

# Uprooted by a petrochemical company: The ethical dimension of open strategy

## Despatriados por uma organização petroquímica: A dimensão ética na abertura da estratégia

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## Abstract

**Purpose:** This article debates the open strategy process, understanding the social pressure on companies as a highlighted dimension within the context of formulating strategy.

**Originality/value:** Within corporate environmental and social crimes and negligence, companies can maintain their closed strategies and try to avoid institutional and social protests by responding ceremonially. To analyze this relationship, we use the theoretical framework of open strategy, assuming a practical perspective of this worldwide social phenomenon, and we also propose a discussion agenda for the ethical dimension of formulating strategy.

**Design/methodology/approach:** We have conducted a documental case study of the Braskem “geological phenomenon” which occurred in Maceió, Alagoas, in 2018 using newspaper reports from *Folha de S.Paulo* and *Estadão*, as well as business reports. Based on these documents, we debate the corporate environmental crime that occurred (ecocide), which caused great losses on the part of the local residents. The documents were analyzed using content analysis and interpreted in light of the delineated theoretical framework.

**Findings:** We emphasize the importance of including the ethical dimension in debates about open strategy and propose a reflection about taking this opening seriously. Openness is built from a dialogic perspective, and social practices are considered a social-historic and culturally situated framework.

**Keywords:** strategy, open strategy, social movements, ethics, ecocide



## Resumo

**Objetivo:** Esse artigo debate o processo de abertura da estratégia, entendendo a pressão social sobre as organizações como uma dimensão de destaque no contexto do fazer estratégia.

**Originalidade/valor:** Em um contexto de crimes ambientais corporativos, sociais e negligências de modo geral, as organizações podem manter suas estratégias fechadas e tentar se esquivar de manifestações institucionais e sociais ao responder cerimonialmente. Para problematizar esta relação, trazemos como arcabouço teórico discussões sobre a *open strategy*, assumindo uma perspectiva prática deste fenômeno social mundial, propondo ainda uma agenda de discussões dentro de uma dimensão da ética no fazer estratégia.

**Design/metodologia/abordagem:** Realizamos um estudo de caso de base documental do “fenômeno geológico” da Braskem ocorrido em Maceió em 2018, a partir de reportagens publicadas na *Folha de S.Paulo* e no *Estadão*, assim como relatórios da organização. Face a esses documentos, debatemos sobre o crime ambiental corporativo ocorrido (ecocídio), que acarretou na despatriação dos sujeitos. Os documentos foram analisados a partir de análise de conteúdo e interpretados à luz do arcabouço teórico delineado.

**Resultados:** Ressaltamos neste artigo a importância da inclusão da dimensão ética nos debates sobre *open strategy* e propomos uma reflexão sobre levar a abertura a sério. Abertura essa construída a partir de uma perspectiva dialógica e de práticas sociais que consideram um arcabouço sócio-histórico, cultural e situado.

**Palavras-chave:** estratégia, *open strategy*, movimentos sociais, ética, ecocídio



## INTRODUCTION

The absence of reflection on ethical questions has been notorious in strategy studies, especially those that study the main currents of this field, which come from microeconomics (Tsoukas, 2018). This can also be perceived in the debate about open strategy, understood in this paper as opening participation in formulating strategy to internal and external members of an organization (Tavakoli et al., 2017). However, we understand that the process of elaborating strategy (open or not) is a phenomenon rooted in moral consequences and considerations (Freeman et al., 2007; Tsoukas, 2018), and therefore, the ethical dimension needs to be considered in the process of elaborating a strategy and making it open. The dynamics of open strategy are related to organizational contingencies and environments, which can initially be put into operation through communication interactions between two or more parties to achieve beneficial results (Hautz et al., 2017; Heracleous et al., 2018). However, even though we know the advantages of engaging various groups in the strategy process, we also know there will naturally be tensions in this dialogue (Heracleous, 2019). Even if these tensions are dealt with constructively (Heracleous et al., 2018), there are different degrees of openness, and complete transparency is hard to find. At the same time, due to social movements and the role of the media in contemporary society (Hautz et al., 2017; Ohlson & Yakis-Douglas, 2019; Whittington et al., 2011), we also cannot assume totally closed company strategies.

The commitment of an organization to an open strategy is not considered static. It is dynamic (Appleyard & Chesbrough, 2017) and conditioned by various stakeholders and their demands on an organization (Whittington et al., 2011). In this case, those organizations that are facing more complex situations (environmental and social crimes and negligence in general) tend to engage more people in strategic discussions in an attempt to facilitate comprehension and improve the public perception of its activities (Hautz et al., 2017; Gupta & Briscoe, 2020; Whittington et al., 2011). This is because transparency increases legitimacy, reduces information asymmetries, and collaborates in managing impressions (Cruz et al., 2022). We assume that organizations within extreme contexts can feel pressure from society to open their strategies.

Extreme contexts are defined by Hannah et al. (2009) as environments in which extreme events may or may not occur that go beyond the organization's capacity to avert them, resulting in a large, intolerable magnitude of physical, psychological, and material consequences for the members of the





organization. These events differ in their timing, magnitude, probability of outcomes, physical or psycho-social proximity, and the threat they pose. This definition limits the understanding of the reach of the consequences because they do not only affect the organization's members. Even though the literature presents countless types of events and/or extreme contexts (Hällgren et al., 2017), corporate environmental crimes, such as ecocide caused by organizational actions, still have not been discussed as analytical phenomena.

Therefore, one point to be considered in the process of opening strategy is the social pressure exerted by social movements. However, in the case of extreme contexts, which require organizational responses, the opening of strategy can be ceremonial due to social pressure and does not necessarily need to be based on an ethical commitment. Thus, our objective is to debate the opening of strategy, understood as social pressure on organizations, as a prominent dimension within the context of devising strategy. We know that an open strategy has the potential to transform an organization's relationships and responsibilities (Hautz et al., 2017).

