

 Daniela Bicalho<sup>1</sup> Tácio de Mendonça Lima<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Universidade de São Paulo, Faculdade de Saúde Pública, Departamento de Nutrição. São Paulo, SP, Brasil.

<sup>2</sup> Universidade Federal Rural do Rio de Janeiro, Faculdade de Farmácia, Departamento de Ciências Farmacêuticas. Seropédica, RJ, Brasil.

**Correspondence**

Daniela Bicalho  
bicalhodaniela@gmail.com

## The National School Feeding Program as a guarantee of the right to food during the Covid-19 pandemic

### *O Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar como garantia do direito à alimentação durante a pandemia da Covid-19*

**Abstract**

**Introduction:** The social distancing measures adopted by international health authorities to stop the progress of the COVID-19 pandemic has consequences for the economic and social field. Among them, there is an increase or increase in poverty and hunger, compromising the guarantee of food and nutritional security. Other programs exist on public agenda as a way to mitigate the consequences of hunger, except the National School Meals Program. **Objective:** This research work problematizes, through critical reflections, a contribution from the National School Feeding Program with guaranteed food and nutritional security for Brazilian students in the pandemic period of COVID-19. **Result:** A critical debate on the right to food in the COVID-19 pandemic period was presented, emphasizing the analysis of school feeding to keep food security of thousands of beneficiary students. In the context of the pandemic, the National School Feeding Program presents changes in their legislation in order to adjust their operational form. **Conclusion:** Reinforce the importance of organized civil society in defense of public policies of the food and nutrition security, especially in the support of the school feeding program, as well as in the role of the State as a protagonist in the fight against hunger and in the reduction of poverty in the country, assuming strengthening existing social policies.

**Keywords:** School Feeding. Nutrition Programs and Policies. Food and Nutrition Security. Pandemics. Coronavirus Infections.

**Resumo**

**Introdução:** A medida fundamental de isolamento social tomada pelas autoridades sanitárias internacionais para conter o avanço da pandemia de Covid-19 traz consequências no campo econômico e social. Dentre elas se destaca o aumento da miséria e da fome, comprometendo a garantia da Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional. Dentre programas existentes na agenda pública como forma de amenizar as consequências da fome, ressalta-se o Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar. **Objetivo:** Este trabalho busca problematizar, por meio de reflexões críticas, a contribuição do Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar na garantia da segurança alimentar e nutricional dos estudantes brasileiros no período da pandemia da Covid-19. **Resultado:** Um debate crítico sobre o direito em questão foi apresentado, ressaltando a análise da alimentação escolar como um potencial para manutenção da segurança alimentar dos milhares de estudantes beneficiários. No contexto da pandemia, o programa de alimentação escolar apresenta mudanças na sua legislação como resposta às adaptações na sua operacionalização. **Conclusão:** Reforça-se a importância da sociedade civil organizada em defesa das políticas públicas de

segurança alimentar e nutricional, em especial no apoio do programa de alimentação escolar, bem como no papel do Estado como protagonista do combate à fome e da redução da miséria no país, assumindo o fortalecimento das políticas sociais existentes.

**Palavras-chave:** Alimentação escolar. Programas e políticas de nutrição e alimentação. Segurança alimentar e nutricional. Pandemias. Infecções por coronavírus.

## INTRODUCTION

The pandemic caused by the new coronavirus called SARS-CoV-2 is defining global health. The range of this disease, until October 7, 2020, was 35,659,007 infected and 1,044,269 dead. In Brazil, up to that date, there were 4,969,141 confirmed cases, with 147,494 deaths, with São Paulo being the state with the highest number of cases and deaths from the pandemic in the country.<sup>1</sup>

Social isolation, to varying degrees of life, depending on the level of severity of the pandemic, has been the most effective response to such a situation, defended by health authorities around the world and adopted by the vast majority of world governments in an attempt to exponentially reduce the level of lethality. This intervention requires the suspension of some activities, such as: face-to-face classes at schools and universities, cultural events and non-essential economic activities.<sup>2</sup> Reducing the movement of people in urban centers affects the incomes of millions of people, especially those working in commerce and indirect workers.

