwright, 2025).

Realising the market-shaping potential of school meals requires coordinated action across government departments, including those responsible for industry, climate, and finance. These actors must support increased investment in school meals and play an active role in their design, recognising that such programmes not only improve educational, health, and equity outcomes for children, but can also catalyse and direct sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

This case study forms part of a broader project led by Professor Mariana Mazzucato and her team at the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose, with support from the World Food Programme. The project positions school meals not only as a welfare

intervention, but also as a mechanism for shaping markets for sustainable and healthy food sourced from local farms and businesses, thereby contributing to food system transformation. Its findings informed the report *A Mission-Oriented Approach to School Meals: An opportunity for cross-departmental and multi-sector industrial strategy*, published in September 2025 by Professor Mariana Mazzucato and Sarah Doyle, and are part of a wider series that also includes case studies from Sweden and Scotland.

### Read the full report here:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/publications/2025/sep/mission-oriented-approach-school-meals>



# 1.

## Case Summary

Location and time period:

### Brazil, 1955–2024

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### The policy problem

In the 1950s, Brazil faced alarming levels of hunger and malnutrition, particularly among children. This context of widespread food insecurity prompted the federal government to launch the first national school meal initiative, known as the *Campanha de Merenda Escolar* (Brasil, 1955). From inception, the programme aimed to combat child hunger while also establishing a system of public food procurement capable of serving the entire national territory. Over the following decades, the initiative evolved in scope, scale, and institutional design, gradually consolidating into what is now the National School Feeding Programme (*Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar*: PNAE). One of the world's largest such initiatives, PNAE now operates in around 150,000 public schools across the country (Ministério da Educação, 2023).

The conditionality that at least 30% of federal funds going to PNAE be used to purchase food from family farmers was introduced in 2009, strengthening the programme's role in fostering inclusive rural development alongside benefitting over 40 million students (Paula et al., 2023). This measure was proposed by social movements, and was aimed at supporting small-scale agriculture, enhancing local food systems, and ensuring fresher and more culturally appropriate food for school meals.

Despite its scale and the international recognition it has received (World Bank, 2016), the PNAE still faces challenges in realising its full transformative potential. Even where the requirement to buy from family farmers is strategically implemented as a way to promote market access to this segment, structural barriers persist in procurement, hindering the inclusion of smallholder producers – particularly those from more vulnerable or remote contexts.

These barriers include disparities in institutional capacity across local governments, administrative and operational fragmentation, and procurement practices that are still primarily driven by cost-efficiency rather than broader developmental criteria (Falvo, 2024). As a result, the programme struggles to expand the inclusion of products from the socio-bioeconomies and organic agriculture, and to adopt procurement criteria that reflect higher nutritional and sustainability standards, which would foster a broader sustainable food systems transformation.

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### Main topics/themes in this case

- Public procurement
- Food security
- Public policy innovation
- School feeding / meal programmes

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### Read this case if you...

- Are exploring how public procurement can be used as a strategic policy tool to support inclusive and sustainable economic development.
- Want to understand how public food programmes can simultaneously address food security, rural development, and environmental sustainability.
- Are seeking lessons on how to design and implement procurement frameworks that promote productive inclusion, reduce inequalities, and support healthier and more sustainable food systems.
- Are interested in the challenges and opportunities of operationalising mission-oriented policies within a federated governance structure.

# 2.

## Overview



Brazil's national school feeding programme, the Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE), is recognized as the largest food supplementation programme in Latin America and one of the world's leading school feeding initiatives. It stands out from other programmes for its continuity, having survived across multiple governments; its constitutional mandate; its universal reach; and its commitment to providing healthy, preferably agroecological, foods (Peixinho, 2013; Lima et al., 2023).

The PNAE serves over 50 million meals daily during the regular school year, benefiting more than 40 million students and 150,000 schools across all states and municipalities in the country (FNDE, 2023). It has also contributed to lifting approximately 20 million Brazilians out of absolute poverty between 2003 and 2015, as part of a comprehensive suite of strategies and programmes aimed at promoting food and nutrition security in the country (World Bank, 2016). This extensive scale makes the programme a central component of Brazil's public policy for combating hunger and poverty and promoting nutrition among children in public education (Paula et al., 2023).

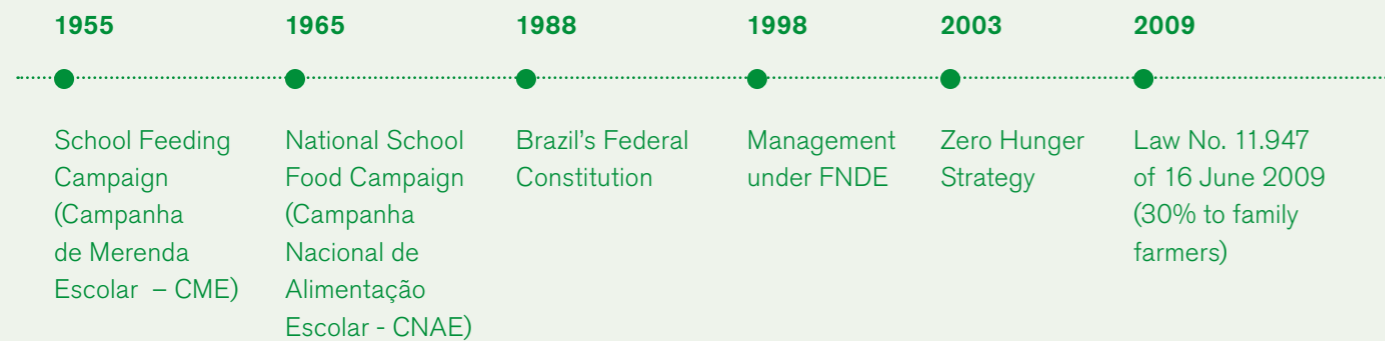
Although now internationally recognized, the PNAE's trajectory reflects nearly seven decades of evolution (Timeline, Figure 1). The programme was created in the 1950s, in a context marked by widespread hunger and food insecurity in Brazil. During this period, the emerging field of nutrition science helped frame hunger as a measurable and urgent global issue, prompting governments to address it through public policy (Vasconcelos, 2005). Initially, procurement of school meals through the PNAE focused primarily on minimizing costs; however, it has since evolved to create market opportunities for family farmers and to incentivize structural changes in Brazil's agricultural sector, far exceeding its original purpose.

The most recent reform to this programme was enacted through Law No. 11,947/2009 (Silva, 2019). This law introduced the requirement that at least 30% of federal funds allocated to the programme must be spent on purchasing food directly from family farmers, with a preference for local producers (Paula et al., 2023). There are also guidelines to prioritise local farmers, Indigenous and Quilombola<sup>1</sup> communities, and sustainable land use practices, such as organic and agroecological products (Mazzucato, Spanó, and Doyle, 2024). This change was designed to not only improve the nutritional quality of meals provided to students but also to promote the inclusion of family farmers, who had historically been excluded from larger food supply chains by large and established agribusinesses (Paula et al., 2023). By establishing dedicated procurement quotas and tailored eligibility criteria, the programme has created institutional pathways to integrate family farming into national food systems, advancing both food security and rural development goals.

The PNAE today stands out as an example of how public procurement can go beyond mere cost-efficiency. Through structured procurement mechanisms, the programme demonstrates how state-led purchasing decisions can align with broader public goals, such as fostering economic inclusion of rural producers and building more resilient food systems. By directing procurement towards family farmers and local suppliers, the PNAE serves as a model for intentionally designed procurement policies that promote social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and local economic development (Mazzucato, Spanó and Doyle, 2024). The next subsections will take a closer look at PNAE's evolution.

<sup>1</sup> Quilombolas are descendants of escaped enslaved Africans who formed traditional communities (quilombos) in Brazil, recognized today with collective land rights.

