

# Focusing events and the COVID-19 pandemic: the emergency basic income on the Brazilian agenda

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Observing and analyzing the causes, effects, and multiple economic, social, and health consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic have been essential to understand this worldwide phenomenon and find solutions that minimize the impacts on peoples’ lives. This article aims to understand the rise of the emergency basic income as a viable policy to tackle the pandemic in Brazil. Based on the agenda-setting literature, specifically on the concept of focusing events, we present a brief history of cash transfer and poverty reduction policies, as well as the actors involved. The study discusses the changes, adaptations, and solutions proposed during the formulation of the emergency basic income as a policy to be considered and effectively adopted in this specific moment of crisis.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; focusing events; agenda-setting; basic income; emergency benefit.

## Eventos focalizadores e a pandemia da COVID-19: a renda básica emergencial na agenda governamental brasileira

Observar e analisar as causas, os efeitos e as múltiplas consequências econômicas, sociais e sanitárias da pandemia da COVID-19 têm sido primordiais não apenas para a compreensão desse fenômeno mundial, mas também para a elaboração de alternativas e soluções que minimizem os impactos na vida das populações ao redor do mundo. Este artigo tem como principal objetivo entender a ascensão da renda básica emergencial como alternativa viável de política pública no cenário brasileiro, por meio do Auxílio Emergencial. Baseado na literatura de *agenda-setting*, em específico no conceito de eventos focalizadores (*focusing events*), recuperamos um breve histórico das políticas de transferência de renda e de combate à pobreza e os principais atores envolvidos, para entender mudanças, adaptações e soluções propostas para que a alternativa de renda básica emergencial pudesse ser considerada e aceita neste momento específico de crise.

**Palavras-chave:** COVID-19; eventos focalizadores; *agenda-setting*; renda básica; auxílio emergencial.

## Eventos focales y la pandemia de COVID-19: La renta básica de emergencia en la agenda del gobierno brasileño


Observar y analizar las causas, efectos y las múltiples consecuencias económicas, sociales y de salud de la pandemia de COVID-19 han sido primordiales no solo para comprender este fenómeno mundial, sino también para el desarrollo de alternativas y soluciones que minimicen los impactos en la vida de poblaciones de todo el mundo. El principal objetivo de este artículo es entender el reconocimiento de la renta básica de emergencia como una alternativa viable de política pública en el escenario brasileño, que ha adoptado un “beneficio de emergencia”. Con base en la literatura de *agenda-setting*, específicamente en el concepto de eventos focales, recuperamos una reseña de las políticas de transferencia de renta, de reducción de la pobreza y los principales actores involucrados, para comprender los cambios, adaptaciones y soluciones propuestas para que la alternativa de renta básica de emergencia pudiera considerarse y aceptarse en este momento específico de crisis.

**Palabras clave:** COVID-19; eventos focales; *agenda-setting*; renta básica; beneficio de emergencia.

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1590/0034-761220200619>

Article received on July 11, 2020, and accepted on February 06, 2021.

[Translated version] Note: All quotes in English translated by this article’s translator.

ISSN: 1982-3134 

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are grateful for the grants received from FAPESP (processes number 2018/16289-3; 2020/07485-3; and 2021/02716-0) and CNPq (process number 424398/2018-4 – MCTIC/CNPq 28/2018), which allowed us to conduct the research that resulted in this article.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Universal basic income as an alternative to solving public problems is not new in Brazil. The first debate was proposed in 1991 by the then senator Eduardo Suplicy – Workers' Party (PT), representative from the state of São Paulo (SP) –, who presented Senate Bill 80/1991. The development and redesign of this bill over the years has inspired other social welfare policies, such as the conditioned cash transfer program (CCTP) *Bolsa Família* (established in 2003). Also, income transfer became a prominent topic in social policy studies and public policy formulation in the country (Bichir, 2010; Coêlho, 2013; Silva, Yazbek & Giovanni, 2012; Sposati, 1997).

