

School feeding in Covid-19 times: mapping of public policy execution strategies by state administration

Alimentação escolar em tempos de Covid-19: mapeamento das estratégias de execução da política pública pelos gestores estaduais

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ABSTRACT

Objective

Identify and discuss strategies for execution the National School Feeding Program by state administrations during the coronavirus disease pandemic 2019.

Methods

This is a descriptive cross-sectional investigation. An exploratory review of the official publication of state governments and the Federal District to find out the strategies for the execution of the National School Feeding Program, after school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Information on the form of execution and the public served by the action were reviewed in a descriptive manner.

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Results

Out of the 27 federative units, 55% distributed food kits, 26% supplied food cards/vouchers and 19% provided food kits and food cards/vouchers. As to the scope, 37% maintained general service, 30% attended schoolchildren from families registered in the Brazilian cash transfer program (*Bolsa Família*) and 26% attended schoolchildren from families registered in the Underprivileged Families Registry.

Conclusion

The National School Feeding Program was weak in terms of assuring the Human Right to Adequate Food and Food and Nutrition Security. The slowness of the federal administration and the gaps in the regulations issued may explain the changes in the reported strategies, which, in their majority, violate the principle of universality.

Keywords: Coronavirus. Food and nutrition security. Quarantine. School feeding.

RESUMO

Objetivo

Identificar e discutir estratégias de execução do Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar adotadas pelas gestões estaduais durante a pandemia de coronavírus 2019.

Métodos

Trata-se de pesquisa transversal descritiva. Foram realizadas visitas exploratórias nas páginas oficiais dos governos estaduais e do Distrito Federal para obtenção de informações a respeito das estratégias de execução do Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar após a suspensão das aulas pela pandemia por de COVID-19. As informações sobre a forma de execução e o público atendido pela ação foram analisadas de modo descritivo.

Resultados

Das 27 unidades federativas, 55% distribuíram kits de alimentos, 26% entregaram cartão/vale alimentação e 19% forneceram kits de alimentos e cartão/vale alimentação. Com relação à abrangência, 37% mantiveram atendimento universal, 30% atenderam escolares de famílias cadastradas no Programa Bolsa Família e 26% atenderam escolares de famílias registradas no Cadastro Único.

Conclusão

Verificou-se a fragilidade do Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar quanto à garantia do Direito Humano à Alimentação Adequada e da Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional. A morosidade do gestor federal e lacunas das normativas expedidas podem explicar as modificações nas estratégias relatadas e que, em sua maioria, ferem o princípio da universalidade.

Palavras-chave: Coronavirus. Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional. Quarentena. Alimentação Escolar.

INTRODUCTION

School feeding programs represent essential State interventions to guarantee the Human Right to Adequate Food (HRAF) and the fostering of Food and Nutrition Security (FNS). It is estimated that 85% of schoolchildren in Latin America and the Caribbean have access to this right, with approximately 10 million having school meal as their main meal [1]. In Brazil, 47.9 million children were enrolled in the Basic Education System in 2019, 80.9% of which were in public school [2]. These schoolchildren meals are purchased with supplementary funds of *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar* (PNAE, National School Feeding Program) and from the administration of States and municipalities [3].

During 2019, the *Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação* (FNDE, National Fund for Educational Development) which manages the PNAE, invested R\$ 3.97 billion in providing more than

10 billion meals/year, making it the second largest school feeding program in the world [3,4]. This amount of funds for the fostering of continuous and permanent access to school meals, highlights the importance of PNAE as a public reference program for the FNS [5-8].

With the Covid-19 pandemic, several countries discontinued face-to-face classes at all levels of education, due to the need to adopt measures of social isolation [9]. In Brazil, these measures were instituted by Ordinance number 356 issued by the Ministry of Health, which came into force on March 11, 2020 [10]. This caused several organizations to flag risks to the maintenance of schoolchildren FNS and for the social players involved in the production, distribution and consumption of food [1,11-15]. Within the scope of PNAE, the first positioning of the federal government was Bill No. 13.987/2020 published on April 7 [16], amending Law n° 11.947/2009, and authorizing the use this Program's funds for food purchase and distribution [17]. Two days later, on April 9, Resolution CD/FNDE (Deliberative Council/ National Fund for Educational Development) n° 02/2020 set the operationalization of the PNAE in the framework of public calamity [18]. On April 30, a webinar clarified managers' questions about the performance of programs linked to the Ministry of Education and a publication was released containing guidelines to assist in the continuity of the PNAE offer during the Covid-19 pandemic [19-20].