**Figure 1. Timeline of school feeding initiatives in Brazil**



## 2.1 First attempts to serve food at schools (1955-1964)

Initially established as the School Feeding Campaign (*Campanha de Merenda Escolar*: CME), the programme was created with three main objectives: to support both public and private initiatives aimed at providing or facilitating school meals through technical and financial assistance; to improve the nutritional value of school meals; and to promote measures for acquiring food products directly from producers or through agreements with international entities, including securing exchange and transport benefits, to supply food at lower prices (Brasil, 1955).

From 1955 to 1964, the programme underwent a series of institutional and operational transformations. It was renamed the National School Feeding Campaign (*Campanha Nacional de Merenda Escolar*: CNME), a dedicated fund was established to support its implementation, and the initiative became linked to international cooperation efforts, most notably through the Food for Peace Programme, which was connected to the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Framed as an emergency

measure to combat hunger and promote rural development, this external support played a crucial role in shaping the programme during that period.

The programme prioritized short-term relief through the distribution of ready-to-consume food products – often imported – to socially vulnerable children, with no integration into broader strategies for food security, education, or agricultural development. Furthermore, the way that food was bought and distributed became entangled with local political dynamics, where access to food aid was often mediated by patronage networks. This fostered relationships of political dependency and limited the programme's potential as a vehicle for equitable and universal public policy. During this period, school feeding took on a more assistentialist and clientelist role (Silva, 2019; Lima et al., 2023).

At that time, the subordination of Brazil's national interests in food production to foreign interests in the global food market was significant. Although the US food products were presented as donations, the Brazilian government was required to cover freight costs and provide a financial counterpart of

approximately 20% (Silva, 2019). These conditions, coupled with the predominance of imported goods, constrained national decision-making and contributed to the marginalization of local agricultural production. The bilateral relationship with the United States contributed to a form of colonization of Brazil's food culture, especially due to the programme's broad reach and the widespread introduction of foreign products in schools (Silva, 2019).

The programme expanded significantly in 1959, reaching 58% of Brazilian municipalities. However, it experienced a sharp decline between 1960 and 1963, serving only about 30% of municipalities. Several factors contributed to limiting the programme's expansion during this period. Fluctuations in political will and inconsistent federal commitment were key barriers, particularly in the early 1960s. Funding constraints also played a central role, as the programme depended heavily on external resources and matching national contributions, which were not always guaranteed. After the 1964 military coup, some coverage was recovered, but this remained limited, with school meals reaching only about half of Brazilian municipalities by the end of the decade (Silva, 2019).

## 2.2 Recognizing school meals as a policy domain (1965-1988)

In 1965, the National School Feeding Campaign (*Campanha Nacional de Merenda Escolar*: CNME) was renamed the National School Food Campaign (*Campanha Nacional de Alimentação Escolar*: CNAE) by Decree No. 56.886/65, expanding its responsibilities to include food and nutrition education (Silva, 2019). This change led to the creation of the School Lunch Programme (*Programa de Almoço Escolar*), which aims to serve "real meals" to students

in supplementary education, secondary education, and preschool (Silva, 2019; Lima et al., 2023).

This period saw a series of additional shifts. From 1966 onward, Brazil began prioritizing the purchase of food from national industries due to the reduction in donations from the United States. That reduction opened space for greater national control, with less foreign influence. At the same time, with the increased domestic investment, the Brazilian government became more motivated to align the programme with national development goals and maximise its public value – including support for the local food industry and improved food and nutrition outcomes.

In this context, the government took steps to build a more integrated national food policy. In 1972, it created the National Institute of Food and Nutrition (*Instituto Nacional de Alimentação e Nutrição*: INAN), which would go on to coordinate the National Food and Nutrition Programme (*Programa Nacional de Alimentação e Nutrição*: PRONAN). Formally launched in 1973, PRONAN aimed to accelerate improvements in the country's food and nutrition conditions through a coordinated, multisectoral approach. It brought together various public bodies and implemented a set of subprogrammes focused on addressing specific nutritional deficiencies in the Brazilian population (Silva, 2014). Despite its brief existence (1973–1974), the first PRONAN represented a turning point in institutionalising food and nutrition as key areas of public policy in Brazil (Silva, 2019).

By this time, industrialized food products had become the primary component of school meals (Lima et al., 2023), and widespread malnutrition remained a national challenge. Between 1974 and 1975, the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (*Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística*: IBGE)

carried out the National Household Expenditure Survey (*Estudo Nacional de Despesas Familiares: ENDEF*), the country's most comprehensive study on food and nutrition to date. It found that 67% of the Brazilian population consumed fewer calories than the minimum nutritional requirements recommended by the World Health Organization (Lima et al., 2023).

In 1976, the Ministry of Education (*Ministério da Educação: MEC*) initiated a programme to provide nutritional supplementation to students. At the same time, the CNAE managed and integrated the second version of the National Food and Nutrition Programme (II PRONAN). This new iteration emphasized the inclusion of fresh and local produce in school meals, supported smallholder farmers in navigating public procurement, and aimed to stimulate local economies (Silva, 2019; Lima et al., 2023). However, these guidelines were not effectively implemented due to pressure from powerful business groups. Control over the food supply remained concentrated in large companies linked to the national agribusiness sector, with continued participation from foreign-capital enterprises (Silva, 2019).

In 1979, the programme received its current name, the National School Feeding Programme (*Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar: PNAE*). Its mission was to meet 15-30% of students' daily nutritional needs during the 180 school days, with the broader objectives of improving nutrition, learning, and eating habits, while reducing absenteeism, grade repetition, and school dropout (Lima et al., 2023).

From 1986 to 1988, the Student Assistance Foundation (*Fundação de Assistência ao Estudante: FAE*) initiated the process of administrative decentralisation through the School Feeding Municipalisation Programme (*Programa de Municipalização da Merenda Escolar: PMME*). During this phase, municipalities became responsible for

managing and operating the programme, including the procurement of local food to stimulate the economy. However, the acquisition of industrialised food products remained centralised under the federal government (Silva, 2019; Lima et al., 2023). State governments were responsible for purchasing, staff training, and logistical support.

Decentralisation did open opportunities for more localised procurement – especially from smallholders – but it also introduced challenges, such as disparities in municipal capacity, limited infrastructure, and weak technical support. Pooled procurement became more difficult due to fragmentation. National guidelines still governed the programme, but local implementation varied significantly depending on each municipality's capacity and resources.

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### 2.3 Constitutionalizing the right to school meals (1988-1994)

The 1988 Federal Constitution marked a turning point in the history of school feeding in Brazil: for the first time, the programme was recognised as a universal right, guaranteeing access to all students enrolled in public primary education. This constitutional milestone firmly positioned school feeding within the scope of the state's duties, anchoring it as a social right and a key element in promoting the human right to adequate food (Silva, 2019; Lima et al., 2023).

Despite this institutional progress, the country continued to grapple with a harsh reality of widespread food insecurity and hunger. In 1993, the Institute for Applied Economic Research (*Instituto de Pesquisas Econômicas e Aplicadas: IPEA*) published the Hunger Map (*Mapa da Fome*), revealing that 32 million Brazilians were experiencing hunger. Among them, nine million families had a monthly income that allowed them to purchase only a basic food basket.

The study also emphasized that food insecurity in Brazil was not due to a lack of food availability, but rather to the limited access faced by the most vulnerable families (IPEA, 1993).

Also in 1993, the National Council on Food and Nutrition Security (*Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional: CONSEA*) was established with the goal of fostering dialogue between the government and civil society in the pursuit of effective strategies to ensure the country's food security. CONSEA marks an important milestone in the democratic management of the policy.