However, the universal basic income or unconditional cash transfer that has as been debated for almost three decades in the Brazilian legislative branch, coming and going in a “garbage can process”<sup>1</sup> (March, Olsen & Cohen, 1972), gained prominence in public policy formulation and agenda-setting in 2020, triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic (Brasil, 2020; Brasil & Capella, 2020). In public policy literature, phenomena such as the COVID-19 pandemic can be considered examples of “focusing events” (Birkland, 1997, 1998; Kingdon, 2003), i.e., they have the potential to focus the attention of different actors and connect existing solutions to new public problems.

This article analyzes how the universal basic income discussed in Brazil since the early 1990s entered the governmental agenda and became viable public policy to respond to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. This exploratory research uses qualitative methods such as literature review and process tracing. The literature review examines and interprets the extensive production on income transfer policies, mapping and defining the object of analysis. Also, the review resumes the theoretical principles of agenda-setting and the role of focusing events in public policy change processes.

Empirical evidence explaining the process that correlates the origin (point A, focusing event – COVID-19 pandemic) with the consequence (point B, emergency basic income) was collected from journalistic reports, opinion articles, legal documents from the government, the Ministry of Health, and international players such as the World Health Organization (WHO), in addition to interviews and contributions from social movements involved in the process. The variety of sources is an important measure to gather empirical evidence necessary to understand and analyze the facts presented in a correlational and causal way between the focusing event and the approval of emergency basic income in Brazil.

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<sup>1</sup> Decision-making processes that occur in situations of ambiguity, encompassing multiple actors with inconsistent preferences, are called “garbage can processes” (March, 2009). They were originally analyzed by March et al. (1972), who coined the term “garbage can model” to designate opportunities for choice involving individuals, problems, and solutions, elements that connect differently over time. The decision-making process in governmental organizations often takes on such characteristics: the so-called “organized anarchies” (March et al., 1972).

The article is structured in five sections, including this introduction. In the next section, we review the debate about the concept of basic income in Brazil and its insertion in the Brazilian academic political debate. The third section presents the concept of focusing events particularly in the literature on agenda-setting and public policy formulation, contextualizing these events' potential to bring about changes in public policies. The fourth section offers a discussion intertwining the debates between the object and the theory, presenting a possibility of research on changing the agenda and public policy formulation when interpreting and analyzing the COVID-19 pandemic as a focusing event with drastic effects that led to the adoption of emergency basic income in Brazil. Lastly, the final considerations present the main characteristics of focusing events that may lead to universal basic income. The article offers new possibilities and theoretical perspectives for agenda-setting and policy formulation studies in Brazil considering crisis contexts, which is still little explored in national literature.

## 2. UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME

The debates and propositions about minimum income and negative income tax have permeated the Brazilian academia since the 1970s, especially the contributions from Antonio Maria da Silveira (1975) and Edmar Bacha and Mangabeira Unger (1978). In Brazil, forms of guaranteeing an income to the population permeate the construction and consolidation of the country's social policies. During the period of re-democratization, in the early 1990s, despite pressure from civil society and the efforts of the political class, the regulation of social assistance and the proposals designed in this area (such as unconditional cash transfer schemes) faced difficulties with consolidating and evolving. The Organic Law on Social Assistance that contains the continuous cash benefit program (BPC) in compliance with the 1988 constitution was an achievement amid these adversities.

That period was marked by strong institutional friction and culminated, from a political point of view, in the impeachment of President Fernando Collor de Mello in 1992. There were also movements of institutional deconstruction of achievements brought by the 1988 Constitution, representing a declared attempt to revise its chapter "The Social Order" (Fagnani, 2017). However, the country's high rates of inflation, unemployment, misery, and economic weakness, were faced with the social policy pattern presented by the Constitution. This pattern led to a long, complex, and slow process of federative decentralization of actions to fight poverty and overcome social inequality, even though the general challenge of achieving these objectives has remained a shared responsibility among municipalities, states, and federal government (Bichir, 2010; Silva et al., 2012).

