

# Vale tudo: Action strategies for Vale after the Córrego do Feijão dam criminal disaster

## Vale tudo: As estratégias de atuação da Vale após o desastre-crime da barragem de Córrego do Feijão

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This article aims to analyze the strategies used by Vale during the first two years after the Brumadinho dam disaster to deal with criticisms from civil society in the face of the consequences caused by the rupture.

**Originality/value:** The article contributes to understanding the strategic processes used by large enterprises to respond to environmental disasters and other damages resulting from activities and work accidents caused by these organizations. It demonstrates how such strategies can be applied and succeed because they are linked to actions and articulations with key actors involved and co-opted in economic, political, and social processes before the disaster.

**Design/methodology/approach:** A qualitative, case study type of research was conducted with citizens of Brumadinho and local mobilization groups. The interviews conducted with ten citizens of the municipality and document analysis allowed a volume of information from the various actors that make up and participate in the tangle surrounding the actions related to this disaster.

**Findings:** The company uses mechanisms that impute discouragement and disbelief in the affected people, fomenting the politics of resignation through numerous strategies of bureaucratization, social and mental suffering, and rights violations that postpone the reparation actions to the affected people. The article demonstrates how the context of technological disasters involves a political, economic, institutional, and social process marked by violations, influences, and injustices with communities and people whose beginning is before the disasters.

**Keywords:** disaster crime, Brumadinho, mining, resignation policies, rights violations



## Resumo

**Objetivo:** Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar as estratégias utilizadas pela Vale durante os dois primeiros anos após o desastre da barragem de Brumadinho para lidar com as críticas da sociedade civil perante os desdobramentos causados pelo rompimento.

**Originalidade/valor:** O artigo contribui para a compreensão dos processos estratégicos utilizados por grandes empreendimentos para responder aos desastres ambientais e aos demais danos decorrentes de atividades e acidentes de trabalho causados por essas organizações. É demonstrado como tais estratégias conseguem ser aplicadas e obter sucesso porque se vinculam a ações e articulações com atores-chave, que são envolvidos e cooptados em processos econômicos, políticos e sociais anteriores à ocorrência do desastre.

**Design/metodologia/abordagem:** Trata-se de uma pesquisa qualitativa, do tipo estudo de caso, na qual participaram cidadãos de Brumadinho e grupos de mobilização locais. As entrevistas realizadas com dez cidadãos do município e a análise documental permitiram um volume de informações dos diversos atores que participam do emaranhado que envolve as ações relacionadas a esse desastre.

**Resultados:** A empresa utiliza mecanismos que imputam às pessoas atingidas o desânimo e a descrença, fomentando a política da resignação por meio de inúmeras estratégias de burocratização, sofrimento social e mental, e violações de direitos que postergam as ações de reparação aos atingidos. O artigo demonstra como o contexto de desastres tecnológicos envolve um processo político, econômico, institucional e social marcado por violações, influências e injustiças com comunidades e pessoas, cujo início é anterior aos desastres.

**Palavras-chave:** desastre-crime, Brumadinho, mineração, políticas de resignação, violações de direitos

## INTRODUCTION

In January 2019, in Córrego do Feijão, a neighborhood located in the municipality of Brumadinho, Minas Gerais, the tailings dam of a mine belonging to the mining company Vale broke. Mining, which, thanks to the commodity *boom* period in the first decade of the 21st century (Faria, 2012, 2016; Bresser-Pereira & Theuer, 2012; Svampa, 2013), had brought so many “development possibilities” during progressive governments, would once again deliver one of the main burdens of the extractive process: a socio-environmental disaster.

Classified as “low risk” and “high damage potential”, the Córrego do Feijão dam had been inactive since 2015 and contained approximately 12 million cubic meters of iron mining tailings slurry (Oliveira et al., 2019). The wave of tailings destroyed much of the mining company’s internal area and surroundings, killing 270 people, contaminating the water of the Paraopeba River, devastating vegetation, and directly harming the survival of animals, indigenous and riverside communities.

Freitas and Silva (2019, p. 22), when analyzing the cases of mining tailings dam ruptures in Brumadinho and Mariana, draw attention to the fact that situations like these, which are configured as work accidents, become disasters since they produce “Interruptions and disruptions in the daily lives of the territories where they occur, with great losses and damages (material, economic and environmental) and impact on the health of the populations”.

Given the complex scenario characterized by economic, social, environmental, and political conflicts that describe the context of the dam failure in Brumadinho, this article aims to identify the strategies used by Vale to deal with civil society’s criticism of the crime disaster since the responsibility for its occurrence is directly linked to the company. To this end, a qualitative case study was conducted with the citizens of Brumadinho, and local mobilization and articulation groups formed after the dam failure.