Then, in 1994, one of the most significant advances in the history of the PNAE occurred. Law No. 8.913/1994 introduced a decentralized model for the administration of programme resources (Lima et al., 2023). According to the new framework, municipalities could voluntarily sign an agreement to receive federal funds, becoming directly responsible for key activities such as designing school menus, purchasing food, and distributing meals through their local education networks (Silva, 2019).

For the first time, the law formally recognised the role of nutritionists in the provision of school meals and mandated the creation of School Feeding Councils (*Conselho de Alimentação Escolar: CAE*) at the municipal and state levels. These councils were tasked with overseeing the implementation of the programme, ensuring that menus aligned with PNAE's nutritional guidelines, promoting dietary diversity and balance, engaging local communities to strengthen transparency and social accountability, and preparing reports on how the programme was being executed in schools (Brasil, 1994; Lima et al., 2023).

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### 2.4 Scaling up and decentralizing the PNAE (1995-2008)

Between 1995 and 2008, the PNAE underwent significant expansion in terms of financial investment and population coverage (Peixinho, 2013). During this period, the decentralisation of PNAE funds to states and municipalities was effectively implemented, *per capita* values were revised, and there was an increasing focus on the procurement of fresh and minimally processed foods (Lima et al., 2023).

In 1997, the PNAE was placed under the management of the National Fund for the Development of Education (*Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação: FNDE*), a structured agency linked to the Mec. The consolidation of decentralised management under FNDE was formalised with the enactment of Provisional Measure No. 1.784 of 14 December 1998, which enabled the automatic transfer of financial resources to implementing entities (Lima et al., 2023).

The launch of the Zero Hunger (*Fome Zero*) programme in 2003 marked a turning point in the national strategy to combat hunger (Haack et al., 2018). Even if not framed as such, *Fome Zero* can be seen as a mission-oriented policy (Mazzucato, 2021), since it proposed a clear, bold, and compelling goal to help advance a whole of government approach to tackling the big challenge of hunger in Brazil.

This programme was structured around a comprehensive set of interventions tailored to different population groups, including: structural policies (employment and income generation; social security; support for family farming; minimum wage and conditional cash transfer); specific policies (emergency food basket distribution; strategic food reserves; food safety and quality; maternal and child malnutrition

prevention; food education); and local policies (rural credit and incentives; support for small and medium-sized towns and cities) (Vasconcelos, 2005).

*Fome Zero* included two relevant food procurement programmes: the PNAE and the Food Acquisition Programme (*Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos: PAA*). Created in 2003, the PAA was established with the goal of promoting family farming through actions related to the distribution of agricultural products to those experiencing food insecurity, and the creation of strategic food reserves (Silva, 2019). Within the framework of the *Fome Zero* agenda, the PNAE integrated and reinforced its role in securing the human right to adequate food for students, particularly those facing food insecurity (Vasconcelos, 2005; Silva, 2019; Lima et al., 2023).

As part of this national commitment, Brazil successfully met Millennium Development Goal 1 (MDG1): to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger. Between 2003 and 2015, approximately 20 million Brazilians were lifted out of absolute poverty through a comprehensive suite of strategies and programmes aimed at promoting food and nutrition security (World Bank, 2016).

The PNAE also made significant advancements during the 2000s in both technical and operational areas, as well as improvements in management efficiency, social control, regulatory strategies, and menu planning (Lima et al., 2023). A key development came in 2000 with Resolution CD/FNDE No. 15, which introduced the requirement that menus should respect “the eating habits of each locality, its agricultural potential, and preference for staple products”, prioritizing fresh foods and setting a target for at least 70% of food purchases to be sourced locally (Lima et al., 2023).

In 2006, the FNDE published Resolution No. 32, which mandated the presence of a qualified

nutritionist as the expert responsible for school meals and menu development. That same resolution also marked a significant advance by recognising the need for enhanced nutritional support for students from Indigenous communities and Quilombola territories, given their higher exposure to food insecurity and malnutrition risks (Lima et al., 2023).

That same year, the FNDE partnered with Federal Higher Education Institutions (*Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior: IFES*) to establish the Collaborative Centres for School Food and Nutrition (*Centros Colaboradores de Alimentação e Nutrição Escolar: CECANES*) for developing actions and projects of interest to the PNAE, including research, training, technical assistance, and outreach activities. These centres also played a key role in building the capacity of programme stakeholders, including school nutritionists (Lima et al., 2023).

In 2007, the More Education Programme (*Programa Mais Educação*) was implemented to support the broader education and welfare of children, adolescents, and youth by offering socio-educational activities outside regular school hours. This programme prompted the need for an increase in per capita funding and required Executing Entities to provide three meals a day (Lima et al., 2023).

Also in 2007, Decree No. 6.286 was issued, establishing the School Health Programme (*Programa Saúde na Escola: PSE*), aimed at supporting student development through health prevention, promotion, and care initiatives (Silva, 2019; Lima et al., 2023). The PSE marked another step towards an interministerial approach by formalizing the partnership between the Ministries of Health and Education, highlighting the recognition that the promotion of well-being requires coordinated actions across different areas of government.

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## 2.5 Strengthening rights and supporting family farmers (2009-2019)

From 2009 onwards, the PNAE entered a new phase of institutional maturity marked by the enactment of Law No. 11.947 of 16th June 2009. This significant milestone in the programme’s history reinforced the legal human right to adequate and healthy food for all students in public education and introduced essential innovations in the programme’s structure and implementation (Peixinho, 2013; Lima et al., 2023).

Among its most impactful provisions was the requirement that at least 30% of the funds transferred by the FNDE be allocated to purchasing products from family farmers and rural family entrepreneurs or their organisations, including those from agrarian reform settlements, traditional Indigenous communities, and Quilombola communities. The law also strengthened the educational and health-promoting dimensions of the PNAE by mandating the integration of food and nutrition education across school curricula (Peixinho, 2013; Lima et al., 2023).

Due to the breadth and depth of the changes introduced, Law No. 11.947/2009 is widely recognised as a turning point in the institutional trajectory of the PNAE, opening greater space for the involvement of new social actors in its implementation processes (Silva, 2019). Collaborative arrangements managed by the FNDE were also considered to foster this policy’s implementation, including assessment partnerships between public and private actors and intragovernmental collaboration (e.g. technical support to improve local implementation).

In the same year, FNDE’s Resolution No. 38 was published to regulate school meal provision for students in basic education and to define the

technical and administrative guidelines for the programme’s execution. This regulation introduced a new purchasing modality that authorised the waiver of competitive bidding under the general public procurement law at the time, Law No. 8.666/1993. It established the Public Calls (*Chamadas Públicas*) as a simplified procurement mechanism, designed to facilitate access to public markets for family farmers and small-scale producers (Lima et al., 2023). *Chamadas Públicas* serve as simplified, inclusive calls for suppliers – especially smallholder producers and their organisations – to submit proposals to supply food for programmes like the PNAE. This process prioritizes social and regional criteria, aiming to strengthen local food systems, support sustainable agriculture, and promote food security through transparent and accessible public procurement practices.

The socio-productive segment of family farming, supported by the 2009 law, comprises a large group of Brazilian workers who share distinct characteristics shaped by their territorial and cultural contexts. The term “family farming” began to be embraced in the 1990s by individuals and their collective organisations as a marker of social identity. Within this context, Brazil launched its first public initiative specifically targeted at this group – the National Programme for Strengthening Family Farming (*Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar: PRONAF*) – in 1996. A decade later, Law No. 11.326/2006, widely known as the Family Farming Law (*Lei da Agricultura Familiar*), was enacted, establishing definitions, principles, and instruments for the development of public policies aimed at family farmers (Silva, 2019).