In addition to the health problem, the new disease reflects serious social consequences, with an increase in poverty and hunger. It is increasingly evident that the worst consequences of this pandemic are occurring in people who were already at risk and in vulnerable situations before the virus appeared in the country, further evidencing social, ethnic-racial and gender inequalities.<sup>3</sup>

The emergence of the pandemic of the new coronavirus emerges in a context in which hunger affects more than 820 million people, which corresponds to about one in nine people in the world.<sup>4</sup> In Brazil, Covid-19 arrived at a time of dismantling public policies (health system, food and nutrition security and social protection, among other things) both from the budgetary and institutional point of view. This context of dismantling policies, especially those aimed at combating hunger, that is, food and nutritional security policies, further contributes to the situation of vulnerability of Brazilians in the face of this pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Among existing programs on the public agenda as a way to alleviate the consequences of hunger, the National School Feeding Program (PNAE, in Brazilian context) stands out.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Brazilian school feeding fulfills a role of social protection, by reducing hunger and contributing to biopsychosocial growth and development, learning, school performance, as well as collaborating in the formation of healthy eating practices, through actions of food and nutrition education and the provision of meals that cover the nutritional needs of students while they are in school.<sup>7</sup>

However, as a result of this pandemic in Brazil, all states in the country and the Federal District adopted measures of social isolation and quarantine to combat the proliferation of the disease, impacting the closure of schools.<sup>2</sup> The disruption of school feeding during this period may cause food insecurity for many children and young people. The isolation policy should not limit access to school meals, since for the more than 40 million students in public primary education benefited, school meals are a guaranteed right in the federal constitution.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, we present a critical debate on the right in question, highlighting the analysis of school feeding as a potential for maintaining the food security of thousands of students using the program. This work seeks to problematize, through critical reflections, the contribution of PNAE in guaranteeing food and nutritional security for Brazilian students during the Covid-19 pandemic period.

## The National School Feeding Program in the context of Food and Nutritional Security

Food and Nutritional Security (FNS) consists in:

[...] the right of everyone to regular and permanent access to quality food, in sufficient quantity, without compromising access to other essential needs, based on health-promoting food practices that respect cultural diversity and that are environmentally, culturally, economically and socially sustainable.<sup>9</sup> (p.01)

In other words, the food may be available for purchase in the markets, but part of the population would not be able to afford to purchase food in adequate volume and with the quality necessary to meet their nutritional demands.

The current context of the pandemic caused by the new coronavirus represents a threat to the FNS of individuals, especially for the most vulnerable (economically active population without a job or precarious workers, residents of the peripheries, in particular, blacks and browns, homeless people, rural families with precarious access to land and other resources, quilombola communities and indigenous peoples).<sup>10</sup>

The availability, access and quality of food is a problem that requires urgent attention. It took Brazil 25 years (from 1990 to 2014) to reduce the rates of people in extreme poverty and get out of the FAO (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization) Hunger Map.<sup>11</sup> However, in 2018, it already faced restrictions on access to food, with 13 million people in extreme poverty (6.5% of the population).<sup>12</sup> In 2014, 73% of Brazilian households were in food security condition.<sup>13</sup> In 2017-2018, the national prevalence of food security dropped to 63.3%, reaching its lowest level since the beginning of the measurements.<sup>14</sup> To make matters worse, it is estimated a reduction to 49% of households with food and nutritional security.<sup>15</sup>

Food and nutritional insecurity is growing in the world and the Covid-19 pandemic has accelerated this process and put more people in this situation. Food and nutritional insecurity affects different segments of society unequally and is determined by economic, political, environmental, educational factors, and others.<sup>16</sup> The complexity of this phenomenon, a fundamental element of the food issue in the contemporary context, requires articulated and convergent public policies between sectors and instances of dialogue that overcome the barriers of sectoral policies.<sup>17</sup>

It is worth mentioning that the right to food is the product of social struggles, the action of minorities, which enabled hunger to be debated and to face it became a social obligation.<sup>18</sup> In 1954, the National School Feeding Program was created in Brazil, based on assistance and fight against malnutrition, with the connotation of a food supplementation program for low-income students.<sup>19</sup> In addition to having been implemented, under the interests of the food industry, it initially served as an outlet for surplus American production and, subsequently, with a strong connection with the Brazilian food industry.

In the 1990s, school meals were decentralized; the federal government transferred resources to states and municipalities to purchase these food, in order to adapt the food served in the schools.<sup>20</sup> Such decentralization made it possible to meet local demands, boosting family farming and providing quality food that is appropriate to the students' culture and eating habits.<sup>21</sup> In 2009, the publication of the PNAE Law,<sup>7</sup> marked by the link with family farming, determined that at least 30% of the financial resources of PNAE passed on to executing entities should be used in the purchase of food from family farming. Acting in an intersectoral manner, the Program moved away from the assistance character that guided its creation, ensuring the right to food for all students of public basic education, with repercussions on the promotion of food and nutritional security.