The article contributes to understanding the strategic processes used by large enterprises, specifically the “harm industries,” as defined by Benson and Kirsch (2010), to respond to environmental disasters and other damages resulting from activities and accidents at work originating from these organizations. The literature demonstrates the presence of a *modus operandi*, already used in other disasters caused by mining and perfected in the case of Brumadinho. As will be presented, one of the main contributions of the article is to demonstrate how such strategies can be applied and succeed because



they are linked to actions and articulations with critical actors involved and co-opted in economic, political, and social processes before the occurrence of the disaster.

In addition to this introduction, the article is structured in five sections, with the second section presenting the theoretical framework that supported the work. The methodology used is presented in the third section and, in the fourth section, the discussion and analysis of the data. Finally, in the last section, the final considerations.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Neo-extractivism and its socio-environmental consequences

The disaster in Brumadinho brought a new warning on the consequences of extractivism in Latin America, especially mineral extraction on Brazilian soil, as it had occurred with the 2015 Fundão dam failure of the Samarco mining company in the city of Mariana, also in Minas Gerais. The first dam failure caused the death of 19 people, the destruction of Bento Rodrigues (a subdistrict of Mariana), and great environmental damage, with the tailings mud ruining the Doce River basin and compromising access to water for several communities along the river. Considered the most significant environmental disaster in the history of Brazil (Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis, 2015), in the last five years, Samarco's environmental crime has been unfolding in several legal processes to hold the company accountable and, in parallel, in attempts to rebuild the sites destroyed by the mud.

According to the Civil Defense of Minas Gerais (2019), data made available by the State Environmental Foundation (Feam) indicate the existence of 428 mining tailings dams in Minas Gerais alone, concentrated in 46 municipalities. These data are the portrait of the scenario of intense exploitation of iron ore in Minas Gerais, which, in a way, demonstrates the level of growth in the last two decades of the so-called *neo-extractivism* (Gudynas, 2012; Burchardt, 2014). It is important to clarify that extractivism, as a method of accumulation, began to be shaped, on a large scale, more than 500 years ago, from the colonization of American, Asian, and European countries, providing essential raw materials for the industrial development of capitalism and the construction of well-being in the global north (Acosta, 2016).



This new format, *neo-extractivism*, has expanded not only in Brazil but in Latin America as a whole, presenting itself as a model in which the State is more active, with more explicit rules, and not necessarily oriented to serve the agents of interest of the political power. The State has a more active role, with direct and indirect interventions in extractive sectors (Gudynas, 2009).

When discussing the Latin American development *boom* related to *neo-extractivism*, Burchadt et al. (2016, p. 7) state that

[...] between 2002 and 2014, the region experienced high relative rates of economic growth, considerable improvements in social indicators, and a political shift that not only brought different progressive political forces into government, but also opened space for many innovative policy reforms that broke with the *mainstream* of free market and liberal-representative democracy. This progressive cycle was based on a new development model: *Neo-extractivism*. After the economic failure and social catastrophe of neoliberalism, as well as the unsatisfactory socioeconomic equilibrium of the Post-Washington Consensus, at the beginning of the 21st century *neo-extractivism* became the “new norm” of South America’s political economy.

The unprecedented expansion of the production of agricultural and mineral *commodities* was one of the main characteristics of the Brazilian economy at the beginning of the century (Perpetua & Thomaz, 2018, p. 10), and the country is currently one of the world’s largest mineral producers (International Council on Mining and Metals, 2014). In 2017, the mineral sector participated with 4.69% of the country’s gross domestic product (GDP). In 2018, considering only extractive mining, exports totaled US\$ 25.2 billion, with 10.5% of Brazilian exports and 50.6% of exports from the mineral sector (Brasil, 2019).

The exploitation of iron ore directly impacts several cities in Minas Gerais. Analyzing the contexts of Minas Gerais cities that have mineral extraction activities, Coelho (2017) points out the existence of the so-called “mineral-dependence,” which he defines as a situation in which, due to the specialization of the productive structure of a municipality in the extraction of minerals, the directions of the local structure are defined in external decision-making centers, either of multinational mining companies or mineral commodity markets. This specialization of the productive structure directly influences all activities in the municipality, making it difficult to create and develop other activities not involved with mining. In other words, these cities

have become dependent on a productive and economic system that has generated significant disasters and incalculable economic, social, and environmental damage.

Acosta (2016) corroborates the idea of mini-dependence by analyzing the characteristics and conflicts that arise in economies based on *neo-extractivism*, as these places do not enjoy the benefits arising from the products generated by the raw materials that are exported. According to the Ecuadorian economist, if the progress and well-being of this type of economic orientation are destined for the rich economies, which can enjoy the finished products, the raw material exporting countries are left with a minimal share of mining revenue and the burden of environmental and social liabilities.

