

MAB REPORT: TWO YEARS AFTER THE FLOODS IN RIO GRANDE DO SUL – ORGANIZATION AND THE STRUGGLE FOR THE RIGHTS OF AFFECTED POPULATIONS

The worsening climate crisis experienced in Rio Grande do Sul in 2023 and 2024 reinforces both the decision and the necessity for the *Movimento dos Atingidos por Barragens* (Movement of People Affected by Dams – MAB) to expand its activities. Born 35 years ago from peasant struggles led by populations affected by dam construction in different regions of Brazil, and broadening its scope of action following the dam collapse disasters in Mariana and Brumadinho, Minas Gerais, MAB now finds itself confronted with extreme events intensified by the climate crisis.

This scenario, which grows more severe each year, has challenged the movement to organize collective struggle aimed at effectively guaranteeing the rights of affected populations. Since September 2023, when the first floods devastated the Vale do Taquari region in inland Rio Grande do Sul, MAB has strengthened its solidarity and support for victims of socio-environmental disasters while deepening debate on climate change.

Following the May 2024 flood, efforts to strengthen grassroots organization began during the emergency phase itself, immediately after the disaster, through the implementation of four solidarity kitchens. Between May 13 and October 12, 2024, these kitchens distributed 188,000 meals, food baskets, drinking water, and essential supplies.

MAB's work with affected communities extended beyond material assistance. Many residents reported that, in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy, they were disoriented, lacked information about their rights, and had no perspective amid the destruction of their homes. The arrival of MAB and the establishment of solidarity kitchens represented a turning point, providing not only food but also guidance and support through an organizational process.

From Solidarity Kitchens to Groups of Affected People

Emergency solidarity initiatives helped transform disorientation and misinformation into collective organization among affected populations. Through conversations with movement activists, communities gradually came to better understand their rights and the urgent need to struggle for their realization.

During this period, MAB worked to guarantee community autonomy by promoting collective learning processes aimed at solving problems and encouraging popular mobilization. Actions were primarily directed toward organizing affected populations so that individuals could become active protagonists in rebuilding their lives and territories.

As a strategy for organizing collective struggle, the Movement promoted the formation of groups of affected people composed of families sharing some degree of affinity, particularly through community and neighborhood ties. This was one of the first steps undertaken, involving the identification of both established territorial leaders and new ones willing to host small meetings in their homes or other informal spaces, inviting acquaintances, neighbors, relatives, and others who might be interested.

These groups consolidated themselves as privileged spaces for analyzing reality and local contexts, discussing community conditions, and identifying possible means of claiming rights.

A New Affected Subject

The emergence of a new category of affected subject, now impacted by extreme events linked to the climate crisis, requires public authorities to act swiftly in providing assistance and developing policies in favor of these populations, who overnight may find themselves without housing, food, or any form of security. Within this process emerges a political subject who no longer accepts being merely a victim and instead chooses to become an active agent in the pursuit of basic guarantees amid the chaos of emergency situations.

Currently, affected populations struggle for recognition, full reparation for damages suffered, and the implementation of permanent prevention and response

policies for extreme climate events, with priority attention directed toward populations in situations of greater vulnerability.

In this context, it is insufficient merely to acknowledge the occurrence of disaster; it is essential to recognize affected populations as holders of rights and to ensure those rights are guaranteed. Reparation cannot be treated as a favor or concession, and reconstruction cannot occur without the active participation of affected populations.

MAB's actions demonstrate that it is possible to transform pain into organization and solidarity into collective struggle. Defending the rights of populations affected by the climate crisis means, above all, defending human dignity, social justice, and the construction of a country prepared to confront the challenges of our time.

The Scale of the 2024 Flood

The floods that struck Rio Grande do Sul in September 2023, and, above all, in May 2024, constituted the largest socio-climatic disaster in the history of the state (ANA, 2025).