Income guarantee programs started to be considered in Brazil in this scenario of consolidation of the social policies designed in 1988. The debate on minimum income and income transfer as a solution for some of the national problems, in turn, gained institutional contours when the then senator Eduardo Suplicy (PT-SP) presented Senate Bill 80 in April 1991. The intense public debate on the topic helped accelerate the bill's appreciation in the Senate (Brazilian upper house), where it was approved in December of the same year. However, such a bill also needs approval from the lower house, and the Chamber of Deputies never voted on the proposal.

The academic debate that followed the bill's proposal and the actions the federal, state, and local governments have taken on this matter demonstrated that Eduardo Suplicy's proposal represented a critical turning point in considering income transfer as a viable solution to some

public problems. Also, many policies and programs inspired in the principles of income or cash transfer and implemented by governments at different levels have offered empirical support for the senator's proposal (Bichir, 2010; Coêlho, 2013; Leite & Peres, 2015; Silva et al., 2012; Sposati, 1997). The interest in such programs by local governments increased during the subsequent years. Marta Farah (2008) identified that the diffusion of policies inspired by universal basic income models among the levels of government occurred due to the common problem of poverty in several municipalities in the 1990s.

Cash transfer policies had occurred in a decentralized and uncoordinated way until the end of that decade. They were originated without an institutionality related to the field of social assistance, which had a poorly organized and precarious system and bureaucracy. Some advances were observed during President Fernando Henrique Cardoso's administration (1995-2003), such as the regulation of the National Social Assistance Fund and the creation of the Fund for Fighting and Eradicating Poverty (Constitutional Amendment 31, of December 2000). However, the process of change and centralization of the area of social assistance occurred during the government of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (2003-2010), giving visibility to these income transfer policies, especially with the creation of the Ministry of Social Development (MDS) and the structuring of the National Social Assistance System (SUAS). The MDS and the SUAS concentrated a stronger social policy agenda to fight poverty and inequality, with greater institutionalization and coordination of actions and programs (Bichir, 2016).

The period of the two mandates of President Lula da Silva is extremely relevant to the debate on universal basic income and income transfer policies. In those years, initiatives in this direction were put into practice and became prominent in the political debate. Simultaneously, the concentration of actors and ideas in the MDS helped consolidate a public policy community with actors from the epistemic community, policymakers, and civil society. This concentration in the MDS was a fundamental measure for the processes of agenda maintenance and policy formulation to address poverty and social inequality. Such a policy community is based on the capacities and experiences participants acquired through learning processes in the history of income transfer and minimum income as policies to reduce poverty across the spectrum of Brazilian federalism, both horizontally and vertically (Leite & Peres, 2015).

This process is intensified from an institutional perspective because this same community can transfer elements such as coordination experience and policy design between different government levels. In this case, according to Leite and Peres (2015), the experience of local arrangements such as the guaranteed minimum family income program in the city of São Paulo contributed to form the conditioned cash transfer program (CCTP) *Bolsa Família* at the federal level. For the authors,

The negotiation strategies and effort to gain the adhesion of the intra-municipal entities and agencies were fundamental to carry out the program in São Paulo. They represented an accumulation of implementation experiences in a decentralized political and institutional context, which proved to be particularly important in the formulation and implementation of the Bolsa Família program institutional design (Leite & Peres, 2015, p. 635, our translation).

At the same time, there is an intense debate about the growing approximation of multilateral organizations, such as the World Bank, to the agenda of overcoming poverty. These organizations' prescription includes minimum income policies in the form of CCTP as a solution for countries that need to structure policies to address social issues. These programs focus on the most impoverished population who commits to comply with conditionalities related to education and keeping healthy habits in order to receive cash handouts that guarantee a minimum subsistence (Soares, 2010).