Environmental and social costs can manifest in various ways, including violations of community rights and physical and symbolic violence to which the population may be subjected. According to Acosta (2016), societies will eventually have to bear the costs of the complex and conflictive relationship between communities, companies, and the State that is established in these territories since local development plans, which incorporate the experience and wisdom of the populations that inhabit them, are shattered to the detriment of the supremacy of mining activities.

## **Corporate management strategies in the face of civil society's criticism in disaster contexts**

Benson and Kirsch (2010), when analyzing the relationship between industries that promote harm to society and the environment and their critics, especially social movements and NGOs, state that the lack of attention to the actions of these companies is especially problematic when the damage they cause is visible and substantial. Based on an ethnographic reading of companies, including mining companies, the authors propose the concept of “*harm industries*,” defined as “capitalist companies based on practices that are destructive or harmful to people and the environment, in which harm is an integral part of their normal operation” (Benson & Kirsch, 2010, p. 461).

Acserald (2013) presents an argument that is consistent with the discussion raised by Benson and Kirsch (2010) by stating that vulnerability is socially produced and that political-institutional and economic practices contribute to making certain social groups vulnerable. To understand vulnerable groups as victims of unequal protection, it is important to determine the decision-making processes that impose risks on the most unpro-



tected – such as allocative decisions of harmful industries and perverse dynamics of the land market, among others.

To understand the relationship between mining companies and their critics and how these corporations define their strategies for managing criticism, Kirsch (2014) used the experience of ethnographic research and participation in the indigenous political movement that challenged, during the 1980s and 1990s, the environmental impacts of the Ok Tedi copper and gold mine in Papua New Guinea, owned by the Anglo-Australian mining and oil company BHP Billiton. It is one of the first conflicts between mining companies and communities reported in the scientific literature, contributing not only to the internationalization of the debate on the mining industry, promoting new roles for indigenous peoples and NGOs in mining conflict contexts around the world, but also triggering a series of lawsuits and legal actions against transnational mining corporations.

Among the strategies to respond to the criticism, mining companies:

[...] seek to assuage concerns by promoting uncertainty and doubt. They manage the politics of time by manipulating scientific research, hiding or delaying the recognition of significant problems. They co-opt the discourse of their critics by promoting themselves as responsible, sustainable, and transparent. They also seek to enhance their reputation by forging strategic partnerships with NGOs, fomenting division among their critics. These strategies help corporations weather momentary criticism and crises. The ability of these companies to neutralize criticism often leaves the public resigned to the harm they produce (Kirsch, 2014, p. 4).

“Time policies” are defined by Kirsch (2014, pp. 189–190) as being

[...] new forms of politics that seek to prevent the negative environmental impacts of mining by directing their attention to the period before the implementation of mining activity. The main strength of the politics of the time as an activist strategy is that it avoids challenging mining projects already in operation. [...] Political movements rarely have sufficient force to stop a mining project after production has begun. Consequently, political pressure may be more effective when directed at the planning phase of new projects, which may make it more difficult for the mining company to raise the necessary funds or obtain government approval. [...] To be successful, campaigns based on the politics of time must change the way people perceive the impacts of mining.





Benson and Kirsch (2010) identify in these corporate strategies the so-called “politics of resignation,” defined by the authors as a powerful resource of contemporary capitalism because it legitimizes corporate power as inevitable or permanent, being, in part, a symptom of a process through which corporate power normalizes and naturalizes risk and harm as unavoidable conditions of modernity. These strategies aim to neutralize criticism and protect these companies from potential delegitimization (Rigby et al., 2017).

Resignation policies are divided into three phases of corporate response to social criticism, the first characterized by denial of responsibility, the second by recognition, and the third by token accommodation and engagement (Vitti, 2021). Milanez et al. (2018) define these three phases as 1. denial; 2. recognition and accommodation; and 3. strategic involvement.

Milanez et al. (2018), when addressing the challenges of research in the context of the disaster of the Doce River basin caused by the rupture of the Samarco tailings dam, already pointed out the execution of this *modus operandi* in the case in question. The same pattern is repeated, occurring in the first moment a posture of denial on the part of the company responsible, in which there was a certain refusal to engage with critics and a lot of misinformation; the second moment characterized by the phase of recognition and accommodation, marked mainly by emergency and symbolic actions (mainly after the rupture) and the third, the stage of strategic involvement, initiated after the signing of the Transaction and Conduct Adjustment Term, in which Samarco, BHP Billiton, and Vale signed with federal government agencies and the governments of the states of Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo (Milanez et al., 2018).