One of the key motivations for including family farmers in Law No. 11.947/2009 was to position the PNAE as a driver of productive inclusion and local development. There was a need for explicit

mechanisms to support local producers, as the rules set by the general public procurement law were largely unfavourable to the participation of family farmers, with excessive bureaucratic requirements such as complex documentation and certifications, and an overall slowness of procurement processes (Silva, 2019).

In 2015, the PNAE gained international recognition as one of the largest school feeding programmes in the world, distinguished by its unique characteristics compared to other similar initiatives globally (World Bank, 2016). That year, the programme expanded to reach 41.5 million students, with a financial allocation of approximately R\$3.76 billion (Lima et al., 2023).

Between 2009 and 2019, the programme expanded its scope to encompass all levels of education, from early childhood education to youth and adult education, and extended its coverage to all public educational institutions, including federal, philanthropic, and community schools (Silva, 2019). During this period, the programme gained further international visibility and advanced with the introduction of tools designed to improve the nutritional quality of school menus. There was an increasing focus on fostering a healthy environment within schools and educating students on healthy eating habits and health promotion through food and nutrition education initiatives (Lima et al., 2023).

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## 2.6 Responding to crises and renewing food security commitments (2020-2024)

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the implementation of the PNAE faced several challenges. In response to the suspension of in-person classes and the need to continue supporting students now outside the school environment, the MEC and the FNDE, adjusted the modus operandi of the PNAE to ensure its continued

operation and that students could still be served, as many students relied on school meals as their main source of daily nutrition (Lima et al., 2023).

This situation sparked broader discussions around the need to ensure continued access to school food programmes, especially given the widespread food insecurity in Brazil. In response to public pressure and civil society mobilization, the federal government enacted Law No. 13.987/2020, authorizing, on an exceptional basis, the distribution of food items purchased with PNAE funds directly to students' families during school closures (Lima et al., 2023).

Despite these efforts, the programme struggled to maintain its principle of universal access. Many municipalities faced operational difficulties, and family farmers, essential suppliers to the PNAE, lost a critical source of income. Although remote procurement through *Chamadas Públicas* was permitted, farmers encountered technological barriers that hindered participation, such as poor internet access and unfamiliarity with digital tools (Lima et al., 2023).

Meanwhile, food and nutrition policies advanced with the publication of FNDE's Resolution No. 06 in May 2020, which reinforced alignment with the Brazilian Dietary Guidelines (*Guia Alimentar para a População Brasileira*), requiring at least 75% of purchases to be fresh or minimally processed foods (Lima et al., 2023).

Between 2020 and 2021, the programme reached over 39 million students across 5,568 Brazilian municipalities, with an investment of R\$4.2 billion (approximately US\$650 million, with an exchange rate of 6.5). However, in 2022, the budget was reduced to R\$3.96 billion due to implementation challenges (Lima et al., 2023) and institutional disarticulation at various government levels. At the same time, the national survey on food insecurity (*Inquérito*

*Nacional sobre Insegurança Alimentar no Contexto da Pandemia*), conducted between November 2021 and April 2022, revealed that over 125 million Brazilians were experiencing some level of food insecurity, including 33 million facing hunger (PENSSAN, 2022).

Despite the programme's extensive reach and investment, per capita funding remained outdated, failing to reflect inflation over the past decade, and civil society organizations advocated for financial adjustments (Lima et al., 2023). Under the newly elected federal government in 2023, their demands were accepted, and in March, a per capita increase ranging from 28% to 39% across all PNAE categories was announced (FNDE, 2023b).

In 2023, the programme's budget saw a significant R\$ 1.5 billion increase, bringing the total annual budget to R\$ 5.5 billion (MEC, 2023). Along with these financial adjustments, the federal administration placed a renewed emphasis on food security as a central policy goal. A key part of this renewed focus is the Brazil Without Hunger Plan (*Plano Brasil Sem Fome: BSF*), which sets the goal of once again removing Brazil from the Hunger Map by 2030, since the country had backslid after previously achieving this milestone. The BSF plan also aims to progressively reduce poverty rates and food insecurity, with a particular focus on addressing severe food insecurity (MDS, 2025). Within this broader strategy, the government reinstated the PAA, strengthening the connection between the PNAE and local agricultural development, and reinforcing the government's commitment to advancing food security and supporting sustainable rural growth across Brazil.



# 3.

## Challenges



The implementation of the PNAE is shaped by a complex interplay of governance structures, ministerial mandates, and social objectives. While the programme's ambitious design enables it to advance nutritional, educational, and developmental goals simultaneously, its success is frequently challenged by structural and institutional tensions. This section explores three interrelated areas that have emerged as particularly critical for the programme's effectiveness (Table 1): first, the difficulty of

balancing national guidelines with local realities in a highly decentralised governance system; second, the complexities of designing and coordinating school feeding as a cross-governmental, multisectoral policy; and third, the persistent barriers in supporting inclusive and ecological food system transformation. Each of these dimensions presents distinct leverage points for policymakers, revealing both the strengths of the PNAE's integrative approach and the institutional fragilities that can hinder its full potential.

**Table 1. Challenges of Brazil's National School Feeding Programme**

Challenge		Leverage Points
Balancing national guidelines with local realities in a multi-level governance programme	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. State and municipality alignment with federal laws and guidelines</li> <li>2. Varying degrees of institutional capacity, infrastructure, and budget limitations across regions</li> <li>3. Outsourcing and reduced workforce</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Develop technical cooperation agreements between ministries and secretariats</li> <li>b. Enhance state and municipal autonomy</li> </ol>
Designing and coordinating school meals as a cross-governmental policy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Lack of institutionalised collaboration, informal partnerships and siloed strategic planning</li> <li>2. Different cross-governmental coordination in local contexts</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Strengthen formal cooperation mechanisms and legal frameworks</li> <li>b. Foster social participation through community-level mechanisms</li> </ol>
Supporting inclusive and ecological food system transformation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Regional disparities and unequal access for smallholders</li> <li>2. Bureaucratic and regulatory barriers</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Improve procurement design for flexibility</li> <li>b. Strengthen cross-government coordination</li> </ol>

To gather insights for this section, the authors conducted interviews with Daniel Bandoni (Coordinator of Food and Nutrition Security at the National Fund for Educational Development, FNDE), Arthur Rimoldi (Director of Family Farming Registry at the Ministry of Agrarian Development and Family Farming, MDA), Andrea Bruginski (Nutritionist and Technical Lead for PNAE at the Technical Coordination of School Feeding, CTAE, State of Paraná), and Raquel Vasconcelos (Nutritionist and Technical Lead for PNAE at the School Feeding Superintendent Office, SUPAE, Secretariat of Education of Alagoas). The information gathered through these interviews was used to develop the sections below.

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### 3.1 Balancing national guidelines with local realities in a multi-level governance programme

The decentralised nature of the PNAE has significant implications for its implementation across different levels of government (Silva, 2019). Although it operates as a nationally structured programme, the execution of the PNAE is highly decentralised, with local governments responsible for carrying out procurement, managing contracts, and ensuring adherence to nutritional guidelines. Also, school feeding can be delivered through various management models, including direct provision, indirect arrangements, and partial or full outsourcing. While allowing for contextual adaptation to local realities, ensuring compliance with national standards demands effective coordination.

As a result, the programme faces operational and governance challenges including difficulties in aligning state and municipal implementation with federal laws and guidelines; significant disparities

in institutional capacity, infrastructure, and budget across regions; and a growing reliance on outsourcing amid reduced local technical staffing. Together, these issues affect the programme's consistency, quality, and ability to fulfil its social, nutritional, and developmental goals.

A key governance challenge for the programme is the difficulty of aligning state and municipal actions with federal laws and guidelines. Interviewees noted that limited interaction with federal authorities contributes to uncertainty at the local level, leading to inconsistent implementation across regions. State actors expressed legal insecurity when operationalizing national directives, citing difficulties in interpreting or adapting federal norms to local realities. This ambiguity around the scope of local autonomy discourages innovation and reinforces a cautious approach, as administrators fear the risk of noncompliance.