The debate takes two different paths: universal basic income and CCTP. Although the association between these models is not unreasonable, they cannot be confused. They are both policies that periodically offer cash handouts to the target audience. The primary difference is that universal basic income is a handout without conditionalities. The policy diffusion process described so far, and the construction of a narrative around the evolution of the guaranteed minimum income proposals are reported, from a political perspective, by Suplicy (2013). The former senator Eduardo Suplicy claims that the minimum income policies in Brazil – even when conditionalities apply – are connected to his universal basic income proposal, discussed by the National Congress in the context of the *Bolsa Família* Program (BFP) (Ferreira, 2019). Bichir (2010) highlights that Suplicy's initiative, materialized in Federal Law 10835/2004 determining the creation of an unconditional citizenship basic income,

[...] indicated, at the beginning of [President] Lula da Silva's government, the intention to transform the income transfer programs associated with conditionalities into programs to guarantee an unconditional basic income. However, any subsequent discussion focused on conditioned cash transfer programs (Bichir, 2010, p. 120, our translation).

Part of the literature dedicated to studying the choice of CCTP to the detriment of unconditional basic income in policies to fight poverty and social inequality refers to a process that, over a decade of BFP, would result in the program's gradual expansion having basic income as an endpoint. Silva (2014), when dealing with the expressive expansion of BFP, argued that the continued advances of the BFP was significant, albeit incrementally, and would lead to a program with a larger and, perhaps, universal scope:

[...] the growing number of beneficiaries incorporated into the program since its creation in 2003 certainly contributes to optimism regarding its possible universalization, partially justifying the thesis that it would move towards the establishment of the unconditional citizenship basic income (Silva, 2014, p. 5, our translation).

However, universal basic income was never implemented, even if it had been considered the endpoint of a transformation and expansion of the BFP, either due to insufficient attention and prioritization to be considered in the decision-making agenda, lack of support, or a favorable political context. According to Jaccoud, Brazilian social protection reforms have led to a "broad debate around

poverty and how to overcome it and a progressive consensus on the need to introduce a national cash transfer program” (Jaccoud, 2010, our translation).

The design chosen for applying the BFP demonstrates the prevalence of important image issues and viable solutions in the production of policies to expand social protection and overcome poverty and vulnerability. Such concepts must be approached jointly, correlated to the world of work, human rights, and intersectionality, which combines and weaves different social policies considered universal, such as health and education, and assistance to impoverished populations via cash handouts.

For Jaccoud, Bichir and Mesquita (2017), the chosen design allowed expanding state capacities by advancing inter-federative and intersectoral actions. Examples of this dynamic can be seen in the significant positive outcomes observed when monitoring the conditionalities of the BFP, i.e., the program elements that are not directly related to basic or minimum income from a conceptual point of view. The authors recognize that outcomes related to conditionalities must be regarded as a reinterpretation of a punitive process that leads to exclusion from the program.

The tension between universal and residual coverage predates the issues surrounding conditional basic income. Pochmann (2007) demonstrates that this tension responds to structural, economic, and institutional conditions that require the advance of political representation, the institutionalization of mass democracy, and the constitution of elements of modern salaried society.

Nevertheless, the proposal of universal and unconditional basic income as a solution to public problems remains, to some extent, in the context of policy communities and does not leave the academic and political debate, even though it does not find a favorable environment to be adopted. Recently, with emphasis on the electoral periods of 2014 and 2018, there were multiple episodes where universal basic income was considered.

The unfolding of Brazilian politics after President Dilma Rousseff’s impeachment in 2016 appeared to remove any possibility of having the universal basic income on the agenda. With the changes in priorities and the progressive dismantling of public policies promoted since President Michel Temer’s inauguration after the impeachment and continued in 2019 and 2020 under President Jair Bolsonaro’s conservative agenda, the discussion on universal basic income lost space. This process also occurred with other items of the Brazilian social protection environment due to what Eduardo Fagnani (2017) describes as the end of the social citizenship cycle in the country.

This deconstruction took place in an institutional, political, and practical way. A milestone in this process was the document *Uma ponte para o futuro* (A bridge to the future) produced by the Party of the Brazilian Democratic Movement (PMDB). The document consisted of a program of actions guiding such deconstruction, although stating in its first paragraph, the intention “to give back to the state the capacity to carry out social policies that effectively fight poverty and create opportunities for all” (Partido do Movimento Democrático Brasileiro [PMDB], 2015). More than changes in government priorities after the impeachment of President Rousseff – changes that could maintain, but would never expand, existing social policies –, the following administration that implemented the PMDB’s program of actions strongly worked for the dismantling of various sectoral policies by dissolving political and administrative structures and discontinuing financial transfers. More subjectively, but equally important, the government tried to re-signify the meanings and images of social policies,

education, health, and the state's own role in promoting social well-being with the increasingly accentuated application of an ultraliberal agenda.