Thus, the FNDE established a set of guidelines on the form of acquisition and distribution of food, leaving at the discretion of the local public authorities the operationalization of the program and initiating a mobilization of all municipalities and States throughout the country. This investigation purpose was to identify and discuss actions taken by the State administrations regarding the PNAE in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic.

METHODS

This a descriptive cross-sectional study to review the strategies of execution of the PNAE by the States Government during the period of school closures due to the pandemic [21]. In order to obtain the data, exploratory reviews were performed in the official publications of the State governments and the Federal District between May 22 and 24, 2020, using the terms: "school meals", "school feeding", "kit", "basic food basket", "food basket". For non-existent data, an Internet search was performed using the most accessed search engine to locate the information.

Information on the form of execution and the public served by the identified strategies were compiled in spreadsheets and submitted to a descriptive analysis. Data on the number of students and schools attended by the PNAE were included.

RESULTS

The 26 States and the Federal District reported the adoption of different measures to assist students. Out of the 27 federative units, 55% (n=15) distributed food kits (perishable/non-perishable), 26% (n=7) delivered food cards/vouchers and 19% (n=5) supplied food kits and provided cards/food voucher. Regarding the scope, 37% (n=10) attended all students, 30% (n=8) took into account students from families registered in the in the Brazilian cash transfer program (*Bolsa Família*), 26% (n=7) served students from families registered in the Underprivileged Families Record and 7% (n=2) adopted mixed criteria (Table 1) [22,23].

Table 1. Execution of the National School Feeding Program by the Brazilian States Governments during the period of school closure in the Covid-19 pandemic. Brazil, 2020.

Region	UF	Total of school-children*	Total of schools**	Execution forms	Students attended
North	AC	179,600	635	Distribution of non-perishable food kits	Schoolchildren of families registered with the PBF ¹
	AM	474,031	720	Distribution of non-perishable food kits	All
	AP	127,909	395	Distribution of non-perishable food kits	All
	PA	599,808	886	Food card in the amount of R\$ 75 exclusively for the purchase of food. Distribution of food kits to indigenous schools	All
	RO	210,006	440	Food card in the amount of R\$ 80 exclusively for the purchase of food. Distribution of food kits to indigenous schools	Schoolchildren of families registered in the CadÚnico ²
	RR	75,596	383	Distribution of perishable and less perishable food kits from school stocks	Schoolchildren of families registered in the CadÚnico ²
Northeast	AL	187,885	309	At first distribution of food kit Then, Food vouchers worth R\$ 50 (bank deposit)	At first for schoolchildren of families registered in the PBF ¹ Then for all students
	BA	863,985	1.264	Food vouchers worth R\$ 55 (valid in pre-defined retail chains) for exclusive purchase of food	All
	CE	450,400	706	Food card in the amount of R\$ 80	All
	MA	365,848	1.097	Food kit distribution	All
	PB	305,790	761	Food kit distribution	All
	PE	590,336	1.053	Food card in the amount of R\$50	Schoolchildren of families registered in the CadÚnico ²
	PI	315,000	650	Food vouchers worth R\$ 60 (via app) and Food kit from school stocks	Schoolchildren of families registered in the PBF ¹
	RN	241,627	624	Distribution of perishable and non-perishable food kits	All
SE	161,181	354	Distribution of food kit (from school stock)	Schoolchildren of families registered in the PBF ¹	
Mid-West	DF	480,227	732	Food card in the amount of R\$ 79.60 (1 meal/day) and R\$ 159.20 (2 meals/day)	Schoolchildren of families registered in the PBF ¹
	GO	491,821	1.062	Food voucher worth R\$ 150 (bank credit)	Schoolchildren of families registered in the PBF ¹
	MS	257,495	367	Distribution of perishable and non-perishable food kits	All
	MT	393,049	759	Distribution of perishable and non-perishable food kits of FF ³)	Schoolchildren of families registered in the PBF ¹
	TO	166,181	510	Distribution of non-perishable food kits	All
South-East	ES	271,581	498	Distribution of non-perishable food kits	Schoolchildren of families registered in the CadÚnico ²
	MG	2,151,036	3.655	Food voucher in the amount of R\$ 50 (via app; can be used for non-food items)	Schoolchildren of families registered in the CadÚnico ²
	RJ	728,682	1.335	Distribution of non-perishable food kits	At first for the schoolchildren of families registered in the PBF ¹ . Then for families that show interest
	SP	3,870,242	5.676	Food voucher of R\$ 55 (via app)	Schoolchildren of families registered in the CadÚnico ²
South	PR	1,101,356	2.147	Distribution of perishable and non-perishable food kits (bimonthly)	Schoolchildren of families registered in the PBF ¹
	RS	943,284	2.571	Distribution of non-perishable food kits	Schoolchildren of families registered in the CadÚnico ²
	SC	521,687	1.277	Distribution of perishable and non-perishable food kits (from schools stock and purchased from FF ³)	Schoolchildren of families registered in the PBF ¹