However, only in 2010, Brazil included food as a social right, established in art. 6 of the Brazilian Federal Constitution, after Constitutional Amendment nº 64, of February 4, 2010. The governance must adopt the policies and actions that are necessary to promote and guarantee food and nutritional security for the population, as provided by Law No. 11,346, of September 15, 2006, which created the National System of Food and Nutrition Security (SISAN).<sup>22</sup>

The importance of the State's active participation in supporting public policies to protect people living in food and nutritional insecurity is emphasized. In this sense, school feeding is one of the axes of specific public policies aimed at promoting Food and Nutritional Security, contributing to the fight against hunger and misery.<sup>23</sup> PNAE is an example of public policy that has grown through governance and commitment, especially in the last 15 years, becoming a state policy.

Thus, it is important that public policy such as PNAE remains to be performed during this pandemic period in order to guarantee universal rights for all students of the Brazilian public system. When classes are suspended, the right to food for all students must be met in public schools, for the correct execution of the PNAE at this exceptional time.

### **National School Feeding Program during the Covid-19 pandemic**

The PNAE is linked to family farming and has effects beyond the school. There is the facility for Federal government, states, and municipalities work with autonomous management and financial independence. This policy is considered a world reference in terms of school feeding.<sup>24</sup> Brazil is the only country that serves all public school students universally: there are 40 million students receiving 50 million meals a day and an investment of R\$ 4 billion in the year.<sup>25</sup>

However, in this pandemic period, public policies need to be reorganized. In this way, the PNAE adapted the operation to maintain the FNS of users. In order to maintain the policy of isolation and students at home with less damage to food, only after almost a month of closing schools, the Federal government signed Law 13,987/2020.<sup>26</sup>

This law added the article 21-A of law no. 11,947, of June 16, 2009<sup>6</sup> recognized as the legal framework for school meals in the country. Thus, states and municipalities can distribute food purchased with PNAE resources to parents or guardians of public primary school students during the suspension of face-to-face classes,<sup>26</sup> as below:

During the period of suspension of classes in public schools of basic education due to an emergency or public calamity, it is authorized, throughout the national territory, on an exceptional basis, the immediate distribution to parents or guardians of students enrolled in them, with monitoring by CAE, of foodstuffs acquired with financial resources received, under the terms of this Law, to the Pnae account.

With this new Law,<sup>26</sup> which allows the redirection of food from schools to the families of children and adolescents enrolled in public schools, the Ministry of Education published Resolution CD / FNDE nº 2/2020, of April 9, 2020, with the guidelines on how the redirection of food should be done by the Program's Executing Entities.<sup>27</sup>

Besides the standardization, the Ministry of Education, through the National Education Development Fund (FNDE), and the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock and Supply, through the Secretariat Family Agriculture and Cooperatives, disseminated a manual with guidelines for the execution of the PNAE during the

pandemic.<sup>28</sup> The material deals with the necessary organization so that foodstuffs are distributed to the families of students enrolled in the public school system.

Local managers have been implementing strategies for the continuity of the program, distributing food, meal kits and/or transferring financial resources to the families of children and adolescents. The initiative is significant, since it ensures the maintenance of food distribution for the families of students, protecting them from food and nutritional insecurity.

However, it is important to reflect on these strategies, regarding the quantity and nutritional quality of foodstuffs distributed by the states and municipalities or acquired by the families.

The food kits must be defined by the nutrition team and contain the appropriate amount for the age group, according to the period in which the student would be attending school. However, when delivered to the family, these foods will probably be shared, which will reduce the amount of food eaten by students.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it is suggested that this strategy be combined with other government actions, such as income transfer, which have an impact on care for other family members, under the risk that the scope of the PNAE will be dissipated in the context of the pandemic.