Decentralisation exposes significant disparities in institutional capacity, infrastructure, and financial resources across regions. While some states and municipalities have developed efficient procurement systems, others face administrative obstacles, procedural delays, and inconsistent application of guidelines. PNAE's federal funding provides a baseline that presupposes additional contributions from local governments – an expectation often unmet, especially in low-income areas with limited fiscal capacity. These constraints can result in underfunded operations, inadequate kitchen infrastructure, shortages of trained staff, and ultimately, disparities in the quality and consistency of school meals.

Operational and implementation challenges affect the consistency and quality of school meal provision across municipalities. Many municipalities have turned to partial or full outsourcing of school meal provision to address logistical and financial constraints.

However, this can result in a stronger focus on cost-efficiency at the expense of nutritional quality and sustainability, particularly in terms of prioritising fresh, minimally processed foods sourced locally and from family farmers.

Nutritionists play a central role in aligning procurement with national dietary guidelines and broader food system priorities, yet their involvement remains inconsistently institutionalised. Despite being required to meal plan and programme oversight, they are not formally recognised as mandatory staff within the educational workforce. Other administrative and technical personnel are also not formally recognised as part of the educational workforce, leading to persistent staffing gaps. These challenges are often driven by budget constraints and a lack of political commitment to expanding local teams. In some cases, key roles may be filled by commissioned or temporary staff, which can result in decision-making being carried out without formal expertise in nutrition or food procurement. This lack of technical capacity makes it more difficult for schools to design menus that fully comply with dietary guidelines and the programme's broader goals.

In response to long-standing challenges in coordinating Brazil's complex, multi-level governance of school feeding, a series of institutional adaptations have emerged. These reforms seek to balance decentralisation with the need for consistency and technical coherence across implementation models.

Technical cooperation agreements have been promoted between ministries and secretariats to address the fragmented execution of the programme across federal, state, and municipal levels. These agreements work as institutional mechanisms to improve alignment across governance levels and also foster collaboration between education, agriculture, and social development agencies. In many cases, they

have enabled a more integrated planning process and facilitated joint capacity-building efforts at the local level.

In recent years, state and municipal autonomy has been enhanced to reinforce their role in procurement and programme implementation. This key shift has been enhanced through the prioritisation of direct transfers of federal resources to local governments. This approach fosters local ownership and allows procurement strategies to be tailored to the regional food supply, while still being guided by federal regulation. As a result, states and municipalities have adopted diverse implementation models – ranging from centralised food distribution to decentralised, school-level procurement – depending on their local capacities and infrastructure. This flexibility allows for adaptation to regional contexts, but also requires mechanisms to ensure adherence to national guidelines and quality standards.

A practical example of these decentralisation improvements is the implementation of the *Cartão PNAE* (PNAE Card), developed by the FNDE in partnership with Banco do Brasil. The *Cartão PNAE* is a payment card designed for use nationwide within the scope of the programme, enabling the use of resources in compliance with Law No. 11.947/2009. This instrument has brought greater agility, convenience, control, and transparency in managing programme funds for food procurement, thereby promoting financial decentralisation and ensuring more efficient local execution (FNDE, 2025).

To support the decentralised implementation of the PNAE, various state-level governance arrangements have emerged, including dedicated technical teams, coordination units, school councils, and local monitoring frameworks. These structures aim to assist municipalities in applying federal guidelines, strengthen implementation capacity, and ensure

greater consistency in programme delivery. By promoting inter-federative coordination and providing technical support, they help to bridge gaps between national directives and local realities, although their presence and effectiveness vary significantly across states.

A type of state-level technical body that has played a critical role in strengthening inter-federative coordination are the Collaborating Centres for School Food and Nutrition (*Centros Colaboradores em Alimentação e Nutrição Escolar*: CECANEs). Established through Interministerial Ordinance No. 1.010/2006 by the Ministries of Health and Education, the CECANEs were created to provide technical and operational support for the promotion of healthy food in public and private schools at the early childhood, primary, and secondary levels. These centres operate through formal cooperation agreements with FNDE, and the legal basis for such partnerships was further strengthened by Law No. 11.947/2009, which authorised the federal coordinating body to promote research and evaluation of PNAE actions in collaboration with public and private entities (FNDE, 2024).

CECANEs are structured units with dedicated teams that operate under detailed work plans, allowing them to serve as key actors in enhancing technical assistance, governance consistency, and territorial reach of the programme. The centres have increasingly taken on broader responsibilities in supporting policy implementation at subnational levels. Their proximity to local contexts, combined with academic expertise, enables them to offer targeted technical assistance, foster knowledge exchange among municipalities, and enhance adherence to national guidelines. By offering training, monitoring, and technical support, the CECANEs help reduce disparities in local capacities and strengthen the

interface with federal directives, promoting greater coherence in school feeding governance across Brazil's diverse territories.

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### 3.2 Designing and coordinating school meals as a cross-governmental policy

The cross-ministerial nature of the PNAE is widely recognised as one of its most distinctive attributes, differentiating it from other school feeding programmes globally (World Bank, 2016). Unlike traditional food assistance programmes that focus solely on nutrition, the PNAE is designed as an integrated policy that aligns school meals with broader educational, agricultural, health, and social development objectives. This approach allows school feeding to serve multiple functions simultaneously, promoting nutritional well-being, supporting local food systems, enhancing educational performance, and fostering social equity.

However, despite these strengths, challenges persist in securing effective coordination among governmental bodies, as collaboration often varies across different institutional structures, political contexts, and local capacities. Interviewees noted that cross-governmental collaboration is often driven by personal relationships or local leadership rather than formalised legal or procedural frameworks at the state or municipal level.

At the federal level, executive and consultative committees were reestablished in 2023 to promote horizontal coordination. Yet in many cases, partnerships between ministries remain informal, relying on personal relationships or local leadership rather than institutional mechanisms. This makes inter-ministerial collaboration vulnerable to political transitions, staff turnover, or shifts in budgetary priorities. Coordination also varies significantly across

local contexts, shaped by differing institutional capacities and governance cultures. Without formalised frameworks for shared decision-making, efforts to integrate education, health, and agriculture through school meals risk fragmentation, undermining the programme's broader development goals.

Also, the lack of institutionalised cross-governmental collaboration weakens shared decision-making and limits the programme's ability to respond to complex food system challenges. Without clear governance structures linking key actors, strategic planning often remains siloed. This hinders efforts to align agricultural supply with nutritional goals or to integrate school feeding into broader public health and social development strategies. In practice, implementation frequently relies on informal partnerships and local arrangements between individuals or offices.

As a result, the degree of cross-governmental coordination varies significantly across local contexts. While some municipalities and states have developed effective cross-ministerial arrangements, others struggle to mobilise basic interagency dialogue. The absence of standardised coordination mechanisms results in uneven implementation of cross-government components, such as food and nutrition education, local procurement planning, and health promotion within schools.

In response to the coordination challenges within Brazil's school feeding system, a number of strategic adaptations have been introduced over time. These policy shifts aim to strengthen institutional collaboration across government bodies while preserving the decentralised nature of the PNAE. Efforts have focused on formalising interagency roles, enhancing technical support, and improving mechanisms for joint planning and monitoring. Together, these reforms seek to align diverse actors and priorities, reinforcing the programme's ability to

deliver on its integrated educational, nutritional, and social objectives.

To strengthen coordination and reduce the fragility of informal arrangements, the PNAE has increasingly adopted formal cooperation mechanisms. Legal instruments such as interministerial protocols and technical cooperation agreements have helped define shared responsibilities and ensure operational continuity across different areas of government. In parallel, local and state governments have established coordination structures, such as interagency committees, technical teams, and school meal commissions, to support joint planning, budgeting, and implementation.