Note: **Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação* [22]; ***Fundo Nacional de Desenvolvimento da Educação* [23]. ¹PBF: The Brazilian cash transfer program (*Bolsa Família*); ²CadÚnico: Underprivileged Families Record; ³FF: Family Farming.

DISCUSSION

The structural changes that occurred in the PNAE as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic caused the discontinuation of the principle of universality of this program, causing the breach of the assurance to the right to healthy school diet for the large population group bound to PNAE. To the detriment of the political, technical and operational advances that PNAE has undergone in recent years, especially since 2009, we ought to highlight the weakening that food and nutrition public policies as a whole have suffered in the last five years. It is worth mentioning the extinction of the *Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional* (CONSEA, National Council for Food and Nutritional Security) and the gradual dismantling of the FNS National Policy (FNSNP), following the reduction of financial resources and the population coverage of the programs [24-28].

In the survey performed, it was observed that, initially, in order to settle the effects of the suspension of the supply of school meals, the Executing Entities (EE) created their own strategies, without support from the federal legislation that regulates the execution of the PNAE. Eleven EE created strategies to meet this demand, such as the use of magnetic cards, reloaded monthly with the amount intended for the purchase of foodstuffs for the students' meals. In some States, as in the case of *Bahia*, the use of these cards was attached to certain commercial establishments, limiting the beneficiaries' autonomy in the use of these funds. Another weakness of this strategy that was pointed out was that the use of magnetic cards would jeopardize, during the Covid-19 pandemic period, the guarantee of purchasing family farming products as set forth in the current PNAE legislation. Consequently, this strategy would impact family farmers who would lose the assurance of their products purchasing by the PNAE [29].

Although a normative guidance is in place to give priority to the purchase of food marketed by family farmers in the region, there is evidence that these producers were affected by the slowness of management initiatives in relation to food purchasing and distributing [16,18]. The possibility of negotiating to postpone the delivery of the most perishable foodstuffs also directly interfered with production outflow, considering that the EE request the delivery a posteriori, only after the return of the face-to-face activities in schools, of the bid products. In addition, the difficulty in relation to the volume of production and the delivery capacity by farmers and/or cooperatives may have inhibited positive initiatives for the purchase of these products. The priority given to the purchase of processed food by the administrations was evident when the option to distribute non-perishable food kits was implemented in seven States, as shown in table 1.

It was found that the criterion of the PNAE universal supply was also infringed by the distribution of food kits only to beneficiaries of the Brazilian cash transfer program (*Bolsa Família*). This without considering the bureaucratic issues that prevent the inclusion of new beneficiaries, who lost their jobs, suffered salary reductions and who started to have informal or unpaid work resulting from the context of the pandemic by Covid-19. Added to this, there is the reduction in the number of beneficiaries of the Program that has been occurring since 2016 [24]. In any case, the transfer of the food card/voucher to families, as informed by the States Administration, when there is no counterpart from the EE, is reduced. This is the reality of most States, which claim that it is impossible to supplement resources due to the reduction of tax collection. This is the case also with family farming, which sales to the PNAE are not guaranteed. The reasons alleged by the EE for not buying food from producers of small local properties, even before the pandemic period, are: insufficient production, difficulty in distribution and delivery logistics, problems with documentation and failure to meet the criteria of the public call [29-34].