In September 2023, extreme rainfall volumes – ranging between 300 mm and 500 mm – affected more than 100 municipalities across the three hydrographic regions of Rio Grande do Sul¹, resulting in damage and losses to housing, commerce, public and private infrastructure, transportation routes, water and energy supply networks, and rural activities.

In total, approximately 390,000 people were affected; among them, 943 were injured, 5,177 were left homeless (*desabrigados*), 22,203 were displaced (*desalojados*), nine went missing, and 49 deaths² were recorded. The highest mortality rates occurred in the municipalities of Muçum (16 deaths) and Roca Sales (12 deaths), both located in the Vale do Taquari region. In this regard, the 2023 disaster revealed not only the intensity of extreme climate events but also the socio-environmental vulnerability of various territories throughout the state.

¹ Meteorological Conditions Observed in September 2023 and the Status of Major Agricultural Crops in the State of Rio Grande do Sul. Agrometeorological Bulletin.

² Civil Defense Bulletin of Rio Grande do Sul (RS) - Available at: <https://www.estado.rs.gov.br/18h-balanco-da-defesa-civil-sobre-chuvas-intensas-e-enchentes-no-rs-contabiliza-49-mortes-6511f7c5070f8>

Eight months after the 2023 rainfall events, May 2024 witnessed the most severe meteorological event ever recorded in the state, with intense precipitation occurring between April 29 and May 5 and rainfall accumulation varying from 320 mm to 700 mm. This tragedy exposed structural weaknesses in flood protection systems, warning mechanisms, and disaster risk management (ANA, 2025).

From an economic perspective, losses were enormous, surpassing BRL 88 billion in measurable damages, losses, and additional costs. More than 80% of total impacts were concentrated within the private sector, illustrating a scenario of crisis for the restructuring of the state economy, which is fundamentally based on agriculture, manufacturing industries, and services. Another significant factor concerns the volume of additional expenditures attributed to public authorities, directed toward emergency response measures, restoring production and public services, and reallocating other governmental expenditures.

Table 1 – Total Effects, in Thousands (BRL)

	Público	Privado	Total
Danos	5.172.824	36.115.553	41.288.377
Perdas	2.616.530	31.490.161	34.106.691
Custos adicionais	12.005.061	1.476.507	13.481.567
Total	19.794.415	69.082.220	88.876.634

Fonte: Suarez (2024, p. 18).

Table 2 demonstrates that the productive sector was the most affected, accounting for more than BRL 60 billion and representing approximately 80% of the estimated total monetary losses. As the sector with the greatest economic capacity, its disruption significantly impacts employment and income circulation, with direct consequences at both state and municipal levels. Material and economic impacts are also notable, particularly through the destruction of housing, urban and rural infrastructure, public facilities, and means of subsistence.

Table 2 – Disaster Impacts by Sector (Total), in Thousands (BRL)

	Danos	Perdas	Custos adicionais
Social	11.605.088	1.033.007	6.405.756
Infraestrutura	4.449.312	1.013.196	1.538.109
Produtivo	25.222.141	30.474.606	5.537.702
Meio ambiente	11.836	1.585.882	--

Fonte: Suarez (2024, p. 18).

These data contribute to an initial understanding of the seriousness of the catastrophe in socio-productive and economic terms, as well as in relation to affected populations, directly impacting living conditions and expanding and intensifying situations of social vulnerability. Many communities lost regular access to essential services such as healthcare, education, and social assistance due to territorial isolation and the destruction of public infrastructure.

On the social level, the magnitude of the crisis was even more dramatic. Thousands of families had their homes destroyed or severely damaged, resulting in hundreds of thousands of displaced or homeless individuals.

The regions most affected were Metropolitan Porto Alegre and Vale do Taquari, with an approximate population of five million people and concentrating more than 40% of the population of Rio Grande do Sul (IBGE, 2025). More than 700,000 people were affected in their homes (Suarez, 2024, p. 17), including 77,712 rescued individuals, 81,170 homeless persons, and 581,638 displaced residents. In addition, 183 deaths and 27 missing persons were recorded.