On March 26, 2020, the Plenary of the Chamber of Deputies passed Law 13982, providing for the payment of emergency aid for three months for all informal workers, unexpectedly resuming the principles of the basic income.<sup>2</sup> The initiative cannot be seen as a measure in the field of regular policy, in which pressure groups or policy communities, in a strong coalition, managed to take and approve the matter in the Chamber of Deputies. Likewise, it should not be seen as a political proposal by President Bolsonaro's government or the result of a policy entrepreneur's action.

The proposal to create and implement emergency basic income emerged as a response to a specific issue, in completely atypical and urgent conditions, which had the power of attention and visibility, breaking any kind of normality in handling issues on the government's agenda. It is also necessary to consider the institutional path taken for the proposal to be approved. Its origin was in the movement of the actors involved in the subsystems and flowed into the legislative branch, diverting – and, in final moments, confronting – the executive branch, which was characterized at the crisis due to the low capacity to propose and coordinate actions to face the pandemic.

This article examines and delves into the research questions based on this historical moment, analyzing the context, observing the change in the agenda, and the consequent formulation of public policies. The study addresses the following questions: what are the characteristics presented by the COVID-19 pandemic that caused already known themes and solutions, such as universal basic income, to be reviewed and added to the government agenda viable solutions in response to the overwhelming consequences of the disease? How can we understand the role of a catastrophic world event, which does not stop at geographical barriers or the economic situation, in the process of governmental priorities and choice of solutions for the production of public policies? Therefore, this research investigates these issues based on the literature on change and the formulation of public policies, regarding the concept of *focusing events*.

### 3. FOCUSING EVENTS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The public policy literature highlights the relevance of sudden and unpredictable events with dramatic and widely visible consequences regarding policy formulation. Studies on agenda-setting, concerned with explaining how issues attract the attention of society and governments, dedicate special consideration to such events.<sup>3</sup> Anthony Downs identified these occurrences as one of the central elements of the issue-attention cycle. For the author, a “dramatic series of events” makes it

<sup>2</sup> Extensions in the payment of the benefit and the amounts paid are currently under discussion and negotiation between the political actors of the executive and legislative branches. Retrieved from <https://g1.globo.com/economia/blog/ana-flor/post/2020/06/30/governo-vai-aceitar-pagar-mais-duas-parcelas-de-r-600-do-emergency-aid.ghtml>

<sup>3</sup> The analysis of COVID-19 as a focusing event proposed here is only one among the countless possibilities for reflection, considering the theoretical and analytical tools of policy analysis. Regarding the agenda, future studies can explore the different definitions of problem that the government may embrace over time. Also, other solutions can be explored in addition to basic income. In terms of the decision-making process, different actors involved and their choices and positions during the pandemic can be mapped. As for implementation, a multitude of actions can be identified and explored, such as the use of social technologies, target audience, role of bureaucracies, relations among federal, state, and local governments, and evaluation studies that, in the future, may analyze the present moment and contribute to policy learning.

possible for issues previously excluded from public attention to be quickly converted into problems about which the public becomes “both aware of and alarmed” (1972, p. 39).

Roger Cobb and Charles Elder (1971) also referred to unanticipated events as one of the elements that could promote “issue initiation,” the process of bringing an issue that demands a governmental response to the center of public attention. The authors use the racial issue in the United States as an example, showing that an issue initially located and restricted to the individual sphere turned into a national and collective crisis through tragic events (Cobb & Elder, 1971). For the authors, the agenda-setting process could result from changes that occur in these situations of broad mobilization or unexpected crisis.