Acserald et al. (2015) point out that business efforts to neutralize social criticism and popular discontent range from community relations activities to “social risk” studies, which aim to anticipate possible situations organized by social movements among populations affected by large enterprises. The authors point out that such actions seek to obtain the “social license to operate,” defined by Thomson (2014) as a kind of informal approval of the community concerning the operations of a given company, not configured as a document or license obtained, but as something essential to reduce the risks of the corporation receiving public criticism, becoming the target of social conflicts and, in general, suffering damage to its reputation.

In this sense, it is important to highlight that Kirsch (2014, p. 220) states that suing (companies) after the damage has been done ultimately reinforces the policy of resignation since it can convey to society the message that there is no way to prevent losses, especially disasters, from happening.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used was qualitative, with the case study method being applied. For data collection, carried out from March to November 2020, documentary research and interviews were carried out. As the research was carried out during the pandemic, the interviews were conducted virtually, and when some detail was needed, subsequent questions were sent by WhatsApp. The interviews were conducted with ordinary citizens living in Brumadinho, affected by the disaster to a greater or lesser extent. Nine citizens and one representative of the municipality’s public sector were interviewed.

The interviewees were asked to assess Vale’s performance during the pandemic concerning assistance to affected people and other issues involving the dam collapse. As it was a question that intended to allow the interviewee a wide range of responses, allowing the most latent elements to surface, precedents were set for answers that contemplated different aspects involving Vale. Despite the risk of obtaining many answers with varied subjects and perspectives, the data collected from the interviewees showed a convergence of themes and opinions, evidencing how frequently certain situations existed in the researched context.

For the interviews, individuals of different age groups, types of occupation, and places of residence in Brumadinho were invited, in addition to their availability to participate in the research. No invitations were made to those who had direct losses of loved ones in the disaster, respecting the mourning of these people. For the selection of interviewees, the snowball technique was used, classified by Noy (2008) as a *procedure in which the researcher accesses the interviewees through the contact information provided by other informants*.

**Table 1**  
*Profile of interviewees*

Interviewee	Sex	Schooling	Participation category
Respondent 1	F	Complete higher education	Citizen
Respondent 2	F	Complete higher education	Citizen
Respondent 3	F	Complete higher education	Citizen
Respondent 4	F	Complete higher education	Citizen
Respondent 5	M	Secondary education	Citizen

(continues)

**Table 1 (conclusion)**

*Profile of interviewees*

Interviewee	Sex	Schooling	Participation category
Respondent 6	M	Secondary education	Citizen
Respondent 7	F	Complete higher education	Citizen
Respondent 8	F	Complete higher education	Civil Society Organization
Respondent 9	F	Complete higher education	Civil Society Organization
Respondent 10	M	Complete higher education	House of Councils

Source: Melo and Guimarães (2022).

Content analysis, a method widely used in qualitative data analysis (Campos, 2004), was the strategy for data analysis. The categories of analysis were established in the exploration phase of the collected material, based on the information offered by the researched field, being organized into five themes:

- 1) relationship between Vale and the public authorities;
- 2) affected people, compensation, and reparations for damage;
- 3) feelings generated by the company’s actions;
- 4) conduct of the company in the face of the Covid pandemic;
- 5) media and publicity use of the disaster and reparation actions.

In qualitative research, the researcher adopts the perspective of saturation; that is, he concludes the interviews when he finds that the answers are repeated, indicating a common perception, in the case of the study, of those affected by the dam collapse. As there was an overlap of disasters at the time of the research – dam failure and pandemic – this issue appeared in the semi-structured interviews and became one of the categories of analysis. It is also worth clarifying that these categories were established from the transcription of the interviews and the theoretical references adopted, such as the resignation policy implemented by organizations in times of crisis and widely discussed by authors such as Benson and Kirsch (2010) and Kirsch (2014).

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The dynamics of the post-disaster actions of the Córrego do Feijão dam require an understanding, in addition to the roles of the State and civil

organizations in disaster-affected territories, of the actions of the Vale company in this specific scenario. This is an actor that, in the case in question, occupies a centrality in the governance system: on the one hand, it is directly responsible for the disaster that occurred and must respond criminally, economically, and socially for the damages and losses caused in the short, medium and long term. On the other hand, it acts strategically within governance by influencing the actions of other actors, whether through economic, political, or even intimidating force, intending to reduce post-disaster spending and economic impacts and damage to the company's image and future, not only in Brumadinho, but before its shareholders, investors, and society in general.

The first aspect that should be considered and included in the context of analyzing actions involving the mining company is that it is in the category of harmful companies, in which the damage caused by practices that are destructive or harmful to people and the environment has already been absorbed within the normal functioning of the company (Benson & Kirsch, 2010). That is, it is an organization linked to a sector that has in its management tools specific strategies to deal with situations such as the disaster that occurred in Brumadinho.