To discuss these relationships, we examine a case that occurred in Alagoas in 2018. Even though it did not receive attention in large media outlets, a corporate environmental crime—termed a “geological phenomenon”—with environmental and social impacts of immense proportions was committed. In March, after experiencing a strong storm, the residents of the Pinheiro neighborhood in Maceió felt a strong tremor in the ground. Without knowing the cause, they judged it to be some ground settling or problems related to sanitation. Later that year, the residents of four other nearby neighborhoods (Mutange, Farol, Bebedouro, and Bom Parto) experienced the same problem, with cracks appearing in buildings and streets. After the Mineral Resources Research Company (Companhia de Pesquisa de Recursos Minerais [CPRM]) investigated the case, the reason for these tremors and cracks was identified. Braskem, a petrochemical company that has operated in the region mining rock salt since the 1970s, was declared responsible for the collapse of a mine that set off the tremor felt in these neighborhoods (Ministério Público Federal, 2023).

After this declaration concerning the origin of the tremors and cracks, as well as the company's responsibility, the members of the local population initiated a movement to assert their rights. As secondary stakeholders of the organization, the people affected gathered in their communities (Dobusch & Kapeller, 2018) to create what we call social movements. In questioning certain injustices and opposing them through these movements, it is possible





to achieve something that cannot be achieved through public and legal measures (Gupta & Briscoe, 2020). In this case, we understand that organizations can keep their strategies closed and try to avoid these protests by just responding ceremonially. However, we propose an important discussion in the strategy literature that can offer new insights into the understanding of organizational phenomena, such as the event we have related to, and produce more cooperative organizational responses, namely a discussion of open strategy.

Within the context that we propose, mixing discussions of open strategy with an ethical dimension can help us understand open strategy in organizations not only as a movement “controlled by” and “subordinate” to organizational interests but also as an effective articulation of actions which are ethically sustained and committed, based on an ethical perspective opposed to the profit motive espoused by organizations. The open strategy literature addresses this phenomenon based on approaches from perspectives featuring practices (Splitter et al., 2019), sensemaking (Bencherki et al., 2019), dialogue (Heracleous, 2019), and networks (Hautz, 2019), as well as an institutional perspective (Goldenstein & Walgenbach, 2019). We propose an ethical dimension within the discussion of social practices, emphasizing that taking this strategy seriously (Whittington et al., 2003) when speaking of open strategy means considering its ethical dimension (Tsoukas, 2018).

To debate the process of open strategy in the face of social pressure, considering the case of Braskem, we propose relating two great themes, open strategy and social movements, and articulating an ethical dimension in the discussion of social practices. These themes represent, respectively, the second and third topics of this paper. We then present this study’s methodological procedures featuring a qualitative case study based on reporting this “geological phenomenon” in *Estadão* and *Folha de S.Paulo* and the organization’s reports regarding the environmental crime in question. Afterward, we present the case study—using excerpts from reporting and corporate reports—emphasizing the importance of the ethical dimension in the open strategy process.

Following this, we articulate the concepts presented in this case study to reflect on how strategy should be conducted in the topic under discussion. In our final considerations, we highlight the importance of debating the ethical dimension when formulating a strategy in a non-utilitarian manner. In the presented case, we recognize ethics as an essential element that should be incorporated into social and organizational actions. Finally, we mention the limitations of this paper and suggest paths for research that can provide continuity to the debate we have proposed here.



## OPEN STRATEGY: “A WORLDWIDE SOCIAL PHENOMENON”

Open strategy is a “worldwide social phenomenon” that cannot “be considered unexpected or revolutionary” when examined from a sociological point of view, given the global tendency towards greater openness within the organizational context (Goldenstein & Walgenbach, 2019, p. 289). Despite this, there is a lack of consensus about its conception and how it should be addressed as an entity, process, or practice (Tavakoli et al., 2017). Therefore, we will seek to provide an overall view of the main points in the literature, which provide a base for the relationships proposed by an open strategy based on an ethical reflection promoted by social movements, considering the dialogic perspective and practices of this phenomenon utilizing a fluid vision of an organization and the strategy implied by organizing and strategizing discussions (Splitter et al., 2023; Tavakoli et al., 2017).

The open strategy approach proposes greater openness, with an organization’s internal and external members participating more significantly in elaborating and implementing strategy (Tavakoli et al., 2017). Hautz et al. (2017) define it as “a dynamic bundle of practices that affords internal and external actors greater strategic transparency and/or inclusion, the balance and extent of which respond to evolving contingencies derived from both within and without organizational boundaries.” Including different forms of knowledge enables an organization to create a more robust sensemaking system, which is capable of dealing with the complexity of an organization’s context (Seidl & Werle, 2018).

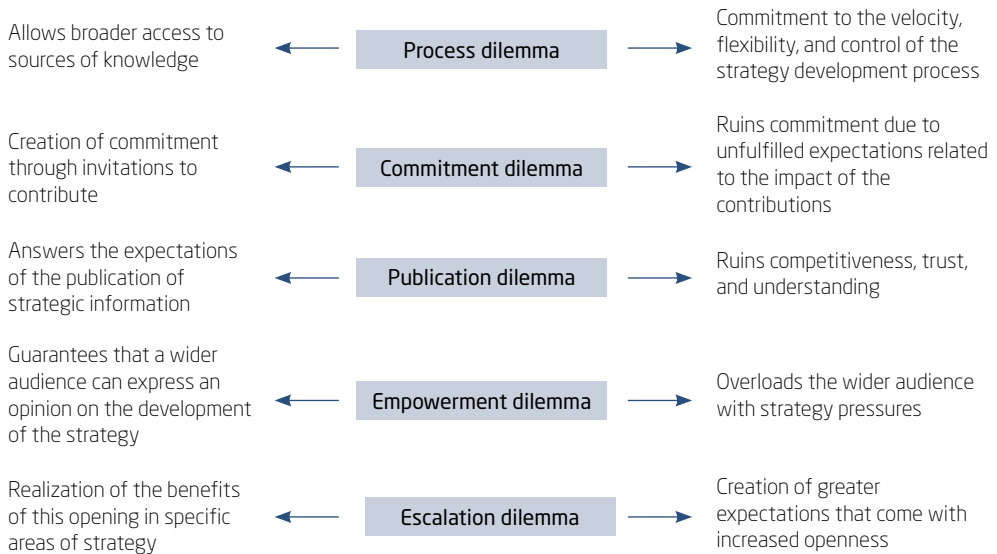
Transparency and inclusion are the pillars of open strategy (Tavakoli et al., 2017; Whittington et al., 2011), but it also includes its cost-free nature (Appleyard & Chesbrough, 2017) and shared decision-making (Adobor, 2020). The pillars emphasize the importance of interactive dialogue in the process of opening strategy, or in other words, two or more individuals routinely sharing information to achieve a particular objective or construct a joint understanding (Heracleous et al., 2018).

