

# Brazilian Government Action in the Strengthening and Dismantling of MERCOSUR's Family Farming Institutionalality

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**Abstract:** The article analyses the changes in the Brazilian government's actions at the Specialized Meeting on Family Farming of Mercosur (REAF). Created in 2004, REAF is a regional forum for political dialogue between governments and social organizations to develop public policies for family farming. Drawing on dialogues between historical neo-institutionalism and debates on policy paradigm and dismantling, the article defines four dimensions (political context and power relations, ideas and policy paradigms, characteristics of institutions, and interests and strategies of political actors) to explain and typify the processes of institutional strengthening and dismantling. Based on such dimensions and on data collected through participant observation, document analysis and interviews with key actors, the article analyses the Brazilian government's actions in comparison to prevailing types of institutional change. The analysis shows that, between 2004 and 2016, the prevailing strategy for institutional strengthening was 'discursive and symbolic' and operated through 'institutional densification'; in turn, from 2016 on, strategies of 'discursive and symbolic' dismantling and 'dismantling by change in the institutional linkages' prevailed.

**Keywords:** institutional change; policy dismantling; ideas; public policy; family farming; Mercosur.

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## Introduction

The creation, in 2004, of the Specialized Meeting on Family Farming of Mercosur (REAF) is a milestone in the trajectory of this social category. Such importance stems from at least three elements. The first concerns political and institutional recognition of family farming – a social group until then ignored by most governments due to the prevailing interpretation of the ‘existence of a single model of agriculture’ (Ramos et al. 2014; Niederle 2015; Ramos 2019). Heterogeneity, when recognized, was viewed only in terms of productive scale, what suggested that differences could be addressed with minor adjustments to agricultural policy instruments (e.g., rural credit interest rates or the type of technology to be transferred). Since the creation of REAF, governments have committed to creating ‘appropriate instruments to recognize and identify family farmers, so that public policies for the sector can effectively reach its beneficiaries, recognizing, for this purpose, under equal conditions, the rural women and men’ (REAF 2007).

The second element is associated with the creation of public policy institutions and instruments. Through Mercosur’s decisions, recommendations and resolutions, and by means of the Agriculture and Agrarian Development Ministers’ political stances, several measures were established, triggered by REAF, such as the Family Farming National Registries, guidelines for gender equality in public policies, instruments for the visibility of products and services from family and peasant farming, recommendations for incorporating this social group into government procurement, and training programs on gender and rural youth (REAF 2014; Niederle 2015; Grisa and Niederle 2019, 2018; Molina 2019; Laport and Riella 2020; Cruz, Marques and Haas 2020).

The third element concerns REAF’s configuration as an innovative and diverse space for political dialogue between social organizations and government actors – a space within which everyone sits around the same table – something unimaginable up until then in regional diplomatic spheres. As pointed out by Pont (2018: 57), such dynamics resulted in ‘one of Mercosur’s most vibrant spaces, and a model in terms of its working method and scope of social participation.’

Such elements have already made REAF the subject of several studies. Some of them addressed conflicts in the conceptual and normative approach to family farming (Niederle 2015; 2017; Belem 2020; Aquino and Wesz Jr. 2020; Zimmermann et al. 2020). Others analysed REAF as a mechanism to propagate and transfer ideas, instruments and public policies among the governments of the region (Marin 2011; Molina 2019; Grisa and Niederle 2018, 2019; Cruz, Marques and Haas 2020; Niederle 2020; Laport and Riella 2020). And still others highlighted the challenges of social participation and the conflicts, tensions and agreements between civil society and the State (Carvalho 2011; Ferreira 2017; González 2020; Zimmermann et al. 2020). In general, these studies present regional analyses, seeking to recount the repercussions of REAF among the countries or even its influence on a given country or theme/issue.

This article addresses a dimension so far scarcely explored, namely, the Brazilian government’s role in the (de)construction of REAF. Since 2004, different ideas, interests and paradigms involving public policies have guided the Federal Government’s actions,

reflecting on different positions about: (i) the role of the State and family farming in the country's development; (ii) how the State should relate to civil society; and (iii) Latin American regionalism. Between 2003 and 2016, the State played a key role in furthering development; promoted the political and institutional strengthening of family farming; provided the institutional transit for social movements within the government; and supported regional integration as a strategic element for positioning in international geopolitics (Bastos 2012; Gadelha 2013; Abers, Serafim and Tatagiba 2014; Grisa and Schneider 2015; Ferreira 2017). However, as of 2016, changes in the political regime brought to light a new set of ideas, interests and paradigms, which resulted in the reduction of state leadership; the return of the discourse of a 'single model of agriculture'; the disruption of spaces for social participation; and dismantling of the processes of regional integration and south-south co-operation (Grisa 2018; Cerqueira and Cardoso Jr. 2019; Saraiva e Costa e Silva 2019; Avritzer 2020).

In view of these changes, this article analyses how the emergence of these 'new' interests and policy paradigms impacted the Brazilian actions at REAF concerning political and institutional strengthening or dismantling. For this reflection, the article draws on the dialogue between approaches in the field of public policies. Based on historical neo-institutionalism, a group of authors has highlighted the importance of gradual institutional changes that can either converge toward institutional strengthening or toward converting or displacing institutional arrangements (Streeck and Thelen 2005; Mahoney and Thelen 2010). Considering the ambiguity in the direction of change, Béland (2007: 23) suggests incorporating into the analytical framework the set of ideas that support it – given that 'a paradigm shift or changes in economic and social assumptions can help explain the nature and direction of change in public policy'. In turn, Bauer and Knill (2012) and Bauer et al. (2012) suggest a dialogue between institutions and interests to understand a particular direction of these changes, namely, the policy dismantling. For these authors, political actors are strategic and choose dismantling when the political gains from such actions are greater than their costs.

Following this literature, the article presents four variables to identify the processes of institutional strengthening and dismantling: political context and power relations, policy paradigms, characteristics of institutions, and interests and strategies of political actors (Hall 1993; Pierson 2000; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Bauer and Knill 2012; Hogan and Howlett 2015; Gurtler, Postpischil and Quitzow 2019; Bauer and Becker 2020; Nicolás and Gaitán 2021; Sá e Silva 2021). In doing so, while filling a gap in the neo-institutionalist debate (the ambiguity in the direction of changes), this article seeks to overcome the limitations of other approaches and notions. On the one hand, the predominance of ideas in the approaches that follow the notion of policy paradigm to the detriment/absence of other explanatory variables, and, on the other hand, the absence of cognitive elements as explanatory elements for the dismantling processes.