Since damage and, consequently, accidental situations that promote disasters are part of the risks associated with mining activity (Kirsch, 2014), Vale's performance in post-disaster actions in Brumadinho already presents, *a priori*, a serious governance problem. It is a point of fragility and conflict when government and private sector groups have interests, tasks, and goals that may be unknown to other actors and even conflicting. In the case of private companies, the perspectives are even narrower since their involvement and especially how they see the issue, usually interfere with their operation and profitability (Quarantelli, 1997). In the case of Vale, since the mining company was directly responsible for the disaster, its performance in all aspects of disaster governance can be seen not only as fraught with interest but mainly as a factor in the company's survival.

It is important to highlight how much the relationship between mining companies and the Brazilian State is marked by games of interests and power relations that predate the Brumadinho disaster but which make up the scenario that allowed it to occur. From the financing of electoral campaigns at the state and federal levels (Milanez et al., 2018) to the disclosure of the Vale group's contributions to municipal and state revenue (Felippe et al., 2016), several "forms of patronage sought to benefit from the extractive model to finance electoral campaigns or enable government coalitions" (Acserald, 2018, p. 169).



In the case of Minas Gerais, as stated by Milanez et al. (2019a), the weakening of environmental licensing processes due to changes in state legislation, regardless of the political party bias that was at the head of the government, which weakened the capacity of state agencies to ensure that extractive activities did not significantly degrade the environment, resulted in the Fundão dam failure in 2015 and also in the Córrego do Feijão dam failure in 2019.

Milanez et al. (2018), in their studies on the Fundão disaster, highlight some aspects present in this relationship between the State and mining companies, which, according to the authors, can be identified in processes such as political campaign financing, lobbying, and the use of the “revolving door.” Despite being declared unconstitutional in 2015, campaign financing still strongly influences several politicians in the Executive and Legislative branches, not only in Minas Gerais but also at the federal level.

The revolving door, according to Milanez et al. (2018, p. 132), is a strategy that goes hand in hand with campaign financing, configuring itself as a practice of

[...] circulation of company employees to positions of trust in the government, or in the hiring by large companies of public servants who have been in strategic public positions, and such practices have been widely used by the mining sector.

In the same vein, the authors point out that this practice also affects the research area through the hiring of researchers to produce studies for mining companies, research funding partnerships, and even agreements between mining companies and research agencies, such as a Technical Cooperation Agreement between Vale and Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior (Capes) (*Diário Oficial da União*, 2015) and another between Vale, Fundação Carlos Chagas Filho de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (Faperj), and Fundação de Apoio à Pesquisa do Espírito Santo (Fapes) (Faperj, 2015).

Regarding the first theme of analysis, the *perception of respondents regarding the relationship between Vale and the government*, the data presented in the research demonstrated the close link between the mining company and the State, which, in the context in question, was personified by the municipality of Brumadinho and the government of Minas Gerais. It seems that the reality of this situation is so present and publicly known that people realize it, are uncomfortable, but cannot oppose it.

For example, one of the interviewees, who is a public servant and who was present at the disaster site in the days following the dam collapse, states



that she had the feeling that the “*State simply did not exist in that place, because Vale was in charge of everything.*” She points out that she understood that there was a space of isolation (in the affected area) due to the rescues, where the firefighters were, which was a place precisely for the public authorities to act, but that in dealing with people, Vale had taken over the situation, but not openly declaring it. Finally, he emphasizes that this relationship (public power, Vale, and the population) has always been very problematic, with many secrets, and that in these circumstances, “*you do not know exactly what is happening, and you feel insecure.*”

The second theme of analysis – *affected people, compensation, and reparations for damages* – directly touches on issues related to rights violations and injustices suffered by those affected. Milanez et al. (2019b) point out that one of the areas most impacted by the Córrego do Feijão dam failure was agriculture, harming approximately 400 rural producers whose properties are located in localities bathed by the Paraopeba River, most of whom worked for the production of organic and agroecological foods, without the use of pesticides. Laschefski (2020) draws attention to the slowness and cruelty of the damage assessment processes, in which the affected residents are confronted with countless unproductive meetings in which tiny values are discussed compared to the corporate profits obtained by these companies. This situation is perceived in the report of one of the interviewees, who is a family farmer, and gives an idea of the daily wear and tear of the affected people who deal with the losses produced by the disaster and find themselves at the mercy of institutional bureaucracies that do not resolve the situation effectively:

I went to the Public Prosecutor’s Office, and he sent me to the Public Defender’s Office; I went to the Public Defender’s Office, and he told me to look for lawyers. I had a lawyer; I’m waiting for him here at home so he can file an injunction in court to go back to providing food for the cattle and see if it mitigates my loss. I had an irrigation system that watered the grass that fed the cattle, and I could no longer water it. The cattle started to feel it, I lost animals, I had to sell another to cover expenses, my life turned upside down, and it’s not just me. Zé opened the property for Vale to store things; it became a warehouse, and they also do not acknowledge it. For a year, they provided food for the cattle, then stopped providing it and said from now on to go to that law firm to get our compensation (Interviewee 5).