This conduct of not including products from family farming in the school meals on account of the Covid-19 violates Resolution nº 02/2020, Law nº 11.947/ 2009 and the recommendations of the Food Guide for the Brazilian Population [17,18,35]. Without the inclusion of fresh and minimally processed foods, the kits now contain processed and ultra-processed foods in opposition to the normative determinations and impairing the quality of the food offered. In addition to what is recommended in Resolution No. 02/2020, Resolution nº 06/2020, presents updates regarding the execution of the PNAE and rules on school meals for the basic education schoolchildren, enhancing the guidelines that school food menus should give priority to fresh and minimally processed foods [36]. The difficulty encountered with the suspension of public transport can be overcome by the delivery of food kits at home and the crowding of people can be avoided by a scheduled distribution, according to Resolution nº 02/2020 [18].

In the first days of August, when this paper was prepared, social control, indispensable for the proper execution of the PNAE, was impaired. Law nº 13.987, dated April 7, 2020 establishes the monitoring by the *Conselho de Alimentação Escolar* (CAE, School Meals Council) in the immediate distribution of foodstuffs purchased with PNAE funds [16]. However, no training of the counselors was provided by the FNDE to train those involved, who eventually had to seek their own information on the subject. It should be noted that the National Confederation of Municipalities recommends the participation of the CAE (School Food Council) during the process of implementing the PNAE, with records of minutes and opinions on the strategies established for the distribution of school meals purchased with federal funds [37]. A study carried out with the CAEs in the municipalities of Santa Catarina, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, verified the need for continued training of the players involved in the Program [38]. The *Centros Colaboradores em Alimentação e Nutrição do Escolar* (CECANE, Collaborating Centers for Food and School Nutrition) can contribute to the training of the counselors through virtual meetings, lives, e-advice, guidance available on social networks, among others. Finally, it is necessary to emphasize that the CAE is also crucial in ensuring the universal provision of school meals. And together with the Public Prosecutor and Public Defender's Office, they may ensure that schoolchildren who are not beneficiaries of the PBF receive State support, expanding the possibilities of universal access to the PNAE in the framework of Covid-19.

CONCLUSION

A limitation emerging in this study is that only the State strategies were investigated and, considering the heterogeneity of the PNAE execution in the universe of Brazilian municipalities, an investigation in the municipality sphere is suggested. In addition, it should be pointed out that the strategies reviewed were those disclosed by the EE, requiring future investigations on how they were put into practice, identifying what is the actual coverage of the schoolchildren care and if they were really effective in guaranteeing the HRAF of this population.

The scenario found demonstrated that the universality of care was a neglected guideline by the State Administrations and in the Federal District. In addition, some strategies used by EE do not include the purchase of products from family farming and make it difficult to guarantee the nutritional quality of the food offered to schoolchildren. These differences can be explained by the lack of actual knowledge of managers and CAEs about the PNAE guidelines and denote the perception of an assistance characteristic of the program, hindering the guarantee of the HRAF.

The vulnerability of the PNAE on account of State Administration during the Covid-19 pandemic and the violation of the HRAF and FNS of schoolchildren show the weakening that public policies in

the area of food and nutrition have experienced in recent years. It is possible to infer that the absence of the CONSEA, the gradual dismantling of the PNSAN, the slowness of the federal government in instituting regulations to be carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic may be considered parts of the many causes that can weaken the comprehensive compliance with the PNAE guidelines.

CONTRIBUTORS

E.N. CORRÊA, J. NEVES, and P. PORRUA contributed to the planning, writing and revision of the article. L.D. SOUZA and C.S. FLORINTINO contributed to the planning, collection, analysis and interpretation of data, and writing of the article. F.A.G. VASCONCELOS contributed to the conception, planning, critical review and approval of the final version of the article.

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