The empirical analysis of REAF is based on different research techniques: document analysis, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. The documentary research covered the period from 2004 to 2021, involving analysis of Mercosur documents (rules, norms, letters, recommendations), REAF (minutes, recommendations,

resolutions), social movements (claims agendas, reports, public manifestations) and governments, especially of Brazil (government reports, public positions, etc.). Participant observation took place in different ways and moments, contemplating the different institutional links of the authors. Since 2014, the authors of this work have been developing research and extension projects on REAF, participating in events and contributing to debates. It is also important to highlight that one of the authors acted as a public manager in several agencies that contributed to the REAF in the period 2003-2016, later also acting as a researcher. From the different research and extension projects mentioned, 41 semi-structured interviews were carried out with representatives of social movements and government actors from different countries, more than a dozen of them representatives of Brazil. Particularly for the purposes of this work, the interviews were analysed based on the categories and variables indicated by the analytical framework.

Besides this introduction, the article is organized into four other sections. The next one presents the theoretical and conceptual elements that guide the proposal of an analytical framework for understanding the political and institutional changes, which are then applied in the following sections. The third section briefly recalls the trajectory of the Brazilian government's role in REAF from 2004 to 2016, which was, albeit some variations, marked by the presence of the neo-developmental paradigm. The fourth section analyses the Brazilian government's conduct, after 2016, when paradigmatic changes enabled the return of neoliberal principles and values to the economy and of conservative values in society. Finally, the main conclusions of the study are presented, resuming the theoretical advances and summarizing the changes in the REAF.

## **Strengthening and dismantling of public policies: conceptual elements**

In the 1990s and early 2000s, one of the prevailing interpretations about the processes of institutional change in public policies highlighted the existence of critical moments, caused by external events (catastrophes, elections, economic crises, and social upheavals), which were then followed by periods of institutional reproduction (Pierson 2000; Mahoney and Thelen 2010; Capoccia 2015). These studies have also pointed to a self-reinforcement trend in public policies stemming from: choices made, alternatives dismissed, and expectations accommodated at critical moments; benefits associated with learning and co-ordination effects; presence of powerful or influential actors who benefit from the status quo; and the costs (in certain cases, irrecoverable) of changing the path (Pierson 2000; Mahoney 2001). Such elements contribute to reinforce a path with increasing returns, that is, 'the probability of more steps in the same direction increases with each step taken' (Pierson 2000).

However, this interpretation that emphasizes path dependence and moments of rupture obscures the gradual changes that take place along the trajectory, whose origins may be endogenous to the public policies dynamics and whose accumulated effects may differ from those initially expected (Streeck and Thelen 2005). In this sense, Mahoney and Thelen (2010) suggest that the dynamics of stability or self-reinforcement are not automatic, often occurring gradual changes caused by: i) tensions emerging from the unequal

distribution of resources by the institutions; and ii) institutional ambiguities that make room for different interpretations of the rules. Regarding the first aspect, the authors point out that actors with different endowments of resources are motivated to defend, bring about changes or even pursue the creation of new institutions and public policies. In this game, it is important to consider the power of certain players to veto emerging changes (using institutional or extra-institutional resources), the broader institutional context that offers veto possibilities, the endogenous and exogenous events that affect the power distribution and the role of coalitions and pressure groups. As to the second aspect, Mahoney and Thelen (2010) suggest that actors use their creativity and agency to explore the institutions' ambiguities and discretion, proposing interpretations that alter, in their favour, the allocation of resources and the substantive results.

Still, according to Mahoney and Thelen (2010), the institutional ambiguities, the dynamics of political contexts (power relations and veto possibilities), and the actors' agency capacity can have repercussions on the creation of new institutions and reinforce those that already exist. For the authors, there are four types of institutional changes to be observed. *Displacement* concerns the changes that lead to the replacement of existing rules with new ones. These (usually introduced by actors who, once marginal, have conquered spaces of power) start to compete with the old ones and, over time, if the resistance is not significant, they prevail. In the *conversion* processes, the institutions endure but start to be interpreted or activated in a new direction: the actors strategically maintain the institutions, explore their ambiguities, and convert them to purposes and objectives different from those previously established. *Layering* refers to the inclusion of new rules to the existing ones, gradually changing their aims and effects. Finally, *drift* portrays the situations in which the rules remain but their effects and impacts alter due to changes in external conditions: the actors strategically choose not to act, adjust or modify the institutions according to the new scenario.

These four types of institutional change can lead to either the strengthening (Falletti 2010) or the decline or dismantling of public policies (Onoma 2010). Due to the complexity in identifying the direction of institutional change, Béland (2007) suggests dialoguing with the notion of policy paradigm (Hall 1993; Surel 1995; Carson, Burns and Calvo 2010; Hogan and Howlett 2015). According to the proponents of this notion, policy-makers act based on ideas and norms that guide their interpretations about the nature and configuration of public problems, which influences the definition of policy instruments created to solve them (Hall 1993). Thus, while paradigms that support the operation of the developmentalist State tend to reinforce interventionist policies, those that value the minimal State legitimize liberal instruments of regulation. Once established, the paradigm is legitimized insofar as it manages to preserve the power relations to its advantage and act in the resolution of public problems (Surel 1995). However, in situations of 'anomalies' and changes in power relations, the current paradigm is replaced by new interpretations and political orientations (Surel, 1995). Thus, 'a paradigm shift or changes in economic and social assumptions can help explain the nature and direction of change in public policy' (Béland 2007: 23).

Converging with Béland's (2007) interpretation on the limitations of historical neo-institutionalism to analyse the direction of the changes, Bauer and Knill (2012: 35) focus on a specific type of institutional change: dismantling, which refers to 'a change of a direct, indirect, hidden or symbolic nature that either diminishes the number of policies in a particular area, reduces the number of policy instruments used and/or lowers their intensity'. Dismantling involves two dimensions: loss of density in a given field, that is, a reduction in the number of policies and instruments applied by them; and loss of intensity, that is, the public policy starts to act less intensively in a given area, which may involve a reduction in the scope and level of intervention, in the spectrum of beneficiaries of the action, in the administrative and regulatory capacity.