Social participation has also played a key role in reinforcing collaboration, with community-level mechanisms such as local School Feeding Councils and food security forums enhancing accountability and public engagement. Despite these advances, sustaining effective coordination still requires continued investment in institutional capacity. Interviewees highlighted the need for targeted training to support collaborative work, as well as the development of shared planning tools, integrated information systems, and joint monitoring frameworks. These steps are essential to consolidate the PNAE's potential as a transformative food policy that operates across government functions.

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### 3.3 Supporting Inclusive and Ecological Food System Transformation

The PNAE is internationally recognised for integrating food procurement with support for smallholder agriculture, creating mechanisms to enable access for family farmers, and supporting sustainable agriculture practices (World Bank, 2016; Silva, 2019). Those are critical factors for fulfilling the programme's

social, ecological, and developmental objectives, but significant challenges remain in ensuring that those mechanisms work in practice.

Representatives from different governmental bodies consistently emphasise the strategic importance of family farming in achieving the programme's nutritional, social development, and ecological goals. However, they also note persistent difficulties related to technical assistance, sanitary certification, organisational support, and access to public tenders.

These challenges disproportionately affect smaller scale producers, limiting their participation in the programme. In contrast, more established cooperatives, typically those with stronger institutional capacity, are often better positioned to navigate the requirements of institutional procurement.

Family farmers' participation in the PNAE reveals significant regional disparities that reflect deep structural inequalities. According to a representative from the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA), which oversees the Family Farming Registry (CAF), the degree of family farmer engagement in the PNAE varies widely across Brazilian regions. The South displays a relatively robust and structured small-scale agricultural sector, whereas in the Southeast and Centre-West regions, the integration of family farmers into the programme remains limited – partly due to the dominance of large-scale agribusiness, which tends to marginalise smaller producers. In the Northeast, a significant portion of production remains geared towards self-consumption, with many producers lacking access to information, institutional support, and basic infrastructure.

Also, sanitary and bureaucratic constraints remain significant barriers that exclude vulnerable smallholder groups from full participation. The certification and oversight requirements linked to food

safety often act as barriers for smallholder inclusion. Interviewees highlighted that more bureaucratic or technical processes, such as sanitary compliance, tend to favour larger or better-organised cooperatives. These actors typically have greater access to support services and institutional knowledge, reinforcing a pattern in which the least supported producers remain the most excluded.

In this context, institutional innovations have played a key role in enhancing the visibility and inclusion of traditional and marginalised communities within the PNAE. Ongoing policy debates and new purchasing strategies seek to deepen the programme's commitment to inclusive procurement while improving flexibility and access for smallholders. At the same time, efforts to scale agroecological purchases emphasize the need for balanced implementation, supported by stronger cross-governmental coordination which creates a more enabling environment for sustainable and inclusive food systems.

Improved alignment across government bodies has contributed to better conditions for smallholder participation. By strengthening coordination with rural development, technical assistance, and social protection initiatives, PNAE has increased its capacity to contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable food system, while maintaining its primary mission of ensuring quality nutrition in schools.

Procurement design plays a crucial role in promoting inclusiveness and flexibility within the programme. Some strategies, such as food group purchasing, were highlighted by respondents as promising practices that better accommodate the seasonal nature of small-scale agriculture. This model allows producers to supply product categories flexibly based on availability, helping to reduce waste and enhancing feasibility for smaller suppliers.

Recent innovations have also sought to increase the visibility and recognition of traditional communities within the programme. A recent update to the CAF system represents a positive step in increasing inclusivity. The registry now allows the identification of 27 different categories of traditional communities, which is an expansion from the previous three (Indigenous, Quilombola, and Riverside populations). This reform, according to MDA staff, has also influenced updates to broader registries such as CadÚnico, the federal government's socioeconomic database used to identify and support low-income families through social programmes. These developments contribute not only to more nuanced policymaking and targeted support to culturally and historically marginalised populations but also reinforce integrated efforts to strengthen social protection networks and support socio-biodiverse territories.



# 4. System Impacts and Future of Policy

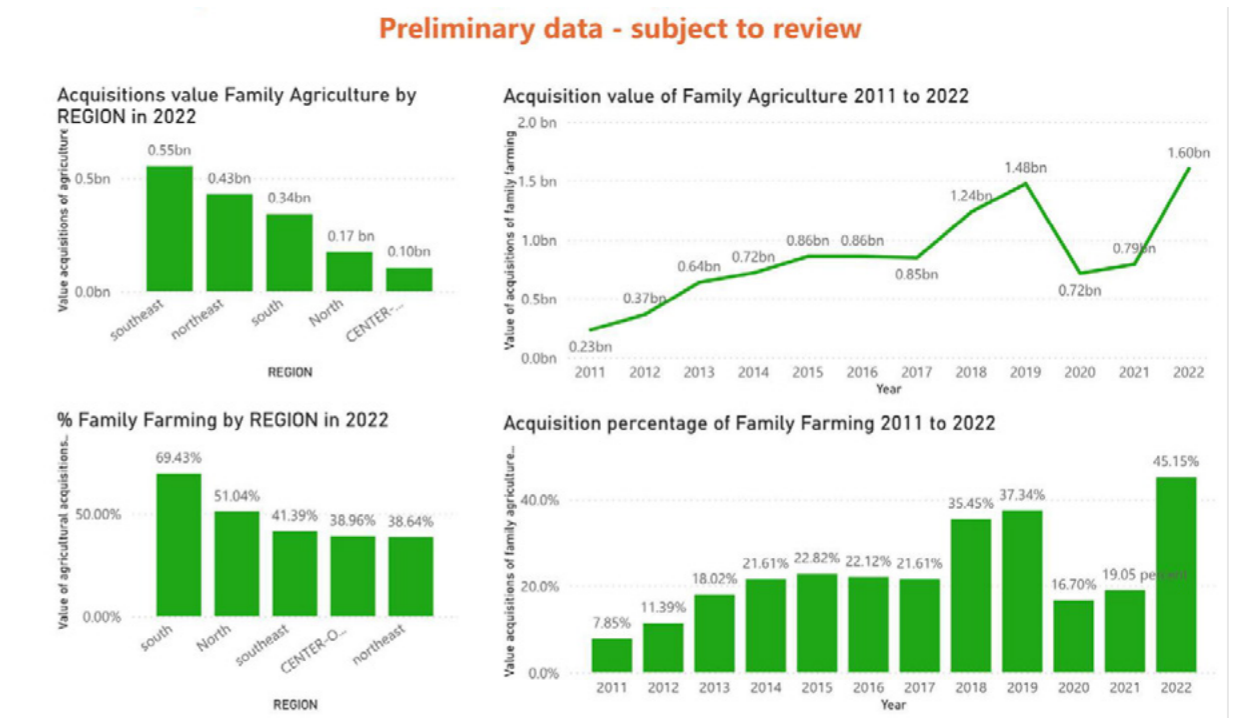


For nearly seven decades, the PNAE has undergone a significant evolution, transitioning from an initially fragmented and assistentialist campaign to a robust and internationally recognized development and food security policy (Silva, 2019; Lima et al., 2023). What was once territorially dispersed and framed as an emergency food aid initiative is now a nationwide programme with extensive normative complexity and cross-ministerial governance mechanisms. The transformation of the PNAE was not marked by a single disruptive event but rather by a series of gradual changes, influenced by both internal and external factors, whose accumulation over time led to substantial institutional and regulatory shifts (Silva, 2019).