Transparency has to do with the intention of sharing information, as well as its access, visibility, and quality, in addition to discussing strategic actions taken by internal and external members (Adobor, 2020; Seidl et al., 2019; Tavakoli et al., 2017). Inclusion refers to broad participation in formulating strategy through internal and external consultations and co-strategizing (Seidl et al., 2019; Tavakoli et al., 2017). The degree of transparency and inclusion can vary, which makes it possible to create various degrees of openness, such as total, partial, or hybrid (Appleyard & Chesbrough, 2017;

Holstein & Rantakari, 2023). The transparency of strategy “infiltrates” organizational strategy gradually and is partially unobserved (Stjerne et al., 2022) until the pillars permeate openness practices, of which Tavakoli et al. (2017) highlight three: transparent discourse, co-creation (see Adobor, 2020), and democratic decision making.

Despite the dialogue and participation that open strategy promotes, its main discussions are addressed from a managerial lens, which weighs its opportunities and problems, such as information overload (Lingo, 2023). Through this lens, Hautz et al. (2017) list five main dilemmas: process, commitment, publication, empowerment, and escalation, as shown in Figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
*Central dilemmas of open strategy*



*Source:* Adapted from Hautz et al. (2017, p. 302).

Despite the theoretical and practical relevance of these dilemmas, Hautz et al. (2017) ignore the ethical dilemma in implementing strategy (Tsoukas, 2018). We understand that a responsible, attentive organization assumes a relational and communicative posture with its stakeholders, incorporates virtues in its strategy, and has an ethical strategy. Unlike considering only stakeholders to be a vital part of organizational performance, an open strategy oriented towards ethics should overcome a self-referential strategy based on self-interest and the practices of the actors (Tsoukas, 2018). Even though



the ethical dimension is considered for internal organizational practices (Gotsis & Kortezi, 2013), there also needs to be a reflection on the benefits of an open strategy oriented towards ethical reflections.

In terms of the pressures that come with a more open strategy, Whittington et al. (2011) list four forces: organizational, societal, cultural, and technological. Even though it is an external agent, society pressures large companies to explain their actions. It demands greater transparency and inclusion in the decision-making process (Hautz et al., 2017), especially in cultures that are more skeptical of organizations (Adobor, 2021), which makes it possible to create a channel of collaboration to respond to crises and extreme events (Hällgren et al., 2017), instead of an opening to only consultants, researchers, or users (Tavakoli et al., 2017). Therefore, social movements, like one or more communities in society, can exert pressure on the organization by demanding transparency and inclusion in strategic practices, promoting the opening of the organization's strategy (Ohlson & Yakis-Douglas, 2019). Organizations that operate in extreme contexts, or those involved in environmental crimes or corporate scandals, which operate under this pressure to be more open, may find it necessary to undertake open practices that will be understood as being ceremonial and uncommitted to social ethics and therefore overshadowed by the profit motive. Considering this specific agent, in the following section, we will address general concepts, examples of pressures exercised by movements, their achievements, and their possible relationship to open strategy.

## **SOCIAL MOVEMENTS: AGENTS THAT PROMOTE OPEN STRATEGY?**

As one of the intrinsic characteristics of social movements, we can identify the desire to gain space and a voice and acquire fundamental rights based on a vision of the ethics of virtue, which can be understood as the “good life” (Tsoukas, 2018). It is common for these groups, normally made up of people who have been through traumatic situations or have been marginalized within society, to seek change through claims and social pressure (Caggiano & Rosa, 2015). We believe that the union of people with similar backgrounds and/or values can favor the exercising of influence and power in the causes that they fight for (Alaggia & Wang, 2020). In other words, the identity that social movements construct is based on individual identities, sustained by a shared interest in change (Halvorsen et al., 2019).



Various examples and subjects represent people's attempts to overcome problems they have experienced and seek dignity and justice: battles for gender equality, against sexual violence, for freedom of religious and cultural expression etc. Social movements become spaces to share stories with those who have had similar experiences (Alaggia & Wang, 2020). Nonetheless, we can reflect on the possibilities for effective change through these groups. Even though the strategic actions of social movements are normally aligned with their values and what they believe is politically correct (Fetner, 2001), it is known that social battles are not always won in legal terms in courts (Oliveira & Alcadipani, 2021). For example, when there is a union between the political sector and social movements, it may be easier to question hegemonic postures by other social groups or organizations. A social movement with representative force can neutralize dangerous effects of the law (Fierro, 2018, p. 99). In this case, there is a tendency for members of these groups to be heard, affect, or influence organizational actions in relation to political and social awareness of a specific subject (Fierro, 2018).

In terms of social movements related to organizations, we understand that the business environment has cooperation and collaboration moved by sharing the same goals and interests, sustained by the profit motive (Alcadipani & Medeiros, 2020). These interests normally diverge from those of the community affected by its actions (Wulf & Butel, 2017). While the community tends to value local, economic, and social development and the preservation of the environment, organizations tend to value one-dimensional results related to economic-financial profitability. However, many organizations are held responsible for crimes, often called events, phenomena, or accidents, on the way to this greater goal. No matter how they are explained, they tend to reverberate negatively in the lives of the population.

Even though Appleyard and Chesbrough (2017) have enumerated the user, the firm, and the market as the three motivators of change in organizational strategies, we propose that social movements should also be interpreted as motivators of change, mainly in terms of the opening and closing of these strategies. This is because the communities that constitute and are constituted by social movements, especially those that oppose organizations face-to-face, feature people who normally live nearby and work in large factories, people who are economically dependent on the social flux that the organization generates in their neighborhood; people who are outsourced; and people who provide services to this larger organization, etc.