To analyse dismantling, Bauer and Knill (2012) highlight three sets of factors: i) the preferences of policymakers, understood as the interests that guide their actions resulting from the analysis of the costs and benefits of their decisions and the anticipation of other actors' behaviours; ii) shocks and external factors (economic conditions, technological changes, unexpected events etc.), which can change how actors operate in national systems; iii) institutional and political opportunities and constraints, which affect the fulfilment and magnitude of the dismantling. The authors understand policymakers as strategic actors and political entrepreneurs skilled in producing engagement, forming coalitions, and overcoming resistance from groups of interest or even society.

According to Bauer and Knill (2012), four dismantling strategies can be identified: (i) in *dismantling by default*, policymakers 'choose not to act', which implies reducing the expressiveness of the public policy without producing its extinction or inactivity; (ii) in *dismantling by arena shifting*, the responsibilities and obligations of public policy are transferred to other government agencies or governance scales (municipalization processes, for example) to weaken it; (iii) in the *symbolic dismantling*, policymakers speak out publicly in favour of dismantling, but do not advance with fruitful actions due to institutional constraints or uncertainties as to whether the dismantling would be to their advantage; (iii) finally, in the *active dismantling*, there is 'high visibility with a strong and clear preference to dismantle' the policy, which usually occurs in the absence of institutional constraints and political reactions (Bauer and Knill 2012).

Based on the contributions of these authors, we built an analytical framework that contrasts *institutional strengthening* and *institutional dismantling* as an outcome of the increase or reduction in the density and intensity of public policy. These processes are associated with four factors of institutional change: i) *political context and power relations*: although to varying degrees, all the approaches mentioned highlight power relations and the role of coalitions of interest competing for resources; ii) *ideas and policy paradigms*: virtually ignored by historical neo-institutionalism and by the literature on dismantling, policy paradigms are significant variables in the dynamics of public policies, contributing (or not) to their density and intensity; iii) *characteristics of the institutions*: collecting contributions from the theory on gradual changes and on dismantling, we highlight the importance of considering institutional opportunities and constraints, as well as the ambiguities and discretion in public policies; iv) *interests and strategies of political actors*: behaviours, strategies and anticipation of other actors' conduct are elements that influence institutional change.

Thus, considering these variables, we identified three types of institutional strengthening and five types of institutional dismantling (Tables 1 and 2). Based on this table, in the following sections, we will interpret the changes in the Brazilian government’s performance concerning REAF.

Table 1: Types of institutional strengthening and institutional dismantling

INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHENING	INSTITUTIONAL DISMANTLING
<p><b>By institutional densification</b> Taking advantage of the few political constraints and high discretion in public policy, political actors in favour of the paradigm include new rules, instruments or institutional relations (joint or complementary actions with other bodies) to increase the density and intensity of public policy. This is a routine and gradual strategy, occurring without drawing the attention of coalitions that challenge the policy paradigm.</p>	<p><b>By institutional densification</b> Although the actors disagree with the paradigm, they do not have the power to extinguish the policy and/or are unable to adjust it to their world views (low discretion). In this case, without high visibility, the strategy involves increasing the density (set of rules, norms, procedures) to such an extent that it becomes difficult to execute the policy, significantly reducing its intensity.</p>
<p><b>By change in the institutional linkage</b> Taking advantage of the existence of few political constraints and high discretion in public policy, political actors in favour of the paradigm expand its density and intensity by transferring it to another governmental sphere with greater political and institutional power. Such strategy implies high visibility, which can contribute to reinforcing the public policy paradigm.</p>	<p><b>By change in the institutional linkage and objectives</b> Actors who disagree with the established paradigm use the low political resistance and high discretion in the public policy to reduce its density and intensity through changes in its institutional linkage and/or by converting its objectives to other purposes. The policy’s maintenance guarantees low visibility to the strategy, at least in contrast to the extinction.</p>
<p><b>Discursive and symbolic</b> Political actors pro paradigm, discursively and symbolically produce a context favourable to institutional strengthening. Fierce political disputes, institutional constraints and low discretion in public policy demand the construction of ‘a path’ favourable to the increase in both density and intensity of public policy, with the ‘co-ordinating and communication discourse’ (Schmidt, 2017; 2008) being a key instrument in this sense.</p>	<p><b>Discursive and symbolic</b> Political actors disagree with the paradigm and, in the face of high institutional constraints and low discretion in the public policy, act to deconstruct it, discursively and symbolically. Converging with the interpretations of discursive neo-institutionalism, the actors trigger a highly visible strategy in order to build an institutional and political context prone to reducing the density and intensity of the public policy.</p>
	<p><b>By extinction or replacement</b> Supported by paradigms that question the importance, format and objectives of public policies, hegemonic coalitions aim for their extinction or replacement with different institutional purposes and arrangements. Although highly visible, the low discretion/ambiguity of the public policy and the absence of institutional vetoes/political constraints favour such measures.</p>
	<p><b>By the ineffectiveness of the policy and its instruments</b> Being close to the gradual change of the ‘drift’ type and the dismantling ‘by default’, this low visibility strategy involves the conduct of actors who, being opposed to the paradigm, choose not to adjust the policy and its instruments when faced with changes in context. Using their veto capacity and handling the policy’s high discretion, the actors maintain the density but do not update the intensity of the policy.</p>

Source: Prepared by the authors, based on Bauer and Knill (2012), Thelen and Mahoney (2010) and Hall (1993).

Table 2: Types of institutional strengthening and institutional dismantling, according to actors' strategies, the public policy paradigm, and the degree of institutional constraints, public policy discretion, and political strategy visibility and changes in the density and intensity of public policy.