Although climate disasters broadly affect society, their impacts are experienced in profoundly unequal ways. The neighborhoods most severely affected by flooding are historically peripheral areas, predominantly inhabited by low-income families, Black populations, female heads of household, and informal workers. In Rio Grande do Sul, 87% of families affected by the May 2024 floods have a total household income of up to two minimum wages, while 65% survive on less than one minimum wage³.

³ MUP – Unified Map of the *Plano Rio Grande*. Available at: <https://mup.rs.gov.br/>

Structural inequality explains why damages are greater among poorer populations. The working class is the group most affected by climate change. Within this class, the most vulnerable populations, who contributed the least to climate change, are those most severely impacted, especially “women, children, Indigenous peoples, Afro-descendant populations, rural communities, informal workers, and people living in poverty” as identified in REDESCA’s working visit report to Brazil. These are the populations living in risk-prone areas, not by choice, but due to a lack of alternatives.

In this sense, disasters cannot be understood merely as natural events. They result from social, historical, and political processes that produce and distribute risks unequally. Valencio et al. (2009) emphasize that “the disaster is not explained by the event itself, but by the social conditions that make it disastrous”, thereby shifting the analytical focus from the exceptional nature of natural phenomena to the normality of social structures that generate risk.

Vulnerability to climate disasters results from long-term political and economic decisions. Urban expansion into risk areas, lack of territorial planning, inadequate drainage infrastructure, and negligence regarding containment works reflect the combination of real estate pressure, absence of regulation, and exclusionary housing policies. These processes are not random; rather, they are guided by economic interests that subordinate the right to the city to the logic of urban land commodification, reflecting the appropriation of safer urban areas by dominant economic interests.

This analysis also sheds light on the relationship between climate crisis and development models. The intensification of extreme events is associated with a pattern of labor exploitation and resource extraction that prioritizes economic growth at the expense of sustainability and social justice. At the same time, market logic tends to deepen inequalities and weaken public policies, increasing the vulnerability of poorer populations.

In contexts of crisis, space also emerges for what has been termed “disaster capitalism”, whereby reconstruction processes are captured by private interests, often to the detriment of the rights of affected populations.

For example, two years after the May 2024 floods, while the number of permanent and safe housing units delivered to affected populations remains negligible and largely symbolic, resources allocated to financing productive sectors, particularly industry and agribusiness, through credit lines, debt forgiveness, and subsidies have been substantial and constitute the largest share of federal government resources directed to Rio Grande do Sul during the post-flood period. In the municipality of Lajeado/RS alone, located in Vale do Taquari, nearly BRL 100 million in federal resources were allocated to housing, whereas support directed to businesses and rural producers reached almost BRL 800 million. In several cases, modernization of industrial machinery even contributed to unemployment among workers.

Likewise, while the state has recorded economic growth below the national average over recent decades, 2024 was marked by a 4.9% increase in Rio Grande do Sul's GDP, higher than Brazil's GDP growth during the same period (3.4%).

In other words, while the disaster increases social vulnerability for most of the population, public investment, especially from the federal government, has been predominantly appropriated by private business interests.

The State's Response

The intensification of extreme climate events in Rio Grande do Sul dramatically revealed the collapse of public structures responsible for preventing, responding to, and rebuilding affected territories. What became evident was not merely the inability to provide an immediate response to the emergency, but rather the exposure of a weakened model of State, marked by institutional fragmentation, privatization of public services, and the absence of long-term planning. Within this context, the climate crisis acts as an accelerating factor of preexisting inequalities, affecting most intensely precisely those populations that have historically been made vulnerable.

The public policies implemented thus far have proven insufficient and poorly coordinated. There have been important initiatives, such as *Minha Casa Minha Vida Reconstrução* and *Compra Assistida*, traditional housing programs not specifically

designed for reparation and which have demonstrated an inability to address the complexity of the reconstruction process. What is lacking is an integrated strategy of reparation capable of articulating housing, infrastructure, access to public services, and the rebuilding of community ties. The result is the reproduction of partial solutions that address some immediate effects of disasters but fail to confront their structural causes. In this scenario, the prevailing logic remains one of emergency response, to the detriment of robust policies of reparation, prevention, and adaptation.