Silva, Freitas et al. (2020) cite among the damages recorded along the Doce River after the Samarco disaster the loss of productivity that many



properties suffered, being directly affected in access to income and the use of goods for collective use. There are several studies involving the Fundão dam disaster and the damage faced by those affected (Milanez et al., 2016, 2019b; Zhou, et al., 2016; Losekann, 2018; Silva & Freitas, 2020). This context demonstrates the fragility of the affected communities in the face of mining. At the same time,

[...] disasters multiply to the extent that political spaces are transformed into instances of judicialization and criminalization of those affected who fight in defense of their territories and ways of life associated with them (Zhou et al., 2018, p. 24).

The third theme involves the *feelings described by the interviewees concerning the company's performance*. In this item, it is possible that aspects related to mental illness are associated since emotions such as sadness and stress, in addition to depression itself, are mentioned. In the experience of the Samarco disaster, Zhou et al. (2016) emphasizes how the institutional dynamics that become part of the routine of the affected communities, among them the technical and administrative definition of what is considered "affected," are factors that produce social suffering.

However, the reference that seems to fit the feelings expressed by the interviewees is the one found in the politics of resignation, a strategy used by harmful industries that operate precisely in the field of emotions. Zhou et al. (2016) name these experiences lived by those affected as the politics of affectations, and such situations, according to Vitti (2021), clearly express the third phase of the resignation policies mentioned by Benson and Kirsch (2010).

Through a process in which corporate power acts to naturalize and normalize risks and harms as something inevitable (Benson & Kirsch, 2010), it seeks to

[...] neutralize social criticism and popular discontent, seeking to offer limited responses through symbolic gestures of compensation or mitigation, taking advantage of the State's failure to guarantee the rights to education and health (Acserald, 2014, p. 2).

[...] I think it is a company that aims to make a profit and also to destroy the territories it mines. I feel like I live in the middle of several craters that they and others have dug here in the region. I don't feel



safe, and I start to question my future here. Vale doesn't care about human beings; it cares about profit. So, I live like this, not able to see a way out (Interviewee 1).

Complete abandonment! Vale does not respect us. I am very sad and disappointed. I have no strength, and I don't know where to start again (Interviewee 5).

Emotions such as discouragement and uncertainty about the future are associated not only with the dam failure episode itself but with the sense of powerlessness and lack of prospects that the mining company will answer for the disaster caused and for all the damage caused to people, the environment, and the municipality as a whole. As described by Benson and Kirsch (2010), the everyday policy of resignation implies admitting that things went wrong and also that one is practically incapable of doing anything about it, recognizing that structural limitations impede the ability to bring about change, a feeling that is also reinforced by the factors mentioned earlier in theme 1, involving relations between the company and the state.

The fourth theme, *the company's conduct in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic*, was unprecedented data that appeared in the research since it covered a specific situation involving two disasters<sup>1</sup>. Among the main data obtained about the pandemic, the interviews conducted and the journalistic sources consulted at the time (Stropasolas, 2020; Evangelista, 2020) showed that Vale and the companies providing services to the mining company continued to work during the peak periods of the Covid-19 pandemic, despite the safety measures and social isolation that were adopted worldwide. In addition to not collaborating with the risk management and prevention measures adopted worldwide, this situation resulted in the constant entry and exit of people from outside the city, increasing the risks of transmission. Another factor pointed out was the works related to the Córrego do Feijão disaster, which, due to the continuous flow of workers, also contributed to the increase in the number of cases, as found by newspapers, since they promoted the constant arrival of people to the city in search of employment in post-disaster actions.

<sup>1</sup> Due to the complexity of the subject and the demand for a specific theoretical framework for carrying out the analysis of the collected data, the authors chose to address this category in a separate article, already published in another journal and available for consultation, in which they discuss the increase of the vulnerabilities of the population affected by Covid-19 as a result of the damage caused by the dam failure. See Melo and Guimarães (2022).



One of the interviewees reports that it was known to the residents of the municipality that outsourced employees of the company were being contaminated and did not stop working even with the existence of protection measures and social isolation. In a tone of exasperation, she states: “It is a company that has never stopped working, that has never stopped mining; I think it is a company that aims for profit, profit, profit, and that also aims to destroy the territories it mines” (Interviewee 1). Also demonstrating knowledge about the existence of this scenario, Interviewee 5 says: “I understand that Vale is responsible for this too. The movement of workers in the city is very large.”