A particularly significant development in this process has been the incorporation of family farmers into the programme's procurement mechanisms. As we have

discussed, this inclusion has not been straightforward, as it has required overcoming multiple structural and operational challenges. On the supply side, family farmers often face challenges in ensuring regular deliveries, meeting the required standards, and accessing suitable infrastructure. On the demand side, there are persistent gaps in capacity and commitment among municipal governments, particularly in terms of designing and publishing procurement calls, as well as a general lack of training and awareness among programme managers. Despite these challenges, data indicate steady progress in the participation levels of family farming in PNAE purchases, although this progress has not been uniform across all states and municipalities (Paula et al., 2023) (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Purchases from family farmers at the PNAE (2011–2022) (FNDE, n.d.).



The analysis of public procurement policies targeting family farming (particularly the PNAE, the PAA, and various state-level initiatives) reveals their catalytic effects across multiple dimensions. Economically, these programmes have contributed to increases in food production, job creation, household income, and access to diversified markets. Socially, they have strengthened local associative organizations, expanded institutional relationships, and promoted greater family involvement in farming activities. Environmentally, they have supported agroecological practices, including the promotion of pesticide-free production. In terms of food security, these programmes have improved household diets and the quality of food products offered (Paula et al., 2023).

Paula et al. (2023) present robust evidence that the PNAE significantly boosted the average income of family farmers who gained access to the programme. Their findings indicate a 32.6% increase in the gross production value (GPV) among participating producers from 2013 to 2017. This positive economic impact illustrates how prioritizing family farming in public food procurement can serve as a powerful tool for productive inclusion. By generating income opportunities in territories with low economic dynamism, the PNAE fosters not only the sustainability of small-scale agriculture but also broader local development outcomes.

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#### 4.1 Paraná: A model for expanding family farming and organic agriculture

Among the states that have successfully integrated family farming into the PNAE, Paraná stands out as a reference for best practices in procurement, farmer inclusion, and incorporating sustainability criteria. As one of Brazil's leading agricultural states, Paraná has a high concentration of small- and medium-

scale family farming. The state has achieved one of the highest percentages of purchases from family farmers, with 100% of federal funding allocated to this segment. It also sources a high percentage of organic products.

A key innovation adopted in Paraná has been the procurement by groups of food products, rather than rigid individual contracts. This model provides farmers with greater flexibility, enabling them to adjust supply volumes based on seasonal variations while reducing financial and production risks associated with unexpected extreme weather events. By allowing diversified food categories, producers can maintain supply stability and expand their market participation throughout the year.

Additionally, Paraná has been at the forefront of gender inclusion efforts within the PNAE. The state introduced a regulatory mechanism prioritising women-led cooperatives and associations, using gender-based criteria as a tiebreaker in procurement decisions. As a result, the number of women actively participating in family farming cooperatives has increased, reshaping traditional decision-making structures within farming communities. Interviewees highlighted how, before this policy, men would typically represent households in cooperative meetings, while women remained at home with children. Once women gained formal recognition as cooperative members, they acquired voting rights, which led to their increased participation in governance discussions and economic decision-making.

Another distinctive feature is the state's cross-government effort for a sustainable food systems transition, with 25% of current purchases organic and a target of 100% organic by 2030. This ambitious goal is supported by initiatives such as Paraná Mais Orgânico, a state-level programme that facilitates

the certification and technical support needed for family farmers to transition to organic production. The programme leverages the expertise of state universities to provide free technical assistance and partners with Tecpar, a state-owned enterprise, to offer free organic certification to family farmers. In terms of cross-sector collaboration, the food safety division of the State Health Department also contributes by testing products to ensure that they are truly pesticide-free.

Other initiatives further demonstrate the state's commitment to improving school meal quality and accessibility. Paraná has implemented the More School Meals (*Mais Merenda*) programme, offering voluntary extra meals to students. The programme was developed by the State Government through the Department of Education and the Paranaense Institute for Educational Development (Fundepar) and aims to enhance the quality and quantity of school meals. By prioritizing the purchase of food from family farmers and organic producers, the programme not only improves nutritional outcomes for more than one million students in the state network but also strengthens local and sustainable food systems.

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#### 4.2 Alagoas: Strengthening family farming amid economic challenges

In contrast to Paraná, the state of Alagoas has faced structural barriers in expanding local food acquisition under the PNAE. Only in 2021 did Alagoas begin purchasing from family farmers, marking a considerable delay compared to other regions. Even then, the process has required substantial technical and political effort, as highlighted by interviewees.

The implementation difficulties in the state stem largely from budget constraints, administrative inefficiencies, and limited technical support for

family farmers. These challenges are compounded by Alagoas's high levels of food insecurity: 59.9% of households with children under 10 experience moderate or severe food insecurity, and 43.7% of all families are considered vulnerable to moderate or severe food insecurity (VIGISAN, 2022). In this context, school feeding represents a critical food security measure for many children. Financial limitations are particularly acute, as local officials estimate that the state receives only roughly one-sixth of the resources needed to fully meet national procurement guidelines and ensure adequate nutrition for students.

To address procurement challenges and enhance the participation of rural producers, the state has implemented several targeted initiatives. One such effort is the *Mais Merenda* programme, which aims to combat food insecurity among students by expanding access to school meals. In the state of Alagoas, this programme complements the federal PNAE by providing additional resources to expand the scope of school feeding. This state-level initiative covers 100% of their schools, supporting the nutritional needs of all students.

As part of Alagoas's broader commitment to aligning educational and social policies, the state has implemented nutritional assessments for students in partnership with physical education teachers. These assessments use anthropometric measurements to monitor children's health and evaluate the nutritional impact of school meals, reinforcing the role of school feeding as a pillar of the state's social protection strategy.

Other notable initiatives include the Cooperative Catalogue (*Catálogo de Cooperativas*), developed by the Superintendent of School Nutrition (*Superintendência de Alimentação Escolar*), which consists of a comprehensive mapping system of

agricultural cooperatives. This tool helps address the lack of formal agricultural data at the state level and improves the planning of food procurement. And From the Field to the Classroom (*Do Campo para a Sala de Aula*), an initiative that strengthens connections between rural communities and schools through the procurement of food from local family farmers. The programme also promotes the exchange of experiences between farmers and students. Through these actions, it supports learning, enhances awareness of local food systems, and reinforces the social and economic value of family farming.

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### 4.3 Where could the policy go next?

Looking ahead, one of the central challenges for the continued evolution of the PNAE lies in strengthening its alignment with the broader goals of sustainable development and socio-bioeconomic principles. As a flagship policy for institutional food procurement, the programme has already established a strong link between school feeding, food security, and rural development, yet additional measures could further enhance its catalytic potential for sustainable food systems transformation.

A critical pathway for expansion involves strengthening agroecological practices and reinforcing social inclusion within procurement decisions. Supporting and strengthening purchases from traditional, Indigenous, and Quilombola communities, as well as women-led farming organisations, would help reduce socioeconomic inequalities while supporting biodiversity conservation efforts. While this priority is already embedded within the PNAE's legal framework, its implementation remains uneven across different regions, as many of these communities face structural barriers in meeting procurement requirements. Limited technical

assistance, bureaucratic processes, and difficulties in accessing formalised markets continue to hinder their full participation in the programme, necessitating targeted support mechanisms to facilitate inclusion.

Current policy debates are focused on deepening the programme's commitment to inclusive procurement. Advocacy efforts are working on elevating the minimum procurement quota from family farming beyond the current threshold, signalling a move towards more ambitious targets that align with national food security and sustainability agendas. While not yet enacted, these proposals have sparked important discussions on the legal mechanisms needed to embed social and environmental goals more firmly into the programme's operational design.