Type of institutional change	Actors' strategies	Stance on the paradigm	Institutional constraints	Discretion in the public policy	Strategy visibility	Density	Intensity
	densification		Low	High	Low	Increase	Increase
Strengthening	linkage shifting	Ideas in favour of the current paradigm	Low	High	High	Increase	Increase
	discursive and symbolic work		High	Low	High	Increase	Increase
	densification		High	Low	Low	Increase	Decrease
Dismantling	change in institutional linkage or policy objectives	Ideas opposed to the current paradigm	Low	High	Low	Decrease	Decrease
	discursive and symbolic work		High	Low	High	Decrease	Decrease
	extinction or replacement		Low	Low	High	End	End
	ineffectiveness of the policy and its instruments		High	High	Low	Maintenance	Without update

Source: Prepared by the authors, based on Bauer and Knill (2012), Thelen and Mahoney (2010) and Hall (1993).



## **The Brazilian government's role in REAF's institutional strengthening (2004-2015)**

The creation of REAF resulted from, and coincided with, the ongoing changes in the policy paradigms generated by the advance of the 'Latin American pink tide' (Panizza 2006), that is, the rise to power, in several countries in the region, of left or centre-left coalitions. Under the command of centre-right governments during the last quarter of the twentieth century, several countries have adopted new paradigms that, despite differences in method and radicality of changes, put the state back as a central actor in development processes. Unlike the Washington prescriptions, the 'Brasilia Consensus' was influenced by ideas related to the promotion of macroeconomic stability, appreciation of the minimum wage, expansion of effective demand and social inclusion (Mello 2011; Faria 2012).

In the Mercosur member states, such changes began with the presidential elections of Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Brazil, 2002), Néstor Carlos Kirchner (Argentina, 2003), Tabaré Vázquez (Uruguay, 2004) and Fernando Lugo (Paraguay, 2008). According to Vásquez (2018), because of the political convergence between these governments, the bloc started to be understood as a space for concertation in the construction of development policies, strengthening of democracies, expansion of rights and social participation. In the same sense, Marin (2011: 8) suggests that created in an 'era marked by the Washington Consensus, during which the governments of the region sought to enter the international market through the elimination of trade barriers and the liberalization of investment flows', Mercosur became 'a space for broad political and economic coordination, aiming to build channels for cooperation between South American countries'.<sup>1</sup> It was in this context that actions to strengthen family farming in the region also emerged.

Throughout the 1990s, the integration and liberalization of markets had exposed family farmers to unequal conditions of competition with corporate farms that benefited from scale gains, access to technologies, lower production costs and easier access to markets (Romano 1996; Niederle 2016). Seeking to react to this process, family farming organizations started acting in political and institutional spaces, putting a strain on the established power relations. In the regional context, this crusade is expressed in the creation, in 1994, of the Confederation of Family Farmers Organizations of the Expanded Mercosur (Coprofam), whose work was directed towards the institutional recognition of family farming as one of the distinct forms of farming in the region, which faced several obstacles related to market and access to targeted public policies.

Initially, Coprofam urged Mercosur to create a specific space to address the problems brought by the opening of markets to family farming – whose demands were not considered by the Agriculture Working Subgroup (SGT 8), in which organizations representing corporate farming prevail. In 2003, Coprofam sent a letter to the Common Market Council (CMC) demanding the creation of a specialized ad hoc group within SGT 8, which should include the participation of governments and social organizations, to propose a target specific policy agenda for family farming (Coprofam 2003). At that time, CMC entrusted the Brazilian government to present a proposal and, taking advantage of

existing institutional arrangements in Mercosur, the first scheme of a specialized meeting was drafted. In February 2004, the co-ordinator of the international area of the Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) presented the proposal to the Common Market Group (GMC) – the bloc's executive body – which approved it at the subsequent meeting, in June of the same year. This process can be interpreted as a change by institutional densification, supported by a pre-existing institutional structure and a favourable political context.

The Brazilian government's leadership was due, among other things, to the institutional learning that the country had already accumulated on the subject. Since the mid-1990s, the country had been creating targeted rural development policies, such as the National Program for Strengthening Family Agriculture (Pronaf); institutions dedicated to family farming, such as the MDA itself, in 1999; and participatory governance spaces, such as the National Council for Sustainable Rural Development, in 1999. These policies were strengthened by institutional densification as an outcome of the political change resulting from the election of President Lula da Silva (Abers, Serafim and Tatagiba 2014; Grisa and Schneider 2015; Medeiros 2020). Consequently, the experience and institutional innovations produced by the Brazilian government transformed the country into an especially skilled political entrepreneur to co-ordinate this process.

In addition to the creation of policies and institutions, it is also important to consider that the MDA sought to address family farming issues in international negotiations. In 2003, amid discussions on potential implications of the creation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) for family farming, 'the MDA created a workgroup with the participation of social movements, which met bimonthly to discuss the international agenda' (Niederle 2015: 61). This agenda – until then focused on the opening of the markets, foreign investments and the expansion of commodity exports – had been conducted by the Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MRE), Industry and Commerce (MDIC) and Agriculture, Livestock and Supply (MAPA), in co-ordination with entities representing the export and agribusiness sectors. However, as a result of an approach to the MRE, the MDA obtained political support to engage in international negotiations. Several events were organized by, or began to include, representatives of this Ministry, which focused its work not only in the intervention in formal spaces, but also in co-ordinating social organizations for the construction of alternative forms of globalization. It is worth noting that, at that moment, the same political group commanding the MDA was also leading the organization of the first editions of the World Social Forum, held in Porto Alegre.

Once the REAF was established, the Brazilian government sought to promote the institution's strengthening by setting in motion several strategies that included the internal organization of the MDA, the preparation, involvement and participation in national and regional sessions, and the pursue of REAF's financial structuring. Regarding the internal organization of the MDA, it is relevant to highlight that since its creation the ministry had an International Affairs and Commercial Promotion Advisory Unit (AIPC), which counted on a single staff linked to the Minister's office. The ministry co-operated with multi-lateral agencies – especially with the World Bank –, participated in missions, in exchange activities and in technical co-operation projects of the United Nations Development

Program (UNDP), the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA). However, until 2003, the ministry did not actively participate in international politics and, as mentioned by one interviewee, ‘did not have its own international agenda’ (Interview, March 2021). That only happened when the new political coalition at the head of the body – formed by many members of an internationalist leftist movement – engaged in creating a new regional integration and south-south co-operation project. At that time, it became evident that the MDA wanted to ‘get on the agenda, really wanted to have an international policy’ (Interview by authors, March 2021).