Events within extreme contexts, even if they reveal a dependent relationship and, therefore, a distance from the powers of the organization and





the population, enable us to understand why affected people tend to unite and form social movements. Even though there is not necessarily a direct relationship between these groups and the final product offered by an organization, they are directly affected by the consequences generated by the organization's activities (Appleyard & Chesbrough, 2017), and this is why they participate in the prevention, solution, or response to these events. An example of the negative consequences of these activities is corporate environmental crimes, also known as ecocides. These crimes affect and deteriorate the fauna and flora of a given area, affecting the entire ecosystem and the basic conditions for human life, such as the quality of the water, air, and ground (Oliveira et al., 2022). The context in which an organization finds itself is influenced by an opening of strategy. It can influence how the pillars of open strategy manifest themselves and where transparency and inclusion can occur differently depending on the context (Heracleous et al., 2018).

In discussing the context of corporate environmental crimes, the sharing of the pain caused by these events makes it possible to create a shared identity and objective among these individuals, which leads to the appearance of social movements (Alaggia & Wang, 2020; Caggiano & Rosa, 2015; Halvorsen et al., 2019). Groups that share social links or a social identity have more force than those that do not (Dobusch & Kapeller, 2018) and tend to promote greater strategic openness.

## METHODOLOGY

Given our proposed objective, this study is qualitative in nature and discusses the process of the environmental crime committed by Braskem. This qualitative research sustains our intention to access and debate the implicit and explicit dimensions of the different perceptions of the actors involved (Coffey, 2014). Braskem was created in 2002 by the merger of the Odebrecht Organization with the Mariani Group, and it is currently the sixth largest petrochemical company in the world, with a global presence including operations in Brazil, the United States, Germany, and Mexico (Braskem, 2023a). Nonetheless, in 2019, the company was deemed responsible for the tremors, cracks, and severe subsidence in various neighborhoods in Maceió, the State of Alagoas's capital, caused by rock salt mining (Estadão, 2019a).

We conducted documental research using the newspaper articles published in two newspapers with the largest circulation in Brazil: *Estadão* and



*Folha de S.Paulo*. In addition to these articles, we selected a company report with information about the crime (Braskem, 2023b). Our research protocol is displayed in Figure 2. We understand that the documents are socially constructed and written with a purpose, which provides us with understanding on an individual level as well as a portrait of the public and organizational realities (Coffey, 2014). Our decision to utilize documental research is justified because this study assumes a perspective of reality as seen through the media and analyzes this process of profound mediatization (Couldry & Hepp, 2017). In assuming these perspectives, we understand that the media plays a role as an institutional agent, publishing, disseminating, and constructing lines of narrative that are not only forms of expression but also serve as a type of conductor of institutional logic that models social practices (in their most diverse discursive and even operational forms). Given this, the composition of the corpus of this paper based on reporting and published reports reveals this assumption, which enables us to learn the dimensions of these discursively articulated social practices.

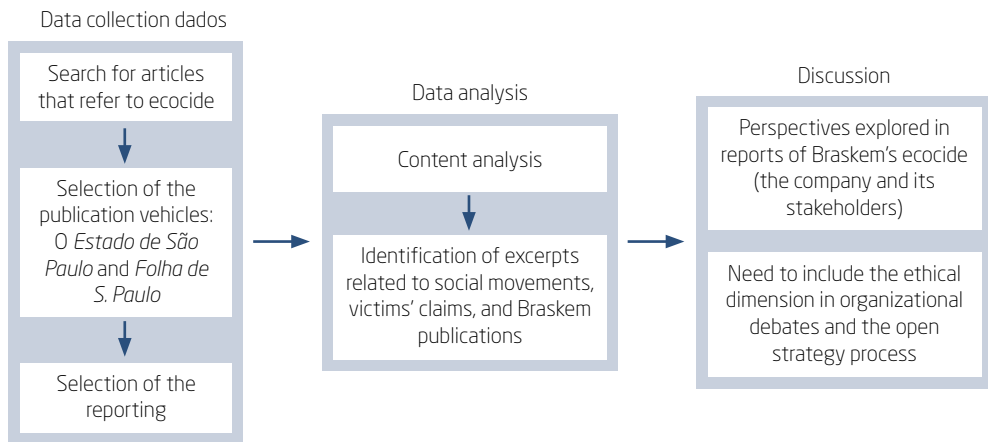
We use the content analysis technique for our data analysis, which makes it possible to obtain qualitative results in accordance with the characteristics presented in excerpts from these messages (Bardin, 2016). This study has been conducted based on the steps elucidated by Bardin (2016) for the organization of analysis: pre-analysis, material exploration, and the treatment and interpretation of the obtained data. Our choice of content analysis should be understood as a choice regarding the organization of our analysis, which guarantees that it will be possible to learn the principal subject units that exist in these texts, enabling us to trace the perspectives of the various agents involved in the context of the case under analysis. It should also be noted that the great size of the obtained text requires a technique capable of dealing with this quantity of material and organizing the entire analysis process. We also wish to emphasize that the use of content analysis does not follow the application of a protocol but rather assists in the process of rationalizing the research (Harley & Cornelissen, 2022).

The pre-analysis refers to the selection and organization of the material to be analyzed to systematize initial ideas; during this phase, we selected the documents that comprise our analysis corpus (Bardin, 2016). The press vehicles used to have a wide circulation in Brazil and the largest number of publications that refer to the case in question. In addition, their reporting demonstrates temporal consistency regarding the history of what occurred and its repercussions. They were also selected because they have a filter capability (date of publication, source type—editorial—and area). The filters were



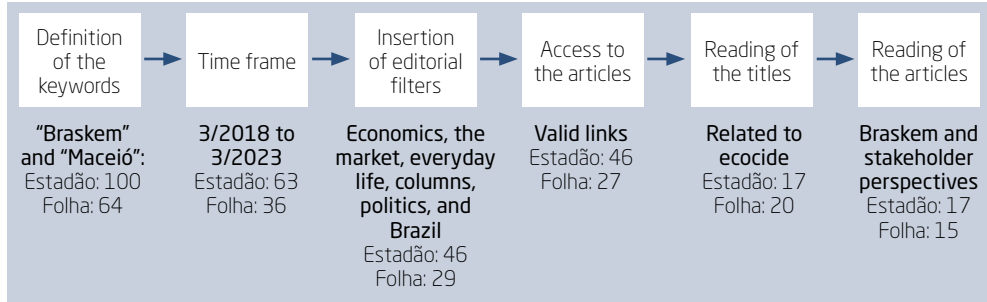
applied to reporting related to corporate environmental crimes ranging from March 2018 until the finalization of this study in March 2023; the search words were “Braskem” and “Maceió”, and the editorials were related to economics, the market, everyday life, columns, politics, and Brazil. We found 46 articles within this time frame in *Estadão*, and 29 in *Folha de S.Paulo*.