Efforts to expand agroecological purchases have underscored the importance of balanced implementation. While the programme has expressed growing interest in organic and agroecological products, adaptations have emphasised the need to avoid excluding less formalised producers. Incremental pathways, combined with training and certification support, need to be explored to build readiness without reinforcing structural inequities. Targeted approaches would increase territorial cohesion, particularly in historically marginalised regions, fostering environmental sustainability alongside rural economic inclusion. Capacity-building initiatives and institutional support would be essential to ensure that agroecological and socio-bioeconomic inclusion efforts are scalable and accessible across diverse local contexts.

Enhancing the local food economy through improved integration between school meal planning and local food production could significantly boost efficiency, sustainability, and nutritional quality. Ensuring that menus reflect seasonal availability and regional biodiversity can reinforce shorter food supply

chains, minimising food waste while enhancing the freshness and cultural relevance of meals. Also, regionalised procurement mechanisms and buying by groups of food enable producers to align supply with natural production cycles, benefiting both economic sustainability and environmental resilience. In the state of Paraná, this model has already been successfully implemented.

At the national level, further streamlining procurement mechanisms would improve accessibility for smaller producers, reducing bureaucratic obstacles that currently prevent full participation. One potential development is the expansion of Procure+Brazil (*Contrata+Brasil*) a digital public marketplace advanced by the Ministry of Management and Innovation in Public Services, which supports access to public markets (MGI, 2025). By adopting digital and decentralised procurement tools, governments can reduce administrative bottlenecks, allowing suppliers greater flexibility in meeting demand while reinforcing localised food system development.

Strengthening institutional capacities to overcome structural barriers is essential, as the Brazilian experience demonstrates that having a favourable legal and institutional framework alone is not enough to ensure widespread programme impact (Falvo, 2024; Mazzucato, Spanó, and Doyle, 2024). Despite well-established regulations supporting family farming, structural barriers persist, including a lack of infrastructure, limited technical assistance, and difficulties in scaling sustainable production.

The complexity of PNAE's operations in a country the size of Brazil, across thousands of municipalities, demands a robust set of state capabilities, including adequate financial, human, and technological resources to ensure effective implementation in all federal units (Silva, 2019). Addressing these challenges will be crucial to further expanding

the programme's impact on food systems, rural economies, and environmental resilience.

Brazil's institutional food procurement programmes have successfully integrated social, economic, and environmental considerations, providing a model for other nations seeking to align their procurement practices with the Sustainable Development Goals. The PNAE provides a blueprint for institutional food procurement, demonstrating how public policies can successfully integrate social, economic, and environmental dimensions. As the programme continues to evolve, reinforcing governance structures, expanding support for family farmers and for the ecological transition, and improving data systems will be critical for ensuring its long-term impact. By maintaining political commitment and strengthening institutional coordination, Brazil's school feeding policies can continue serving as an international model for sustainable food system transformation.

# 5.

## Lessons Learned



Brazil's school meals programme has now been running for three-quarters of a century, and the PNAE has become a model of international reference and a global benchmark for linking food security, education, and inclusive rural development (World Bank, 2016). In partnership with the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (*Agência Brasileira de Cooperação: ABC*) under the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the programme has supported nearly 80 countries across Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia in developing or strengthening their own school feeding systems. What lessons have, and can be, drawn from this long history?

### **Universal school feeding policies are an effective means to address food insecurity.**

By ensuring that every student in the public education system has access to meals, the programme has reinforced food security as a fundamental right and reduced nutritional deficiencies among children and adolescents. Interviewees noted that in municipalities with higher poverty rates, school meals often constitute the primary daily source of nourishment for students, making the programme indispensable in these contexts.

### **Food policies extend beyond nutrition, serving as an instrument for learning.**

Integrating food education into the school curriculum, whether through farm-to-school programmes, nutrition workshops, or sustainability modules, enhances students' understanding of food systems. This approach helps foster healthy eating habits from an early age, influencing long-term dietary patterns while reinforcing the role of school meals in climate adaptation strategies.

### **Civil society participation is key to the shaping of effective school meals programmes.**

The evolution of the PNAE – from its early iterations as emergency food aid to its institutionalisation as a national policy – was driven by social movements and advocacy groups in as much as by governance mechanisms. Over the decades, community-led initiatives have influenced key legislative changes, including the universalisation of school feeding, the extension of the programme from early childhood education to adult learning (EJA schools), and the integration of family farming into procurement

practices. Since 2016, the weakening of broader social protection frameworks has affected inter-federative coordination, sometimes reducing state support for local school feeding initiatives. Nonetheless, the role of social movements and advocacy coalitions has been critical to safeguarding core programme functions, ensuring continued funding and technical assistance, despite national political shifts.

**Embedding social goals within national legislation increases the likelihood of survival, ensuring that implementation mechanisms remain functional even amidst administrative transitions and shifting policy priorities.**

The trajectory of the PNAE underscores the impact of political cycles on public food procurement policies. Importantly, the institutionalisation and formalisation of the programme within legal and regulatory frameworks, and leadership of solid institutions such as FNDE, have played a key role in preserving its structure and operational stability. At the local level, CONSEA, Local Food Security Councils and advisory committees are essential governance bodies, ensuring programme responsiveness and public accountability.

**Simplified procurement mechanisms help to reinforce economic inclusion and support family farming.**

Over seventy-five years, the PNAE has introduced reforms in the procurement process, removing administrative barriers and simplifying traditional bidding processes. These reforms have significantly expanded market opportunities to family farmers and ensured that the food distributed through the PNAE supports both social and economic goals (Paula et

al., 2023). This strategy aligns with broader efforts in Brazil to promote rural and sustainable development through public procurement initiatives, such as the Food Purchase Programme (PAA). *Contrata+Brasil* also aims at the continued simplification of procurement procedures to increase access to the public market.

**Investment in technical training, financial literacy, and cooperative structuring is necessary to ensure broader participation from marginalised farming groups.**

Despite the progress in integrating family farming, challenges persist regarding the most vulnerable farmers' ability to meet procurement requirements due to the lack of capacity building and technical support for small-scale farmers. Interviewees stressed that many small-scale producers, especially those from traditional, Quilombola, and Indigenous communities, struggle to access institutional markets due to bureaucratic complexity, certification barriers, and logistical limitations. With sustained investment, streamlined procedures, and context-sensitive support, there is a clear pathway to expanding equitable market access, enabling these communities not only to participate, but to compete, grow, and play a central role in shaping more inclusive and resilient food systems.



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## List of Acronyms

- ABC - Agência Brasileira de Cooperação (Brazilian Cooperation Agency)
- CAE - Conselho de Alimentação Escolar (School Feeding Council)
- CECANEs - Centros Colaboradores de Alimentação e Nutrição Escolar (Collaborative Centers for School Food and Nutrition)
- CME - Campanha de Merenda Escolar (School Feeding Campaign)
- CNME - Campanha Nacional de Merenda Escolar (National School Feeding Campaign)
- CNAE - Campanha Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (National School Food Campaign)
- ENDEF - Estudo Nacional de Despesas Familiares (National Household Expenditure Survey)
- FAE - Fundação de Assistência ao Estudante (Student Assistance Foundation)
- FNDE - Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação (National Fund for the Development of Education)
- IBGE - Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics)
- IFES - Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior (Federal Higher Education Institutions)
- INAN - Instituto Nacional de Alimentação e Nutrição (National Institute of Food and Nutrition)
- MEC - Ministério da Educação (Ministry of Education)
- PAA - Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos (Food Acquisition Programme)
- PMME - Programa de Municipalização da Merenda Escolar (School Feeding Municipalization Programme)
- PNAE - Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (National School Feeding Programme)
- PRONAN - Programa Nacional de Alimentação e Nutrição (National Food and Nutrition Programme)
- Pronaf - Programa Nacional de Fortalecimento da Agricultura Familiar (National Programme for Strengthening Family Farming)
- PSE - Programa Saúde nas Escolas (School Health Programme)
- USAID - United States Agency for International Development

# INNOVATION IS POLITICAL