Initially, the increased participation of AIPC in the international debate echoed the concerns about the potential effects of opening agricultural markets, which required identifying the sectors and social groups that would be strongly affected and, thenceforth, designing public compensation policies that would not be susceptible to questioning by the World Trade Organization. Along with that, there was a process of discursive and symbolic strengthening of both family farming, valuing its economic contribution and the promotion of food and nutritional security, and of the regional integration process itself. Aligned with the discourse of social organizations, the MDA began to propose an integration process more focused on co-operation between countries than on exploiting its comparative advantages, which had been affecting productive units and rural communities that were not able to compete with products from neighbouring countries.

Brazil’s protagonism at the international level, and especially in the agenda of fighting hunger and food insecurity, contributed to politically relocate the MDA and its policies within the government and to relocate the AIPC and the subject of regional co-operation within this ministry. Therefore, the office had its bureaucratic capacities strengthened – counting, in 2011, with 18 staff linked to the minister’s office, four of which were involved particularly with REAF – and assumed an increasing role in disseminating Brazilian public policies, mainly through close collaboration with the FAO. It is worth noting that several MDA staff accompanied José Graziano da Silva when he assumed the regional representation (FAO-Latin America) and, later, the post of Director-General of FAO, in Rome. This process helped to legitimize and strengthen AIPC’s position within the MDA, MDA’s position within the government, Brazil’s position in the regional debate and REAF’s own position on the international agenda. It is noteworthy that, beyond a forum for political dialogues between governments and social organizations, which served as a ‘laboratory for other international actions’, REAF became a collective institutional entrepreneur, fostering similar spaces in other instances, as CELAC and the Committee on World Food Security.

None of this would have advanced without the support of the main family farming organizations. In this sense, it is important to emphasize AIPC’s frequent interaction with civil society organizations, such as the Confederation of Workers in Family Farming (CONTAG) and, therefore, the Coprofam itself, the Brazilian Network for the Integration of Peoples (Rebrip), the Landless Workers Movement (MST) and the Federation of Workers in Family Agriculture (FETRAF). Furthermore, several MDA staff had close relationships

or had already worked in social movements or in their partner organizations. In effect, MDA's bureaucracy used to promote 'institutional activism' (Abers 2015; 2021) around family farming and REAF's causes, co-ordinating governmental and non-governmental actors and boosting regional debates, based on the experience and diffusion of Brazilian public policies (e.g. public procurement, family farming registry, target policies for women and family farming identification seals). Therefore, there were, as pointed out by one interviewee referring to the period between 2006-2010, 'a young and courageous team, with a 'direct channel with the Minister's office' and 'a Minister that is open and interested' on the agenda (Interview by authors, February 2021). Indeed, REAF was a space highly valued by ministers, as will be pointed out next.

MDA's bureaucracy and family farming representatives were actively involved in organizing and participating in national and regional REAF sessions. Between 2005 and 2018, Brazil's national sessions assumed an organizational configuration similar to that of the regional sessions. The final plenary was preceded by debates in thematic commissions, which were based on previous discussions held at society and government meetings, including in civil society's exclusive and autonomous spaces (Niederle 2015). However, unlike in the regional arrangement, all participants were involved in the discussions of all commissions, expanding political involvement and the agenda of the meetings. The national sessions generally involved 30 to 40 people, during two or three days,<sup>2</sup> and observed the following schedule: regional and international conjuncture; reports on Mercosur and the country's priorities; reports on general REAF subjects and important events on the Brazilian agenda for rural areas; balance of the regional session (follow-ups or decisions adopted by the Mercosur bodies); REAF's relationship with international organizations and forms of integration (e.g., International Year of Family Farming); agenda of each thematic commission and exchange of information and discussions on stances to be adopted in the regional session; and final plenary. This dynamic helped to discuss national policies, build agreements on the regional agenda and feed regional sessions, strengthening Brazilian participation in these spaces.

Among the governmental actors present at the national sessions, it is worth noting the participation of the various areas of the MDA (mainly the departments of Family Farming -- SAF, the sector responsible for policies for Women and *Quilombolas*, and the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform -- INCRA), the MRE (especially the sector responsible for South America and the General Coordination for Humanitarian Cooperation and Fight against Hunger -- CGFome), the Ministry of Social Development, the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic and, occasionally, other ministries interested in specific topics. Among the non-governmental actors, main participants included FETRAF, CONTAG, the Movement of Rural Women Workers of the Northeast (MMTR-NE), National Council of Extractive Populations (CNS), Union of Cooperatives of Family Agriculture and Solidarity Economy (Unicafes), Interstate Movement of Coconut Breakers (MIQCB), non-governmental organizations (ActionAid and Oxfam), and academics. In 2014 and 2015, the Small Farmers Movement (MPA), linked to Via Campesina, also started to regularly participate. Initially, the civil society participation in

the national sessions had financial support from ActionAid and Oxfam and, later, it began to be financed with budgetary resources from the MDA, signalling the attention given by the Brazilian government.

The participation of the Brazilian delegation in the regional sections varied according to the location of the event and the national and international political dynamics. Between 2004 and 2015, the delegation usually comprised 10 to 20 people – except for 2008-2009, when the participation reached more than 40 members. Among the governmental actors, staff linked to the MDA, INCRA and MRE stood out. The intense involvement of the MDA Ministers is noteworthy. In the period from 2004 to 2012 they have been absent in only four regional sessions. As mentioned above, AIPC staff had the Minister's political support and legitimacy to further the strengthening of REAF and other south-south co-operation projects.

Besides these actors, representatives of other bodies such as MDS, Ministry of Education, Presidency of the Republic, Embrapa and the National Council for Food and Nutritional Security also occasionally participated. Regarding the participation of civil society, Contag, Fetraf, MMTR-NE, MIQCB, Unicafe and CNS stood out. Occasionally, representatives of NGOs, the Movement of Peasant Women (MMC) and family farming co-operatives were also present. Despite their political differences, this set of governmental and non-governmental actors presented a certain consensus around the same policy paradigm and a unified discourse at the regional sections, which only happened because of a commitment to address only issues that everyone was in agreement with – a commitment that required a prior process of political concertation at the national sections.