**Figure 2**  
*Research protocol*



The data from these articles was extracted using Excel for the titles, publication date, author, and access link. It was not possible to access two of the articles in *Estadão*. After reading the titles, we decided that 21 articles from *Estadão* and 20 from *Folha de S.Paulo* were relevant. Later, we selected only those that dealt with the event’s history in Maceió, the supervising governmental bodies’ and Braskem’s official notes, resident accounts, social movements, and local community complaints. After reading these articles, we selected 17 articles from *Estadão* and 15 from *Folha de S.Paulo* as our analysis corpus, giving us 32 articles listed in Appendix A. The process developed in the pre-analysis step is displayed in Figure 3.

**Figure 3**  
*Pre-analysis*



During the material exploration phase, we identified excerpts that referred to the initial moments of the crime (before Braskem was declared responsible), the moment the CPRM issued its report stating that Braskem was responsible for this event, the formation of social movements in the affected neighborhoods, the variety of losses experienced by the residents, and the measures taken after responsibility was determined. As may be observed, we did not codify the content based on registration units. We prioritized the feelings (Cruz et al., 2022) found in the article excerpts. It should be emphasized that we did not seek to quantify the content of the excerpts but rather organized it in order to analyze the strategic direction adopted by the company and the local community’s narratives.

Finally, in the data treatment phase, we were able to discuss this case by interpreting the results of the content extracted and organized from the collected material. In this sense, it was possible to understand the environmental crime from the company’s perspective as well as the perspectives of the stakeholders: the institutional authorities and the residents of the affected neighborhoods. The results were related to Braskem’s (non-) opening of its strategy, which we will discuss in terms of the need to introduce an ethical dimension in this process.

## BRASKEM’S “GEOLOGICAL PHENOMENON”

Several initial possibilities were investigated by the Brazilian CPRM, the public company responsible for performing geological, geophysical, geochemical, hydrologic, hydrogeological research and management, and publishing geological and hydrological information (Ministério de Minas e

Energia, 2023) regarding the severe subsidence and cracks that occurred in Maceió. From the outset, Braskem's mining arose as one of the possibilities that could trigger the tremor and subsequent damage to the affected neighborhoods (Felix, 2019a; Madeiro, 2018). However, the company reported that the seven mining shafts in the area were inactive (Felix, 2019a). A year after the event, there was still no answer about what had occurred (Felix, 2019a; Madeiro, 2018). It was only on December 8, 2019, that CPRM's report indicated that Braskem's extraction of rock salt was the leading cause of the ground sinkage and the cracks due to the partial collapse of two of the company's mines (Estadão, 2019a).

At various moments, Braskem stated that it was collaborating with the authorities to identify the causes and, with this purpose, was executing complementary studies (Estadão, 2019a; 2019b; Felix, 2019a; 2019c; 2019e; 2019i; Holtz, 2019; Madeiro, 2018). It also referred in its report to hiring institutes that are worldwide references in geology and seismology to investigate what had happened in these neighborhoods (Braskem, 2023b, p. 10). Braskem affirmed that its hiring of other institutes was a collaboration with society.

An official note released in the middle of December stated that "it was informing the public about the studies performed by companies of international renown with transparency and responsibility" (Estadão, 2019a). The transparency and responsibility that Braskem referred to were not evident in the report of the individual responsible for presenting the CPRM's report: "there is an absence of data for 27 [. . .] of the 35 existing mines" (as cited in Estadão, 2019a), impeding a more detailed conclusion of the realized studies (Pitombo, 2019). While Braskem repeatedly affirmed that it sought transparency even before it was assigned responsibility, the CPRM's geologist refers to gross errors in the data provided about the subsistence in the areas of Braskem's mining shafts (Pitombo, 2019). Returning to our understanding that transparency is related to the intention to share information, as well as guaranteeing its visibility, accessibility, and quality, what we perceive is the omission of large amounts of data and a lack of quality in the data presented by Braskem, exposed by the Brazilian Geological Service (Sociedade Brasileira de Geologia [SBGEO]).

The same thing occurred in relation to what was termed "collaboration" with the authorities: Braskem questioned the report prepared by CPRM, indicating that it was responsible for this event. In a note, the mining firm stated that the report issued by CPRM contained "relevant technical inconsistencies and lacked a definitive solution that would ensure the safety of



the residents of the affected neighborhoods” (Felix, 2019b), as well as “inconsistencies in the methodologies used in preparing the report [...]” (Felix, 2019c) and thus questioned its assigning the blame to Braskem (Estadão, 2019b). In this sense, even though distrust can lead to an opening of strategy (Adobor, 2021), we perceive its actions as designed to protect their information and question the results presented by CPRM.

In Braskem’s report and in the reporting related to this occurrence, the company always refers to this event, here understood as the consequence of a corporate environmental crime, as a “geological phenomenon” and a situation in which “the ground gave way and cracked” (Braskem, 2023b; Felix, 2019c; 2019f; 2020; Lucca, 2022). In addition, in the reports, Braskem, which insists that it is collaborating to identify the causes and is assisting in the removal of the families, does not assume blame for the severe subsidence and the cracks: “To the company, there is no relationship between this geological phenomenon and the rock salt mining used in its industrial processes” (Barbieri & Bahenamnn, 2019). The Braskem discourse not accepting responsibility continues: “The obligations assumed in this agreement do not signify a recognition of responsibility for the occurrence of cracks in these neighborhoods due to geological events in March 2018” (Felix, 2020; Felix et al., 2020). In this case, we perceive the distance between Braskem’s actions and proposed actions that would demonstrate ethical underpinning and commitment.

Among the various sentiments identified in the reports on the residents, a sense of abandonment and affliction permeates several reports, as well as disgust at the authorities’ slow response. This abandonment initially targeted the government due to an absence of reports that proved the responsibility of the mining firm at the time. Due to the context of protests, the organization of the first social movement took place: the SOS Pinheiro movement (Felix, 2019a). Once the report declaring Braskem’s responsibility was released, which involved other neighborhoods as well (Bebedouro and Mutange), the residents’ disgust was directed towards the company: “Braskem, Get Out!” were the cries heard in the audience, accompanied by a large screen in the central square of the Pinheiro neighborhood (Estadão, 2019a; Pitombo, 2019). We may perceive, therefore, that the beginning of the residents’ mobilization in these communities was constructed based on the shared pain generated by this ecocide.