The housing plans proposed by governments are, in general, being designed in areas distant from the original territories of affected communities. In practice, this constitutes a policy of deterritorialization, capable of further accelerating processes of social exclusion and deepening the peripheralization of affected populations. Another concerning aspect is the manner in which housing distribution has been conducted: individualized, without considering neighborhood bonds and community ties. There is a concrete risk of community fragmentation and even income-based segregation within housing developments themselves if access priorities are defined solely according to socioeconomic criteria.

Within this context, a central question emerges: who are, in fact, the affected populations? Far from being a merely technical definition, the category of “affected person” constitutes a political construction under constant dispute. As argued by Carlos Vainer, it is a “social category under dispute”, whose definition implies either the recognition or denial of rights. Being recognized as affected means gaining access to reparation policies, such as compensation and resettlement. Conversely, not being recognized means remaining invisible to the State.

In the recent case of Rio Grande do Sul, MAB has observed that the process of identifying families selected for public policies has been marked by profound underreporting, particularly within housing programs. Thousands of individuals affected by floods and other extreme events do not appear in official registries and are therefore excluded from public policies. The criteria adopted by municipalities to define eligibility for housing programs and other forms of support vary significantly, creating situations of injustice and arbitrariness. Families whose homes suffered severe damage but were not classified as “total losses” ultimately become excluded from programs, often without

receiving clear information regarding their situation. This constitutes a silent form of exclusion, one that further deepens social vulnerability.

Underreporting is not merely an administrative problem; above all, it is a political issue. By restricting recognition of affected populations, the State simultaneously restricts the reach of reparation policies. In this sense, the struggle for recognition as an affected person is, fundamentally, a struggle for rights and for social justice.

Another element exposing the contradictions of the current reconstruction model lies in the allocation of resources from FUNRIGS (*Fundo do Plano Rio Grande*), a fund created to centralize and finance reconstruction, adaptation, and resilience actions following the floods of 2023 and 2024, financed primarily through the suspension of Rio Grande do Sul's public debt to the federal government.

By January 2026, the Fund had already consolidated an estimated allocation of approximately BRL 13.9 billion in investments. However, the distribution of these resources reveals a profound disconnect between budgetary priorities and the needs of affected populations. Most resources are concentrated in transportation infrastructure, totaling approximately BRL 7.4 billion, with the largest amount (more than BRL 3 billion) directed toward highway concession projects – namely privatization and toll implementation. Next come investments in public security, exceeding BRL 1 billion, including the acquisition of equipment such as helicopters, vehicles, weaponry, and even investments in the prison system.

On the other hand, investments in housing, the central axis of any reconstruction policy, amount to less than BRL 1 billion. This distribution reveals an inversion of priorities: while major infrastructure projects and public security investments receive substantial volumes of resources, the direct needs of affected populations, such as dignified housing and territorial reconstruction, remain underfunded.

The lack of transparency in the management of FUNRIGS further aggravates this scenario. Available information is fragmented, difficult to access, and insufficiently detailed, hindering social oversight and public participation in defining priorities. Without transparency, there is no possibility of effective monitoring of public expenditures, nor of meaningful political engagement by affected populations and their organizations.

Given this context, the construction of a **state policy on the rights of populations affected by the climate crisis and by extreme climate events** becomes urgent. Such a policy must begin with broad and inclusive recognition of who the affected populations are, incorporating not only those who lost their homes but also those who suffered economic losses, disruption of community ties, and impacts upon their ways of life.

Furthermore, it is essential to guarantee the effective participation of affected populations in all stages of public policy, from planning to implementation. Reconstruction cannot be imposed vertically through standardized solutions detached from local realities. On the contrary, it must be collectively built, respecting the knowledge, practices, and forms of organization developed by communities.