The Brazilian government's role in strengthening REAF also involved the financial structuring of the regional forum. In the first years of operation, without the contribution of Mercosur resources to carry out the activities, guarantee the participation of social organizations in the meetings and structure a technical secretariat, REAF counted on donations from the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), through IFAD's Mercosur Program. However, it soon became evident that expanding the actions would require other sources of funds. Thus, exploiting the institutional design of the Mercosur Structural Convergence Fund (Focem) – which establishes different financial contributions from member states according to their respective Gross Domestic Products –, the Brazilian government proposed the creation of an Agriculture Fund (FAF), which was approved in 2008 and implemented in 2013. Established for a five-year period, the fund defined a fixed contribution of US\$15 000 per country and another variable amount, defined as follows: Brazil US\$210 000 (70%); Argentina US\$71 000 (27%); Uruguay US\$6000 (2%); Paraguay US\$3000 (1%). These resources would aim to 'finance programs and projects to encourage family farming in Mercosur and facilitate a broad participation of social actors in activities related to the subject' (Mercosul 2008). This institutional consolidation was an important milestone for REAF, ensuring greater organization, stability and participation of civil society.

In addition to its prominent involvement in FAF, the Brazilian government financially contributed to REAF from two other complementary sources. The first was a

partnership with the Brazilian Cooperation Agency (ABC), through which the MDA proposed the program called ‘Exchange of Experience on Models for Management of Public Procurement Policy for Family Farming’. The exchange was organized into four modules, between 2011 and 2013, counting with government officials and civil society representatives from Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay, Chile and Ecuador. The second contribution involved the technical co-operation project with FAO, established in 2008, entitled ‘Strengthening spaces for dialogue between FAO, Governments and Civil Society: new mechanisms for the construction of public policies, support for family farming and food and nutrition security’ (GCP/RLA/173/BRA). This project disseminated MDA public policies within the scope of south-south co-operation, focusing on strengthening national and sub-regional spaces for political dialogues between government staff and civil society organizations.

In short, this trajectory illustrates Brazil’s direct and indirect role in strengthening REAF, notably through the discursive and symbolic strengthening and the strengthening through institutional densification. Working together with other countries, the Brazilian government (especially the MDA and, within it, the AIPC) aimed for increasing both REAF’s intensity – by ensuring the qualified participation of bureaucracy, civil society actors and political authorities in national and regional sessions – and density – by stimulating and acting in the creation of financing mechanisms and projects, programs and actions. However, from 2016 onwards, the paradigm shifts gave way to a redirection, pressuring for its dismantling.

## **The role of the Brazilian government in dismantling REAF as of 2016**

The repercussions of the economic crisis of 2008, the fall of commodity prices in international markets since 2011, the reduction of foreign direct investments in the region, the adoption of more orthodox economic measures, and the political reorganization of conservative sectors were some of the elements that opened space for ‘new’ policy paradigms in the region. In the case of the Brazilian Government, such tensions began to manifest in 2013 and gained greater expression with the coup that deposed Dilma Rousseff (Santos 2017) and, later, with the election of Jair Bolsonaro in 2018.

In general, the ‘new’ paradigm that became established with the changes in the political regime sees the market as the engine for development, falling on the State only the maintenance of macroeconomic stability and the fiscal reforms and adjustments to maintain the confidence of private agents (Balestro and Monteiro 2019; Couto 2020). In the scope of the international relations, this paradigm has ‘put the country back in close relationship with North American foreign policy’; sought to replace Unasur with the Forum for the Progress of South America (Prosul), guided by new conceptions about the role of regionalism; ‘abandoned political support to the Venezuelan government, identifying it as the main threat to the security and stability of the region’; ‘started to treat Mercosur as a secondary subject on the agenda’, even highlighting supposed restrictions imposed by the bloc on negotiations of bilateral agreements or the ineffectiveness of its structure;<sup>3</sup>

and reduced the priority 'attributed to Buenos Aires, in favor of Chile', considering the confluences with this latter in terms of 'criticism of South American political regionalism' (Vigidal and Bernal-Meza 2020: 17). With regard to family farming, the prevalence of a sectorial and productivist interpretation of agricultural development – expressed by the return of the idea of a single model of agriculture ('agribusiness') that differs only in terms of productive scale – culminated in the MDA's extinction as well as in various forms of dismantling (by change of institutional linkage, by institutional densification or ineffectiveness) of family farming policies (Grisa 2018; Sabourin et al. 2020; Sabourin, Craviotti and Milhorange 2020; Leite 2021; Niederle et al. 2022). Many of these policies (public procurement, rural women, agroecology, rural extension) were at the core of the REAF's agenda and their dismantlement reverberated and converged with the Brazilian government's involvement per se in this arena.

In 2016, following the coup, the MDA was extinguished and underwent a dismantling process by means of changes in the institutional linkage. Part of the public policies related to family farming was transferred to the new Special Secretariat for Family Farming and Agrarian Development (SEAD), linked to the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Presidency. AIPC was one of the structures that became linked to SEAD (2016-2018). Besides lacking the political weight that MDA had, SEAD has fewer staff – AIPC started to count with 11 staff in 2016, with only two dedicated to REAF – and a reduced density and intensity in international politics. In addition, by losing its ministry status, the rural development sector also lost its space in the Foreign Trade Chamber (CAMEX), limiting SEAD's chances to intervene in foreign trade policy definitions, participate in international negotiations and intervene in BRICS and CELAC sectoral ministerial forums. There was also a readjustment in the trilateral south-south co-operation policy, evidenced by the elaboration of a new project with FAO on regional co-operation, which shifted the focus from the promotion of dialogue on public policies and the strengthening of state and social capacities (which contributed to the institutional densification and discursive and symbolic strengthening) to more specific co-operation actions.<sup>4</sup>

In 2019, at the beginning of Bolsonaro's government, SEAD was extinguished and, once more, the institutional linkage of its attributions has changed, being, in part, incorporated into MAPA, notably in the Secretariat of Family Farming and Cooperativism (SAF/MAPA). With this change, AIPC was extinguished, and its staff redistributed among different areas of MAPA, such as SAF and the Secretariat for Trade and International Relations (SCRI). Regarding international actions within the scope of SAF/MAPA (which, in 2019, counted on two staff), the Secretariat became responsible for the Brazilian participation in REAF and for managing other technical co-operation projects. This new configuration fragmented and reduced the family farming international agenda, whether in the scope of international trade negotiations or in terms of its participation in multilateral forums, international processes (with emphasis on FAO) and other spaces for regional integration.