The author who most widely discussed the relationship among unexpected events, attention, and policy changes was John Kingdon (2003). The author showed that attention is a scarce resource in policy formulation processes and that decision-makers only focus on a few issues, neglecting others. The issues that attract the attention of policymakers are those understood as problems requiring government action.

There are some mechanisms or ways to gain the policymakers’ central attention, and the so-called focusing event<sup>4</sup> is one of them. Among the most visible focusing events are high magnitude disasters and crises with the capacity to mobilize the attention of society and government quickly and precisely. For Kingdon, focusing events are crucial given their potential to assist in the perception and definition of problems, drawing attention to issues that already existed but were not considered a priority. It is important to stress the general scheme in which the concept of focusing events is inserted in the multiple streams model: changes in the governmental agenda occur in brief moments that configure an opportunity, based on the convergence of three streams, problem, policy, and politics. Put simply, *problem* is the idea about an issue relevant to society, *policy* refers to the idea about how to deal with this issue, and *politics* involve the electoral cycle, public opinion, and other circumstantial factors.<sup>5</sup>

Focusing events have a relevant impact on the politics stream. One of the components of this stream is the “national mood,” i.e., the general perceptions that society shares in a given time (Kingdon, 2003). Such perceptions involve public opinion or broader social movements that are sensitive to media coverage.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the media can amplify the scope of focusing events in social debate as a whole. This process can channel the attention of the most different social actors, enabling the emergence of some particular ideas. Baumgartner and Jones (1993) called this process “triggering events.” For the authors, these events are important because they highlight issues that were possibly already on

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<sup>4</sup> Other mechanisms or ways to gain policymakers’ attention are the dissemination of indicators produced by government-led research or studies from other sources that reveal the magnitude of a problem (a study showing an increase in road traffic accidents, for example). Kingdon (2005) also points out the feedback on government actions resulting from routine monitoring practices and bureaucracy assessment, which may find failures in the performance of specific actions, failure to achieve expected results or the production of unanticipated consequences. For a more in-depth discussion of such mechanisms, see Kingdon (2005), Chapter 5.

<sup>5</sup> For a more detailed analysis of the multiple streams model, see Capella (2007).

<sup>6</sup> Agenda studies in the field of communication favor the investigation of relations between the public agenda – the set of issues that emerge and circulate in society, involving these more general perceptions – and the media agenda – issues prioritized by the media. For more on this relationship among the public, media, and policy agendas, see Dearing and Rogers (1996).



the agenda and gained prominence due to changes in the extent or framing of media coverage. In this case, such events work as “dramatic symbols of problems,” consolidating perceptions and understandings about an issue and strongly concentrating the attention (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993).

Thomas Birkland (1997) expands and develops the concept of focusing events proposed by Kingdon, formulating a specific theory on the impact of crises and disasters on the agenda-setting process. Birkland (1997, 1998) examined four cases in the US to understand how focusing events influence the process of producing public policies: the San Fernando earthquake, which occurred in 1971 in southern California; Hurricane Camille, affecting the states of Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and some of the southern states, in 1969; the ecological disaster caused by the leak of the oil tanker Exxon Valdez, in Alaska, in 1989; and the Three Mile Island accident, the most significant nuclear accident in the country, which occurred in 1972 in Pennsylvania.

The author concluded that each event is unique, despite sharing characteristics that define them as focusing events. His argument is based on the assumption that there are potentially focusing events that can capture the attention of the public and policymakers. Such events have four characteristics: they occur suddenly and unexpectedly; they are rare, unpredictable, and unplanned; they affect many people; the public and the most informed members around the policy have access to information about the event almost simultaneously. Thus, a potentially focusing event is defined by the author as

“[...] sudden, relatively rare, that can reasonably be defined as harmful or revealing the possibility of potentially greater future harms, inflicting harms or suggesting potential harms that are or could be concentrated on a definable geographic area or community of interest, and that is known to policymakers and the public virtually simultaneously” (Birkland, 1997, p. 22).