Finally, permanent institutional mechanisms must be established, such as the creation of a specific state body and a public fund dedicated exclusively to risk management and climate adaptation, subject to social oversight and transparency. More than responding to disasters that have already occurred, it is necessary to build state capacity to prevent new impacts and reduce vulnerabilities.

The climate crisis imposes unprecedented challenges, but it also exposes the contradictions of a development model that produces inequalities and precariousness of life. Confronting it requires more than technical solutions: it demands political will, strengthening of the State, and commitment to social justice.

DEMANDS OF THE POPULATIONS AFFECTED IN RIO GRANDE DO SUL

More than one hundred thousand homes affected and no policy commensurate with the scale of the disaster

Data from the Government of Rio Grande do Sul, published in the *Mapa Único* (MUP RS), indicate that approximately 465,000 private households were affected by the 2024 flood. The *Confederação Nacional de Municípios* (CNM), in its latest survey with municipal governments, stated that around 113,000 homes were damaged and/or completely destroyed. Official figures, however, as is well known, often serve more to conceal than

to reveal: there exists a significant contingent of people who were never even recognized, rendered invisible by public registries.

Two years after the flood, the promise of housing remains a distant dream for many. The mismatch between the supply of homes and the demands of affected families lays bare the priority given by the State to bureaucracy rather than to life itself. The federal government program *Minha Casa Minha Vida – Reconstrução* represented an important step in the face of the tragedy, but one insufficient to address the challenge of rebuilding the lives of affected populations. Other federal and state housing programs are underway, yet they likewise fail to meet the actual needs of affected communities.

Underreporting, far from constituting a merely technical problem, reveals a political choice for neglect. The absence of active outreach by governments is not accidental: it is a decision not to see those who need assistance most. Thousands of people who lost their homes remain outside official registries, taking refuge in the houses of relatives and friends. Bureaucracy and the lack of clarity regarding eligibility criteria for public programs do not exclude the neediest families by chance, since they operate as a highly selective mechanism of inclusion and a violently expansive mechanism of exclusion.

For MAB, solutions must involve full recognition of affected families, measures that genuinely contemplate these populations through new housing policies, and a broad program for home reconstruction and renovation.

In this regard, one of MAB's principal demands – the defense of a collective resettlement model capable of preserving community bonds and networks of solidarity among neighbors and relatives – encounters resistance from public authorities that continue to treat affected populations as numbers rather than as subjects of rights. For this reason, it is indispensable to ensure the effective participation of these populations in all stages of the process, from planning to implementation.

For Food Security and Other Basic Rights

The absence of adequate policies for reparation of affected populations in the state means that, even after such a long period, many families still experience lives disrupted by unemployment and reduced household income, generating impoverishment



among these populations. This does not occur by chance, but as a direct consequence of state negligence in guaranteeing the minimum conditions necessary for reconstruction.

One of the most immediate consequences is daily uncertainty regarding access to food, which, together with the high costs of water and electricity, compromises household budgets and deepens insecurity concerning fundamental needs. For this reason, MAB advocates maintaining programs for food provision to affected families and guaranteeing access to water and electricity of adequate quality and at fair prices, in addition to amnesty for all debts accumulated during the flood period and the guarantee of social electricity tariffs for all families living in flood-prone areas.

The vulnerability imposed upon affected populations is also directly related to their health conditions. The destruction caused by the floods to Basic Health Units, Psychosocial Care Centers, Popular Pharmacies, and Hospitals left the population abandoned at a critical moment in their own lives. Added to this, and especially regarding women's health, is the condition of schools and childcare centers in affected territories, many of which have yet to be restored.

The dismantling of healthcare and education systems directly impacts the mental health of residents in Rio Grande do Sul. Tightness in the chest, insomnia, tremors, shortness of breath, dizziness, nausea, sweating, discouragement, fear, and anguish. The list of symptoms is readily recounted by affected individuals who seek support within a weakened system in order to cope with depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder and, to make matters worse, find little hope for improvement in the future.