The fifth and final theme, the *media and publicity use of the disaster and reparation actions*, is a subject that appeared frequently in the interviews, playing a strategic role in softening the negative image of the company, signaling a strategic performance of actors who participate in the social dynamics and end up interfering in the construction of public opinion about the disaster and the responsibility of those involved.

The accounts of some interviewees demonstrate the scale of these actions and how they omit the reality experienced by the people affected and by the municipality in general:

They are doing a publicity job in Brumadinho, from what I hear, it is a very well-done job, in the properties, for a gastronomic festival in Tiradentes, now, at the end of the month. I keep wondering: “Advertising what? What do we have in Brumadinho?” The impression I get is that they are marketing, and playing games, you know? (Interviewee 5).

The role of the media in influencing opinions about disasters was not new in Brumadinho. In studies produced from the analysis of the articles published shortly after the Mariana disaster, Rocha (2016) warned about the precarious coverage carried out by the prominent printed newspapers in the country. On the first day of the event, newspapers such as *Folha de S.Paulo*, for example, did not even mention the names of mining companies Vale and BHP as directly linked to Samarco. The newspaper *O Globo*, in turn, in the first weeks after the rupture,

[...] treated the disaster as a natural phenomenon and emphasized the help to the homeless, in which the subject of the tragedy was the mud, the result of an accident and not an environmental crime with causes and responsibilities to be investigated (Rocha, 2016, p. 2).

Brasil and Pires (2017, p. 3) point out that what was addressed and emphasized in these articles on the Mariana disaster were

[...] numbers – the number of people affected and pollutants released into the environment, compensation amounts that the companies responsible should pay, emergency investments in communities, devaluation of the shares of mining companies Samarco and Vale,

and the conflicts between mining companies, environmentalists, the State and communities affected by the dam collapse were presented only in specific moments. Along the same lines, authors such as Bueno (2017) draw attention to the approach taken by newspapers such as *Valor Econômico*, which highlighted the financial impacts caused by the disaster, as well as the losses to the company caused by compensation to victims and communities, in addition to environmental fines and the imminent loss of value of the mining company's shares.

Studies related to Mariana have already shown how the focus on the disasters and damages caused after the dam rupture and not on the circumstances that led to the event, in addition to the pre-existing conflicts between mining companies, environmentalists, and local communities, end up hindering the understanding of society in general about the context of mining disasters. As highlighted by Bueno (2017, p. 39), “over time, [the press] ignores the real risks inherent in these ventures, especially when they are at the mercy of the greed of companies and the omission of authorities”.

In addressing the performance of the hegemonic media in the Brumadinho disaster, Santana and Sousa (2023) highlight how the Brazilian and international populations depended on the journalistic discourses produced to see the event that occurred and how these discourses influenced those affected by the disaster. As mentioned by one of the interviewees, Brumadinho is a large city in territorial extension, and many people heard on television that something had happened that would impact their lives, such as the contamination of the Paraopeba River by tailings sludge. Thus, the greater the spread of news and information about the actions taken by the company, the greater the feeling that “the damage was being repaired.”

Santana and Sousa (2023), in a survey of the articles published in newspapers and television programs, corroborate some of the aspects that had been pointed out in the Mariana studies, such as the decontextualization of the impacts caused by the mining activity itself in the municipality even before the dam rupture. The authors also highlight the focus of the articles



on the mourning of the families of the fatal victims, omitting the process of struggle of those affected in search of reparation and justice. As stated by the authors,

[...] by making it difficult for readers and viewers to understand the reasons for the protests, the hegemonic media collaborates with the weakening of these struggles, supporting the structures of capitalist domination (Santana & Sousa, 2023, p. 30).

Silva, Lopes et al. (2020), in turn, in a study on the representations of social actors in the news about the Brumadinho and Mariana disasters, emphasize how the media distances the local community from social, economic, and environmental impacts, not recognizing it as a victim of the tragedies. The same occurs with the environment, which is not represented as a disaster victim. The authors add that the

[...] exclusion of militant/activist voices in defense of the interests of the local population and the environment can mitigate social pressures for the formulation of effective policies to prevent new tragedies (Silva, Lopes et al., 2020, p. 389).

Thus, involving the media and producing publicity actions focused on the disaster may be a way, developed in critical management strategies, to manage the shock caused in the community by the disaster. However, since the disaster has already hit the municipality and relations with the community are severely compromised, reinforcing the policy of resignation (Kirsch, 2014), the focus of these media actions is not necessarily the local community but the external public which, as already mentioned, is far from the affected territory and uses the communication channels to obtain information about what has been happening in Brumadinho. The intention to reach the external public is even perceived in the comments of the interviews. In the excerpt below, it is clear that in addition to the intention to “account for Brumadinho,” the company also intends to involve other cities that were at risk of disaster as a target of care by the company:

During the pandemic, they wanted to say that they were doing a thousand things; they even put them on LinkedIn. Guess which cities they highlighted? Brumadinho and the other places which were at risk of their dam breaking (Interviewee 3).