Social mobilization initially appeared in separate groups within the affected neighborhoods, such as SOS Pinheiro (Felix, 2019a, 2019d, 2019g), the Residents’ Association of Mutange (Felix, 2019e, 2020), and the Com-







munity Beneficent Association of Bom Parto (Felix, 2019c, 2020). These initial divisions may be explained by the fact that they were affected at different times, as well as the particularities of each neighborhood, with residents' associations (in the cases of Mutange and Bom Parto) and different social classes already existing. A resident of Bom Parto, the last of the neighborhoods to be affected (Felix, 2019c), stated, "[...] in Mutange, there is a social situation of need. Imagine being here at the edge of the lagoon in adobe houses without floors. It's much worse than in Mutange. Here, the people are extremely poor. In Pinheiro, there are extremely expensive homes."

Later, these groups were superseded by the Unified Movement of the Braskem Victims (Pitombo & Vasco, 2021). We understand this movement to be a consolidation of a "community" (Dobusch & Kapeller, 2018) due to their members' common goals, social ties, and identity as victims of this corporate environmental crime. It also assumed a confrontational posture toward the organization, demanding more transparency and inclusion (Ohlson & Yakis-Douglas, 2019). These residents unified as a single community to gain more relevance and power in their battle to assert their rights (Alaggia & Wang, 2020) to reparations and the recovery of their properties damaged by Braskem's crime. In this manner, we understand that the movement represented a community organizing itself to respond to an extreme event caused by Braskem due to a lack of effective actions taken by the organization.

Over a year after the tremors, the company affirmed that it had begun a dialogue "with representatives of other public and private firms within the affected area" (Felix, 2019h), as well as "social dialogue with the community of the afflicted neighborhood" (Braskem, 2023b, p. 10). The organization further emphasized that it had created a Financial Compensation and Relocation Support Program "with a support structure for the residents, ranging from preparations for moving to the payment of indemnifications" (Braskem, 2023b, p. 6). However, we know that removing people from their homes goes far beyond financial compensation and relocation support: there are ties, history, and memories of the locales where they lived (Halvorsen et al., 2019). The death of stories, ties, friendships, places, and memories is observed in the statement of one member from the Unified Movement of the Braskem Victims. "It was a neighborhood where everyone knew each other. There was Alonso's shop, Rogildo's restaurant, and even the Tobias Barreto soccer team, named after our street. We've lost all of this" (Pitombo, 2023). Rationally, no life in the biological sense was taken. However, the residents' statements reveal that there were other types of "deaths."





## THE INCORPORATION OF THE ETHICAL DIMENSION IN OPEN STRATEGY

Reflection regarding the ethics of the process of open strategy elucidates several issues in terms of the positioning adopted by Braskem. The company stated it was open to clarifying the case, as we can see from the notes and excerpts from the reporting. However, we have observed distrust of the national institution responsible for analyzing geology in these areas. This was the first response in which transparency was interpreted as a manageable ceremonial phenomenon in which the organization managed the dilemmas of opening (Hautz et al., 2017). In addition, society demands answers from the organizations involved in extreme contexts, often through social movements and pressure that results from them, as advocated by Ohlson and Yakis-Douglas (2019), in which external groups discover information that organizational interests have kept secret. How the company responds to this demand is related to the company's and strategy's commitment to ethics. What can be perceived is Braskem's ceremonial opening of its strategy. This ceremonialism demonstrates that there was no effective commitment to the ethics of life but rather ethics based on profit.

Given this context, we can point out various factors that can lead people to abandon their homes, neighborhoods, cities, and even countries in a forced manner. These people may be environmental refugees who have left the space they belonged to due to ecological or climatic consequences or, in other words, not by the hands of a man (Santos & Custódio, 2020); residents evicted from their homes without a specific motive, who suffer financial, social, and even psychological consequences due to their sudden move (Hatch & Yun, 2021); and people politically persuaded (or forced) to leave their land because it has come to be valued by political or business actors (Feldman & Geisler, 2012). The exodus of residents of the affected neighborhoods in Maceió, in turn, has aspects in common with the experiences of each of these groups. People have had their roots cracked like their houses, and thus, they can be characterized as uprooted.

In Brazilian literature, we understand the uprooted as those whose voices are not audible, who are not respected in the eyes of society, the proletariat, and those who do not have rights or even the opportunity to create roots (Casaroto Filho, 2022). On the other hand, if we search for definitions from philosophy, we understand the uprooted as individuals who have had their land taken away from them and are constantly trying to find their land and their space again (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1992). In this paper, we understand





the uprooted as those who created roots in their neighborhood and city for years but had them taken away by force when the ground shook. At the same time, the term uprooted serves as an allegory for the social movement under debate.

Based on the present case, we understand that the opportunity to create roots (Casaroto Filho, 2022) existed before the crime. The fact that these individuals need to deal with their forced exit from where they belonged, however, reflects a change of scenario, in which the opportunities were lost in the middle of these cracks, which became, in truth, violations of human rights and basic living conditions (Oliveira et al., 2022; Santos & Custódio, 2020). This can be observed from the resident's statement about the effects that extend beyond the financial aspects caused by the crime: "The emotional factor is always very strong. People had their social roots in this neighborhood [ . . . ]" (Felix, 2019d).

We argue that there is a need for reflection on the instrumentalization of the ethical dimension on the organizational level. In the face of extreme events like those that have plagued Maceió, it is hoped that this organization would not respond instrumentally. This is because the strategy or opening strategy is (or should be) suffused by the ethical dimension on all intra- and trans-organizational levels. We assume that ethics is a multilevel concept, particularly in the discussions of Hannah Arendt and her concept of world love (or love of the world), which evokes the capacity for commitment, reflection, and discernment as the foundations of an ethically possible human existence. When incorporated into organizational practices as a virtue, there is no need to think when acting ethically; it occurs naturally (Tsoukas, 2018). However, what is demonstrated by Braskem's solution while waiting for a response from the people affected by its practices is the cost of preparing to move, the cost of rent, and indemnifications. These are relevant objective measures; however, they pale compared to the greater cause: the residents' constant search to find their lands again (Deleuze & Guattari, 1992) and, in this case, their neighborhoods. "My home, which I built with so much effort, has been left behind. Today, I just live thinking about returning to my little home", stated a resident of one of the affected neighborhoods (Madeiro, 2018).