The other situation to be considered is regarding the nutritional quality of these food kits. The current regulation of PNAE<sup>29</sup> establishes that food products offered must be based on fresh or minimally processed food, in order to respect the nutritional needs, eating habits, the local food culture, in addition to being guided by sustainability, seasonality and agricultural diversification the region and in promoting adequate and healthy food. For the pandemic period, the FNDE was careful to emphasize in the regulations that the kits must follow the provisions established of the PNAE legislation with regard to nutritional quality, as well as maintaining the supply of fresh fruits and vegetables and the acquisition of family farming food.<sup>27</sup> However, in the context of the pandemic, it is even more necessary to encourage the FNDE as to the practice of this guidance by states and municipalities. PNAE is an element of strengthening and guaranteeing income for family farmers, as well as promoting adequate and healthy food for students in their homes. The relationship between education and agriculture policies for the delivery of food kits to students is an important strategy to reduce the negative impacts caused by the pandemic in school feeding and family farming.

Another aspect that should be questioned is regarding the executing entities that chose to transfer their own funds to the families of the students to acquire the food. In this case of transferring responsibility for the purchase of food to the family, it becomes a challenge to guarantee the nutritional quality of the food that will be purchased, as well as eliminating the possibility of selling family agriculture to the program. It is also necessary to consider the difficulties that the family may face in receiving the benefit and preparing the food. Thus, we understand the need to monitor these actions. The study by Reis et al<sup>30</sup> proposes a model for monitoring the benefits of financial assistance received by students during the Covid-19 pandemic, through a checklist to understand the nutritional status applied by the community health agent using telehealth.

This period has been a great challenge for federal, state, and municipal managers who are implementing PNAE. In spite of all the difficulties caused by the pandemic, the PNAE has shown effective responses.

It is important to emphasize that the PNAE legislation<sup>26</sup> to face the Covid-19 pandemic is not a requirement, but a recommendation to municipal and state managers, even though the program has a universal character. Thus, the Federal government and the civil society, must mobilize these managers to carry out the necessary innovations and come to adhere to this law, operationalizing the access of these foods to 100% of the students' families, reducing the impact of insecurity food and nutrition and bringing assistance to the most vulnerable families who can't purchase other types of food.

The public policy of PNAE<sup>7</sup> is designed to meet at least 20% of the nutritional needs of students on the day. If the manager does not provide these foods, students are suppressing the possibility and the right to at least these 20% of nutritional needs. In addition, these foods of recognized nutritional quality, such as fruits and vegetables, when arriving at students' homes can also contribute to the formation of healthy eating habits for their entire family.

Besides the operationalization during the pandemic, strategies must be implemented after the return of face-to-face classes. Amorim et al<sup>31</sup> suggests strategies such as food insecurity survey among students, expand the amount transferred by the PNAE to municipalities with a low and very low Human Development Index, and attendance of students from families in food insecurity during holidays and vacations.

At this moment, after about six months of isolation measures, which resulted in the temporary suspension of classes in the country, there is a signal of a gradual return of classroom activities in schools in some states and municipalities. Thus, school feeding must be carried out with the necessary sanitary rigor, applying measures to prevent, control and contain risks and harms to public health in order to minimize the risk of transmission of Covid-19 for the school community. In this regard, FNDE published a document with technical recommendations to carry out the PNAE activities.<sup>32</sup>

Considering the context of the pandemic, the performance of social control will be even more important, especially with regard to the inspection of the quality of food, structural and sanitary conditions of school kitchens. In addition, the monitoring, evaluation and technical support of the FNDE and the Collaborating Centers for School Food and Nutrition (CECANE) to the executing entities will be essential to ensure the achievement of food security for students and the entire school community.

Finally, the role of the State as a protagonist in the fight against hunger and the reduction of poverty in the country is reinforced in a structural way, assuming the strengthening of already existing social policies. The PNAE has several powers in the existing programs on the public agenda as a way of mitigating the consequences of hunger, suggesting adaptations in the implementation in the context of the pandemic. It is necessary that the guarantee of the right to adequate food continues for the entire population, especially those most impacted in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic. The hunger is today! It is urgent and cannot wait!

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Brazilian school feeding program is the result of struggles for the right to adequate food and is a policy that not only helps with FNS, but also contributes to biopsychosocial growth and development, learning, school performance and the formation of eating habits of thousands of students.

We reinforce the importance of organized civil society in defense of public policies for FNS, especially in supporting the PNAE, as well as in the role of the State as a protagonist in the fight against hunger and reduction of poverty in the country, assuming the strengthening of existing social policies. Therefore, policies to promote school meals must be promoted urgently.

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### Contributors

Bicalho D conceptualized, designed, collected information and data, provided a description of the scenario and prepared the study; Lima TM collected information and data, prepared the study and revised the article. The authors approved the final version of the manuscript.

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