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread worldwide at an accelerated rate, causing thousands of deaths and collapsing health systems in several countries. The complexity of this event does not allow us to treat it as a problem of a specific sector or considering it as an issue limited to public health. The economic and social consequences in the field of employment and income, social assistance, and social welfare are, in this case, directly related to the impacts and consequences of the disease.

The COVID-19 pandemic satisfies the characteristics of Birkland’s (1997) criteria to define focusing events. First, the pandemic occurred suddenly and unexpectedly. In the last decades, the international scientific community has shown great concern over the possibility of epidemics, mainly due to the high intensity in the movement of people and goods around the planet. Examples of epidemics justifying such concern are dengue, cholera, and yellow fever outbreaks, and new diseases such as severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), hemorrhagic fever caused by the Ebola virus, and avian influenza (Carmo, Penna & Oliveira, 2008). Therefore, the possibility of a pandemic does not, in itself, constitute a focusing event. However, a pandemic due to the Sars-CoV-2 outbreak in the Wuhan region of China in December 2019 was a sudden and unforeseen event due to the epidemiological and clinical characteristics of the new coronavirus, high transmissibility, and rapid progression of contagion on a global scale.

When characterizing the COVID-19 pandemic as a focusing event in Brazil, the study analyzes the federal government's choices, which did not prioritize coordinated actions to face the health crisis. The fight against the pandemic required coordinated actions by the central government from all countries – not only from the point of view of public health but also regarding the economy, labor, social assistance, security, among other spheres of life. Although the Brazilian national health system (SUS) has an efficient structure to reach the population directly, which is fundamental for contact tracking and testing strategies, the federal government was guided by issue representation varying among denial (with narratives such as “there is no crisis,” “there is no reason to panic,” “it is just a flu”), avoidance (“there is nothing to be done”), relativization (“the biggest problem is not the virus, but the economy”), and the lack of responsibility (reflected in narratives attributing the responsibility to address the pandemic to local governments – states and municipalities).<sup>7</sup>

These choices on issue representation reflect a continuous search for containing the problem in an attempt to block the governmental agenda (Capella, 2016). Thus, despite the magnitude of the focusing event, the predictability of its occurrence, and the knowledge obtained from other countries' experience, many of the actions of the Brazilian federal government sought to mischaracterize its occurrence as a one-off event.

Finally, it can be said that the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil falls under the conceptual framework of a Birkland focusing event since it appeared suddenly, spreading quickly and reaching a large number of people around the country, generating unexpected, unpredictable emergencies, requiring rapid actions of control, treatment, and unplanned prevention in any of the various sectors affected. Whether due to the lack of positioning and coordination of the Brazilian authorities, especially from the President, or due to the bureaucratic response time and the need to verify the fact instead of acting toward possible solutions, the uncertainties about the disease ended up generated information and solutions that evolved throughout the pandemic.

Discoveries about the development and evolution of the disease, treatment protocols, transmission mechanisms, forms of prevention, adequacy, and positioning of Brazilian society in the face of the authorities' recommendations (often conflicting and divergent) are examples of information that has been systematized and disseminated to the population, health professionals, decision-makers and politicians simultaneously, mainly informed by the same sources: international organizations such as WHO and the media.

The media, in particular, has a fundamental role in focusing events such as the COVID-19 pandemic since the public's attention to this type of event is closely linked to news coverage. The media becomes the main information channel for policymakers. The greater the scope of the event –

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<sup>7</sup> One example that reflects this situation is that four different ministers occupied the position of Brazilian Minister of Health from the beginning of the pandemic. Luiz Henrique Mandetta was replaced on April 16, 2020, by Nelson Teich, who, in turn, left the Ministry of Health on May 15, 2020. General Eduardo Pazuello took the position of interim minister for four months. Pazuello was officially appointed as Minister of Health only on September 14, 2020. On March 15, 2021, President Bolsonaro announced the replacement of Eduardo Pazuello by doctor Marcelo Queiroga.

the greater the number of people involved; the broader and more tangible the effects; the more these effects can be measured or converted into images; and the rarer the event is – the broader the news coverage tends to be. Comparative graphic analyses among countries, striking images like that of Pope Francis praying alone in St. Peter’s Square in the Vatican, on March 27, 2020, or the opening of collective graves in several cities around the world, and live online coverage, are examples of the media’s agenda power in cases of focusing events.