All these elements impacted the work dynamics of REAF's regional and national sessions, which began to lose their effectiveness. REAF's 25<sup>th</sup> Regional Session, held in June

2016, was attended by only one representative of the newly extinct MDA. In 2018, as one interviewee reports, ‘we started to lose the ability to keep the technical staff that we had before and to lose the engagement of extremely active staff. Then, I think we started a cycle where REAF began to break up, and this spills out to other countries...’ (Interview by authors, April 2020). According to the same interviewee, it became more difficult to appoint government staff as focal points for the thematic commissions and, as a result, to ensure the continuity of the work. Consequently, the days of events were intense in activities but followed by ‘periods of little work between regional editions’ (Interview by authors, April 2020). Compared to previous periods, there is, therefore, a reduction in the performance and activism of the bureaucracy to guide the REAF’s deliberations.

Until 2018, national sessions followed a dynamic that was similar to previous years: two or three days of debate on a set of topics involving 30 to 40 people. The differences, then, were more evident in the difficulties in involvement of SEAD’s bureaucracy and in the exclusion of certain actors from civil society, who assumed repertoires of protest and confrontation with the new government. In 2019, the national sessions continued to involve the same number of people, however, with new dynamics, actors and themes. The historical agenda of the thematic commissions gave way to situational subjects (Mercosur/European Union Agreement) of interest to SAF (co-operativism) and related to co-operation projects (discussed below). In 2020, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the 55<sup>th</sup> National Session took place online, restricted to one afternoon; and the next session, in preparation for the 33<sup>rd</sup> Regional Session, was not held.

Another significant change concerns the composition of the public arena. While confrontations with family farming organizations intensified, reducing their number of representativeness and intensity of participation and political influence, new actors were called to the meetings, notably the National Confederation of Agriculture (CNA) and the Organization of Cooperatives of Brazil (OCB). The participation of these organizations, while portraying the discursive and symbolic dismantling of the family farming category, promoted by the Ministry when claiming the existence of a single model of agriculture in the country, also puts a strain on power relations and on political dialogues at the national and regional levels. As one interviewee mentioned, ‘the entry of CNA and OCB alters REAF’s audience, bringing in those who have never participated (...) the movement is really towards expanding this audience, focusing on co-operativism, on co-operatives and, then, the stamp of family farming co-operatives gets weaker ...’ (Interview by authors, April 2020).

Regarding the regional sessions, the Brazilian delegation continued to oscillate between 10 and 20 people, except for the meetings held in Brazil and the 30<sup>th</sup> REAF, in June 2019, shortly after Bolsonaro taking up the Brazilian government, when only five of its representatives participated in the event. However, as happened at the national meetings, new subjects and actors came on the scene. The Thematic Commissions agenda was left out in favour of specific themes, reflecting the national government agenda (mainly the Mercosur/European Union Agreement) and the co-operation projects under discussion. This change weakened REAF’s work in the promotion of political dialogues and the



dissemination of public policies. Rather than being a protagonist in the agenda setting, REAF started to just react to the topical agenda of governments and the interests of international co-operation agencies. Regarding the actors, we observe the conduct of SAF/MAPA staff, who seek to enable the participation of other governmental actors (Brazilian Forest Service, CONAB, SCRI/MAPA). However, the absence of other ministries (such as the MRE, which has not been present since 2012) and of political authorities, such as the MAPA Minister is noteworthy. These absences – also reproduced by authorities from other countries<sup>5</sup> – limits REAF's political impact. In turn, two movements can be observed concerning representatives of civil society. On the one hand, the participation of civil society organizations was jeopardized due to the non-renewal of the FAF (discussed below); on the other hand, as occurred with the national sessions, OCB and CNA became part of the regional debate, producing tension among 'the audience' that was being developed within, and by, REAF (Zimmermann et al. 2020).

Along with and converging with these changes, we have also seen changes in the financial sustainability mechanisms. Once its initial five-year term expired, FAF was temporarily extended until the end of 2018 due to the availability of remaining resources (Mercosul 2017). Although family farming organizations have championed the funds' renewal in 2017 and 2018, its termination coincided with the intensification of paradigmatic shifts in the region. Taking advantage from the institutional fragility of the instrument itself (time limit), new actors and coalitions did not make any effort to renew it, creating a strategy of dismantling by ineffectiveness.

Besides preventing the participation of certain civil society organizations in regional sessions, the deactivation of the FAF also impacted the Technical Secretariat activities. Headquartered in Montevideo, this secretariat was responsible for mediating dialogues between governments and social organizations; safeguarding and contributing to the fulfilment of the schedule of regional meetings, national sessions and thematic sessions; preparing technical documents and assisting countries in internalizing REAF's rules, guidelines and decisions assumed by the GMC; contributing to the operationalization of co-operation and technical exchange agreements; and collaborating in the dissemination of proposals, demands and the situation of family farming in the region (Ramos et al. 2014). With the FAF's non-renewal, the Technical Secretariat was extinguished, compromising the records and follow-up of decisions, the institutional memory, the co-ordination between governments and social organizations and the stability of the actions in the face of the intermittency caused by the rotation of the pro-tempore presidency of the Mercosur every six months.

Since the end of FAF, the financial alternatives rested on projects for technical co-operation with international organizations and around specific themes (technical assistance and rural extension, agricultural health and food safety, rural women...). These technical co-operation projects, some of them proposed by the Brazilian government, allowed exchanges of experiences in public policies and permitted hiring a consultant to act as REAF's Technical Secretary. Although authorizing certain activities, this alternative has produced significant changes in regional dynamics. If, in the past, ministries, sub-ministries and

secretariats responsible for family farming policies in each country could co-ordinate long-term actions, intervene in international negotiations favouring an alternative co-operation project, and even focus outside the region through intense institutional activism with multilateral organizations, after the changes their work has shifted to attend specific and topical demands in reaction to the new international negotiation agenda.