The Urgency of a Protection Plan

The anguish experienced by the people of Rio Grande do Sul is permeated by the constant fear of reliving the nightmare of flooding. This results from the absence of emergency plans capable of preventing situations in which populations are exposed to environmental risks and large-scale rescue operations become necessary. After all, if so many people needed to be rescued from the rooftops of their homes, it means that all measures intended for the evacuation of vulnerable populations had failed, leaving rescue operations as the final alternative.



More than rebuilding cities, it is necessary to rethink strategies attentive to affected populations – with truly effective emergency plans, protection for the most vulnerable, and local actions articulated with global policies.

The reconstruction of Rio Grande do Sul, two years after the floods, is a process that demands more than resources; it requires sensitivity, coordination, and above all the recognition and active participation of those who continue to live with the scars left by climate change. The road ahead is long, and the struggle for our rights continues.

Water for life, not for death!

References

ANA, Agência Nacional de Águas e Saneamento Básico. **As enchentes no Rio Grande do Sul: lições, desafios e caminhos para um futuro resiliente**. Brasília: ANA, 2025.

CARDOSO, Loana Silveira et al. Condições meteorológicas ocorridas em setembro de 2023 e situação das principais culturas agrícolas no estado do Rio Grande do Sul. Comunicado Agrometeorológico, Porto Alegre, n. 59, p. 6-28, set. 2023. Disponível em: <https://www.agricultura.rs.gov.br/upload/arquivos/202310/23102751-comunicado-agrometeorologico-59-setembro-final.pdf>

Confederação Nacional dos Municípios - CNM. **Boletim dos Desastres no Rio Grande do Sul**. 2024. Disponível em: <https://cnm.org.br/comunicacao/noticias/cnm-atualiza-prejuizos-dos-municipios-com-as-chuvas-no-rs-impacto-e-de-r-13-3-bilhoes>. Consulta em: 20 mar. 2026.

HUMANOS, CIDH-COMISSÃO INTERAMERICANA DE DIREITOS. **Impactos das enchentes no Rio Grande do Sul: observações e recomendações para a garantia dos direitos econômicos, sociais, culturais e ambientais**. Relatório da visita de trabalho da REDESCA ao Brasil. 2024.

Sistema IBGE de Recuperação Automática - SIDRA. **População residente estimada**. Disponível em: <https://sidra.ibge.gov.br/tabela/6579>. Consulta em: 10 mar. 2026.

Secretaria de Planejamento, Governança e Gestão (SPGG). **Mapa Único do Plano Rio Grande (MUP RS)**. Departamentos de Economia e Estatística (DEE) e de Planejamento Governamental (Deplan). Disponível em: <https://mup.rs.gov.br/>. Consulta em: 20 mar. 2026.

Secretaria de Planejamento, Governança e Gestão (SPGG). **Fundo do Plano Rio Grande - Funrigs**. Departamentos de Economia e Estatística (DEE) e de Planejamento Governamental (Deplan). Disponível em: <https://planoriogrande.rs.gov.br/funrigs>. Consulta em: 20 mar. 2026.

**MOVIMENTO DOS ATINGIDOS POR BARRAGENS**E-mail: secretaria@atingidos.orgSite: <https://mab.org.br>

Suárez, Ginés; **Avaliação dos efeitos e impactos das inundações no Rio Grande do Sul**. ONU, BID, CEPAL, 2024.

VAINER, Carlos. Conceito de Atingido: uma revisão do debate. In: ROTHMAN, Franklin Daniel. Vidas Alagadas – conflitos socioambientais., licenciamento e barragens. Viçosa: UFV, 2008.

VALENCIO, Norma; SIENA, Mariana; MARCHEZINI, Victor; GONÇALVES, Juliano Costa (Orgs.). **Sociologia dos desastres – construção, interfaces e perspectivas no Brasil**. São Carlos: RiMa Editora, 2009.