In the comment of Interviewee 7, it can be seen that the local population is aware of the media use of the actions and that they do not correspond to the reality experienced by the people of the municipality after the disaster: “Vale carries out some actions and gives media visibility to them as if the act was something we should applaud for, while what really matters and concerns those affected is left in the dark” (Interviewee 7).

It may be considered that the company’s main intention in these actions involves, in a way, a form of social risk management in a slightly broader field. The objective would not be to regain the trust of the local community to operate in the affected municipality but to ensure the maintenance of a certain credibility in other places that have mining activity under the endorsement of the general society that does not suffer the injustices and direct damages promoted by mineral extraction and that consumes the products that use ore as raw material, moving the demand of the commodities market.

The defining feature of contemporary capitalism is the corporate response to critique. Capital manages critique in such a way that recognition of and discontent about harm are converted into structures of feeling that promote cynicism about the ability to alter social structures and makes resignation a dominant mode of political action. Industries consistently manage to weather crises, litigation that threatens their ability to continue operating, and the mobilization of their opponents by strategically acknowledging some degree of risk, partnering with governments or NGOs, and coopting the language of critique (Benson & Kirsch, 2010, p. 474).

Based on this data, which certainly requires attention and should be observed as research, the concept of *mineral influence* is proposed. Mineral influence can be considered as the indirect action of the mining sector with the general public through the efforts of third parties, whether public persons or organizations, to serve the interests of mining companies. To this end, organizations in the mineral extractive sector use their economic importance, power of influence, and political reach. Unlike *mining dependence*, which operates in the local production chain and arrangements and identifies economic dependency, and the *social license to operate*, which exercises its intentions through corporate social responsibility towards local populations, *mining influence* involves a network of actors who do not work directly for mining, but who play roles or perform activities in which they will talk



*about* mining, reaching and building the social image of mining companies for an audience that does not live directly with the damage of mining activity but that supports the market demand of mining.

These actors, whether they are prestigious public figures or organizations with recognized performance in the socio-environmental field, motivated by lucrative business contracts or even by sumptuous resources from funding agencies whose sources of funds are the mining companies themselves, end up directing their influence capacity in favor of rebuilding the image of these companies and, mainly, of the mining sector. Further sedimenting the neutralization of criticism, located in the third phase described by Benson and Kirsch (2010), these actors reinforce the policies of resignation by endorsing discourses that are often contradictory, considering that they are trying to transform into a spectacle where there is scorched earth.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The main objective of this article was to identify strategies used by the Vale company to deal with civil society's criticism of the Córrego do Feijão mine dam disaster. The management of the criminal catastrophe in Córrego do Feijão does not involve "only" the disaster but a systematic political, economic, institutional, and social process of violations, influences, abuses, and injustices that had its apex in the dam rupture.

The results were close to other researchers' records (Zhourri et al., 2016, 2018; Milanez et al., 2018; Vitti, 2021). The company uses mechanisms that impute discouragement and disbelief to the affected people, fostering the policy of resignation mentioned by Benson and Kirsch (2010) and Kirsch (2014) to the numerous strategies of bureaucratization, social and mental suffering and violations of rights that postpone the actions of reparation to those affected, who are thrown into slow judicial processes that benefit the company, similar to what has been happening with those affected by the Samarco disaster in Mariana.

It is important to highlight that the results exceeded the objective set since the circumstances of the data collection period brought new elements that directly impacted the researched theme. The emergence of a pandemic during data collection, even if it had not reached Brumadinho, could not be ignored. As a way to include and delimit a vast and complex subject such as the Covid-19 pandemic within the scope of the research without compromising the central theme and objective of the work, it was decided to



correlate the company's performance in the face of a new disaster in the territory, allowing the population to express, as in the dam rupture, about the procedures that the company adopted to respond to the disaster.

And, as in the crime disaster caused by it, Vale once again proved indifferent to preserving life and, as reported in the interviews and denounced by media outlets, kept its facilities running, increasing the contamination levels by Covid-19 in the city. In this sense, the potentiation of vulnerabilities promoted by the company during the pandemic is a factor that can interfere with and impair the recovery process of the disaster itself since the maintenance of high rates of contamination and deaths delays the resumption of activities and the execution of repair actions.

As an indication for future research, we suggest a greater understanding and development of the concept of influence-mining proposed in this article. The subject, of greater complexity and interface with other areas of knowledge, such as communication, marketing and social responsibility, and private investment policies, requires research and separate work, which can contribute effectively to analyses related to this context that, in addition to the economy, directly involves thousands of lives and ecosystems.

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