## Final remarks

This article analysed the Brazilian government's role in REAF. Based on the dialogue between the historical neo-institutionalism, the approach of policy paradigm and the debate on the dismantling of public policies, we explored the dynamics of institutional strengthening and dismantling. The analysis suggests that, between 2004 and 2016, due to the institutionalization of new policy paradigms, the reconfiguration of the political context and power relations, and institutional openings, actions and strategies aimed at REAF's institutional strengthening prevailed, whether through discursive and symbolic means, or through institutional densification. In this period, the actors linked to the Brazilian government, especially the AIPC of the MDA, sought to create and legitimize spaces and actions for dialogue that praised the diversity and importance of family farming for rural development and food and nutritional security. Since REAF's creation, the work of these actors has positively contributed to its gradual processes of institutional densification, manifested in the expansion of social participation and the creation of projects, programs, financing mechanisms and technical secretariat. As seen in the chapter, different elements and mechanisms contributed to the increase in the density and intensity of REAF.

From 2016 onwards, as a result of the reconfiguration of policy paradigms, power relations, and political and socio-economic contexts in Brazil and other countries of the bloc, and taking advantage of institutional settings, strategies aimed at dismantling REAF began to prevail. Regarding the Brazilian government's role, these actions combined the discursive and symbolic dismantling around family farming and the dismantling by changes in the institutional linkages. This political shift, reinforced by Bolsonaro's election in 2018, resumed the interpretation that there is one single model of agriculture in the country, differentiated only in terms of production scale, thus paving the way for institutional changes, notably the extinction of the MDA and the SEAD, with part of the family farming policies incorporated into the SAF/MAPA. In addition to lowering the political weight of the institutional structure dedicated to family farming, these changes in institutional linkages resulted in the reduction in the number, involvement and activism of the bureaucracy dedicated to REAF. Furthermore, the omission of political authorities, the FAF's non-renewal and the shifts in the dynamics of the national and regional sessions (weakening of the agenda of thematic commissions in favour of topical issues, exclusion of historical actors and entry of outsiders) also contributed to a dismantling by ineffectiveness. Through different strategies, we observe institutional changes that contribute to reducing the density (e.g., FAF's non-renewal and end of the Technical Secretariat) and the intensity of the REAF (e.g., reduction of social participation and regional political action in the diffusion of policies for the family farming).

Research findings on REAF's trajectory demonstrate the functionality of the proposed analytical framework and its variables to understand the different processes of institutional changes. Instead of focusing only on strategic actions or ideas – as emphasized by some of the approaches mentioned here –, we demonstrated that institutional changes result from the conjunction of several factors, such as the reconfiguration of political contexts and power relations, the establishment of new policy paradigms, strategies and interests of the actors in exploring discretion, ambiguity and institutional gaps. Due to different interactions between these elements, institutional changes can be expressed by either strengthening or dismantling institutional structures. Drawing on this framework, the analysis of other institutional processes will allow us to reach an even deeper level of understanding of the directions of institutional change, as well as to understand and compare types of strengthening and dismantling that were not evidenced in REAF's trajectory.

## Notes

- 1 The confluence of this movement with the creation of the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (Alba) resulted, in 2008, in the Union of South American Nations (Unasur) and, in 2010, in the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), seeking to strengthen political and economic ties between countries (Niederle 2015; Sosa 2013).
- 2 According to the Minutes of the 36<sup>th</sup> National Session of REAF held on March 21 and 22, 2013, the next sessions would have a duration of three days in order to account for the agenda in question.
- 3 In this context, in December 2019, the Common Market Council, under the Pro Tempore Presidency of Brazil, approved the 'updating of the MERCOSUR institutional structure', guided by the parameters of 'functional grouping, productivity and contribution to the objectives' of the bloc, resulting in a 'concise and rational organization chart' appropriate to 'the current stage of the integration process', 'simpler and more efficient, eliminating duplication of efforts', so that to overcome the fragmentation and difficulties in proceeding with the work (MERCOSUR / LII GMC Ext./PN 16/19; MERCOSUR / CMC DEC. No. 19/19). Although the Decision did not imply the extinction of REAF's spaces and structures (as occurred in other areas), it demanded nomenclature changes (commissions for thematic axes) and converged to cool down the commissions themselves.
- 4 Following the FAO 173 Project, the Brazilian government, via SEAD/Casa Civil, established with the FAO office for Latin America and the Caribbean the 'Knowledge Management Platform for Rural Extension Technical Assistance' project.
- 5 As mentioned by one interviewee, 'In recent years, it has been noted that some countries have ceased to include top-tier authorities in their official delegation, as was the case until 2014-2015. The participation of ministers and vice-ministers is not so frequent anymore, and this, without a doubt, is an element that limits the possibilities of incidence of REAF work in each country' (Interview by authors, April 2020). In the case of the Brazilian delegation, this absence began to be expressed in 2013. In 2017 and 2018, SEAD's Secretary participated, but, as already mentioned, even though linked to the Presidency of the Republic, this Secretariat held a political status lower than that of the Ministry.

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## A ação do governo brasileiro no fortalecimento e desmantelamento da institucionalidade da agricultura familiar do MERCOSUL

**Resumo:** O artigo analisa as mudanças nas ações do governo brasileiro na Reunião Especializada em Agricultura Familiar do Mercosul (REAF). Criado em 2004, o REAF é um fórum regional de diálogo político entre governos e organizações sociais para o desenvolvimento de políticas públicas para a agricultura familiar. A partir de diálogos entre o neoinstitucionalismo histórico e os debates sobre o paradigma político e o desmantelamento, o artigo define quatro dimensões (contexto político e relações de poder, ideias e paradigmas políticos, características das instituições, interesses e estratégias dos atores políticos) para explicar e tipificar os processos de institucionalização, fortalecimento e desmantelamento. Com base nessas dimensões e em dados coletados por meio de observação participante, análise documental e entrevistas com atores-chave, o artigo analisa as ações do governo brasileiro em comparação com os tipos de mudança institucional vigentes. A análise mostra que, entre 2004 e 2016, a estratégia predominante de fortalecimento institucional foi ‘discursiva e simbólica’ e operou por meio da ‘densificação institucional’; por sua vez, a partir de 2016, prevaleceram estratégias de desmantelamento ‘discursivo e simbólico’ e ‘desmantelamento por mudança nos vínculos institucionais’.

**Palavras-chave:** mudança institucional; desmantelamento de políticas; ideias; políticas públicas; agricultura familiar; Mercosul.

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