It is possible to perceive the ties that these residents feel that go beyond their homes in excerpts from the newspaper reports: their work, their schools, businesses, and everything that was constructed around their neighborhoods has been modified. One resident affirmed that "[ . . . ] they tried to live with the cracks and the fear until January when they moved. They sent



their daughters to a different school and left behind the students who received extra help, which had provided complementary income” (Felix, 2019a). Another resident said, “I also have a bar and an establishment in Pinheiro, but not in the area at risk. I fear that later it will also become an area of risk” (Felix, 2019c).

What began with 200 residents leaving their homes (Madeiro, 2018)—and their ties, memories, and histories—came to affect an area of 78 soccer fields (Felix, 2019f). By 2023, 14.5 thousand homes, apartments, and commercial establishments had been abandoned, equivalent to 20% of the city of Maceió (Pitombo, 2023). After four years of tensions, with the case stalled in the Brazilian justice system and in an attempt to pressure the organization, fifteen neighborhood residents filed a lawsuit in the Netherlands (Lucca, 2022). What can be understood as being uprooted from not just their homes, neighborhoods, and regions became uprooted from their nation, which occurred when they sought justice in another country. In addition to being dispossessed, the residents of these neighborhoods faced forced migration (Oliveira & Alcadipani, 2021), demonstrating that organizational actions in extreme contexts extend beyond organizational boundaries, representing a physical, psychological, and material threat to the community (Hannah et al., 2009). As one of the victims’ representatives affirmed in the Netherlands, “they lost their homes, their community, and their sense of identity after this large company Braskem took what it wanted from the land and did not think twice about the environment and the people living there” (Lucca, 2022).

Later in the report, Braskem highlights the availability of social assistance and psychological support. However, even after the period of social isolation caused by the pandemic, this support is only available online. The ethical dimension of these actions that seek to minimize the effects of the committed crime is questionable. The pretense of the organization’s “openness” to meet the demands of the affected community is distant from its strategy in practice, which is sustained by a functional-systemic perspective, guided by complying with legal requirements and determinations that translate into occasional action that does not affect the organization’s strategic direction. Based on this perspective, Braskem assumes an openness that seeks to meet its own needs to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of its stakeholders. Despite embarking on a posture of transparency and inclusion triggered by the ecocide perpetrated by the organization, this posture is managed so that it will not affect the process, commitment, publication, empowerment, and mainly escalation of its opening (Hautz et al., 2017),



rather than an openness that seeks to assume an ethical posture in view of the disasters caused by the organization. In spite of the emergence of groups that have placed the organization in this position of opening its strategy to regain legitimacy (Ohlson & Yakis-Douglas, 2019), the company is upholding the status quo through an instrumental and ceremonial strategic vision, which, although it pays lip service to being open and ethical, is in truth sustained by the logic of market competition which ignores morality, virtue, and ethics, or in other words, the aspects that one would expect to find in the manager's practices (Tsoukas, 2018).

In addition to the negligence related to the psychological condition of the affected residents, which permeates the organization's post-crime strategy, the abandonment of neighborhoods has generated other problems that the company has had to deal with, such as the control of pests, the closing of doors and windows and abandoned businesses: "Fighting Dengue, Zika, and Chikungunya by fumigating to exterminate flies and mosquitoes. In addition, the buildings, the streets, squares, and lots have been fumigated and watered to control for pests such as scorpions, rats, cockroaches, and other insects" (Braskem, 2023b, p. 45).

After the residents left the areas of risk in these neighborhoods, they "slowly became a ghost city" (Pitombo, 2023), increasing the number of assaults and burglaries (Felix, 2019f) and thus the risk to the residents who stayed on. Therefore, the consequences of Braskem's ecocide are still latent. "There is no longer healthy coexistence for people in these areas. They have become islands socially and economically. There are no more schools, churches, and health posts; urban mobility has been affected", relates a member of the Unified Movement of Braskem Victims (Pitombo, 2023). The scenario of abandonment and deaths—of ties, friendships, neighborhoods, and memories—from the point of view of "externalities" demonstrates that the organization has closed its doors to those affected.

Even though it announced the deactivation of the mines and its leaving of the State of Alagoas because it could not continue in the region (Barbieri & Bahenamnn, 2019), Braskem has in fact resumed its operations there. The mining firm even caused a brine leak with oil leaking into the ground, affecting the Mundaú lagoon and mangroves in a protected area in Mutange and Maceió (Cunha, 2021a). The company, in its defense, announced that it was "an isolated event due to an operational failure." Braskem even tried to install a tank to store sulfuric acid and met resistance from the residents. "The condition of the terminal's construction is very murky. I believe there's no place for this and that it won't last", stated the President of the Bom Parto Neighborhood Resident Association (Cunha, 2021b).



Given the lack of change in its practices in recent years, we understand that to the extent to which Braskem was deemed responsible for the “geological phenomenon” that occurred in Maceió, it has adopted various forms of opening, even though it has kept its strategy off the table, to diminish calls for justice on the part of institutions and the affected groups. In the classifications used by Appleyard and Chesbrough (2017), the organization increased transparency and inclusion when it responded to an extreme event by making itself available to governmental bodies and instituting programs that promote dialogue with the affected local community through the Financial Compensation and Relocation Support Program.

At a later point in time, seeing that its ceremonial opening had not resulted in any regained legitimacy and recognition, and with the intensification of the community protests against the organization (Cruz et al., 2022; Ohlson & Yakis-Douglas, 2019), the mining firm hired specialists to counter the offensives conducted by the stakeholders. At the same time, we observe the impact of the stakeholder movements as they organized themselves into communities, such as the Unified Movement of Braskem Victims, to question the information provided by the organization. The ceremonial opening movement is classified as such because the transparency of the information did not fulfill the tenets of intentionality, visibility, and quality (Adobor, 2020; Hautz et al., 2017; Seidl et al., 2019; Tavakoli et al., 2017), and it was merely motivated by a desire to reduce the bad consequences for Braskem due to the extreme event in the region caused by the organization. Even though the creation of communities represented a force to pressure Braskem to open, it was not possible to understand from the data the degree of openness that the organization had to accept to meet their demands. However, the fact that the organization assumed a responsive posture demonstrates the seriousness and potential of social movements and other external actors concerning a strategic opening once they organize themselves into communities.

Given all that we have presented, we may note not only the lack of making the company responsible for its actions in terms of the illustrated ecocide but also the recurrence of behavior that is prejudicial to society and the environment and contrary to the community’s interests. After appearing to offer an initial discourse of opening based on ethical principles given the “seriousness” and tradition of the company—here treated just as formal aspects—what we perceive is an organization that does not in fact permit social participation, given that what is “social” does not appear to be a part of its practices and strategies. The space to “formulate strategy” continues with the organization as the protagonist, and the posture of transparency it proposes



continues to be managed based on its competitive interests, which supersede the formally proposed dialogue.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on our objective of debating the open strategy process from the point of view of social pressure on organizations as a notable dimension within the context of formulating strategy, we understand that the inclusion of local society in the strategic process can represent a new form of organizing (Tavakoli et al., 2017). This is a form in which the organization can be understood as vulnerable through the need to incorporate new voices, culminating in a process that is “openness as organizing principle” (Splitter et al., 2023, p. 8). However, organizations that exempt themselves from their legal, social, and moral responsibilities tend to understand dialogue, proposed as a single ethical dimension of open strategy, as something that will affect not only how they devise strategy but also how the organization is structured.

We can understand that the movement of organizations toward an open strategy is a global trend (Goldenstein & Walgenbach, 2019). This can be observed in studies such as Stjerne et al. (2022), in which the authors present a model describing the transition process from a traditional strategic model to an open strategy model. However, many of the studies refer to organizations in terms of technology and innovation, in which products and services are necessarily linked to openness (Appleyard & Chesbrough, 2017).

The case we discuss relates to a sector in which these aspects of openness are not so relevant. However, given that the phenomenon has become generalized, at least in the affected city, we understand that not only do organizations interconnect (Wulf & Butel, 2017), but society does as well, as do the relationships that are constructed within it. We propose incorporating the ethical dimension in this debate in a non-utilitarian form, instead in social and organizational actions, in formulating strategy and open processes (Tsoukas, 2018).

We consider this scenario of abandonment and death—the death of ties, friendships, places, and memories—from the point of view of “externalities” that demonstrate a closing of the organization to those involved. In examining the problem of speaking from a dialogic perspective and social practices in dealing with the openness phenomenon, we should consider the entire social-historical and cultural framework, which needs to be considered when



adopting an open strategy. It is in this context that the ethical dimension needs to be discussed because dialogue and the recognition of social practices that (dis)unite all the practitioners (internal and external to the organization) are what is needed to construct virtue through the relationship, which will be established there, in this case between the organization and the community. Speaking of openness is to recognize, also based on this ethical dimension, that a constitutive dialectic among the parties impedes an organization's transparency from being considered a one-way phenomenon.

The tensions cited here, which are mapped in the literature (Hautz et al., 2017), are in fact the finding that up until now, dealing with the openness phenomenon has been an inevitable contingency of the global world and one of the social challenges that have arisen (Goldenstein & Walgenbach, 2019), but since theoreticians and managers still preserve a closed space as something sacred in terms of formulating strategy, this space remains a place where control and competition are still the only results pursued by organizations (Tsoukas, 2018). In order to take strategy seriously (in accordance with the discussions of Whittington, 2003 and Vaara & Whittington, 2012) and deal with more responsive organizations (doing justice to the perspectives that we have brought to this discussion, such as dialogue and social practices), we have examined this problem of the ethical construction that the openness phenomenon requires. If we do not take this seriously, any discussion or theorization about openness may fall into the same managerialism that contaminates our practices and uproots many people, territories, and identities.

We understand that future studies can investigate the potential for open strategy in organizations that operate in extreme contexts since their actions generate consequences that extend beyond organizational boundaries (Hällgren et al., 2017; Hannah et al., 2009) in order to incorporate an opening that values the ethical dimension. Empirical investigations based on primary data can be elaborated to investigate the way in which organizations appropriate ceremonial openness to acquire legitimacy but continue to be guided by the profit motive, in contrast to the vision of various organizational stakeholders. In this paper, we approximate the ethic of virtue proposed by Tsoukas (2018). However, other paradigms can help solve this dilemma, such as Kantian deontology or the ethics of caring (Gotsis & Kortesí, 2013).

Another important point is that despite the fact that studies of open strategy have emerged in practical cases concerning organizations, there still is little discussion about how an organization can effectively take this







seriously and how organizations can get over the vision of instrumental strategy to construct an open strategy process that considers collaboration, ties, and relationships which legitimately take care of others and promote empathy. Finally, a step beyond discussing open strategy would be discussing open organizing (Splitter et al., 2023), which goes beyond elaborating strategy and permeates all the activities undertaken by an organization based on ethical reflection, which can help examine the problems of transparency, inclusion, and the distribution of the right to make decisions.

If we want to take open strategy seriously, we need to deal with these dilemmas without adopting a functional-systemic perspective, but rather by making practical changes in our studies and formulating strategy. Without this, we will reproduce the same problems (and the exact solutions), causing redundancy in organizations that are more and more ceremonial in terms of what they do. In the final analysis, the dimension of transparency will always be managed openness, and we can always be surprised by corporate environmental crimes and cheating, such as the case we have discussed. Thus, the uprooted community remains without answers regarding the physical, psychological, and material consequences caused by Braskem's environmental crime. After all, few battles engaged by social movements are won without the support of other actors, in this case, without the support of the law (Fierro, 2018; Oliveira & Alcadipani, 2021). Therefore, we also need to examine the problem of the ethical dimension of strategy far beyond the issue of a "resource," as this field has traditionally discussed it, but rather as a virtuous practice, which is based on a space of coexistence between organizations and their most varied relational peers.

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## APPENDIX A - A LIST OF THE CONSULTED DOCUMENTS

### (conclusion)

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