However, in contrast to the media agenda, which reacts immediately to the focusing event, the government agenda responds more slowly to events and depends, to a large extent, on the characteristics and response capacities of each policy domain most directly related to the event. Therefore, government prioritization and action on focusing events obey stimuli different from those established in the public policy process. In addition, focusing events enable the topic to gain absolute priority on the agenda and reconfigure the process of selecting solutions. Based on this idea, we will analyze universal basic income as a viable option in selecting solutions that aim to combat the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil and abroad.

#### 4. UNIVERSAL BASIC INCOME PRINCIPLES IN SELECTING SOLUTIONS

For Birkland (1997), these events not only concentrate the attention, as Kingdon had shown but also have great potential to favor solutions in the debate of policy communities. As they are unplanned and unpredictable, sudden, dramatic events, they end up involving the entire political class, inside and outside the government and favor opening the way for change. These moments of crisis create opportunities for the generation and defense of new ideas, based both on evidence – indicators, statistical data, information from practices of routine monitoring, among others – and on the interpretation of these elements.<sup>8</sup> “Focusing events do not gain their focus power from the accretion of evidence, but rather from their symbolic value” Birkland (1997, p. 133).

This means that those who defend a certain idea of what to do about the issue (policy solution, in Kingdon’s terms) will rely on data and evidence, but also on symbols, sometimes with a high emotional burden. The solutions likely to be accepted and receive support among the most different social groups are those that mobilize the imaginary around the event to ensure that the crisis is resolved or that the problem does not recur.

[...] the actor who has plausible research results and a highly visible, tangible, and dramatic event on his or her side is likely to do better in a policy debate than an advocate with only evaluation data. This, in turn, can lead to more rapid, nonincremental policy change in light of the event (Birkland, 1997, p. 134).

Thus, focusing events provide opportunities to defend ideas in public policy communities. Birkland also suggests three characteristics fundamental to understanding the priorities of

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion on the relevance of arguments in the policy process and their relationship with evidence and ideas, see Majone (1989).

governmental actions in the selection of solutions in moments of crisis. First, the nature of the policy community around the event, where the more organized the community, the greater the influence of a focusing event in changing the agenda. Second, the degree of public participation in the policy, which means that the reaction of groups organized around interests related to the event is crucial for the event's capacity to concentrate the policymakers' attention and stay on the agenda for some time. Finally, the crisis tangibility, i.e., data and measurable indicators to support the severity of the situation and justify the government action.

In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic as a focusing event in Brazil, it is necessary to understand how the choice and formulation of a policy that considers offering emergency basic income – a solution based on the principles of the universal basic income – became a viable solution in a crisis context. Based on the background briefly presented in this article's introduction, the policy community formed over the 1990s and 2000s around the universal basic income and cash transfer policies has never left the scene, even in the least favorable contexts since President Rousseff's impeachment in 2016.

As for the choice of solutions, having a history and familiarity with cash transfer policies when it comes to prioritize and select possible solutions is relevant. The experience, the learning of the bureaucracy, and the mechanisms present in the Brazilian institutional structure cannot be discarded, nor can the entire legacy of the *Bolsa Família* Program (BFP), the system of unified registry of individuals in social disadvantage (*Cadastro Unico*), the National Social Assistance System (SUAS), the participation of state-owned banks, such as Caixa Econômica Federal (CEF). These structures are potential facilitators to choose cash transfer policies as a strategy to guarantee minimum conditions of human survival in a period of crisis. It is not a matter of creating a whole new structure and apparatus, which demands more time than a crisis can offer, but of activating, adapting, and expanding existing capacities and structures.

When selecting solutions for the effects of the pandemic in Brazil, it is essential to consider the actions and organization of policy communities. The actors who, seeing the possibility of opening a window of opportunity amid the crisis, acted through a strong coalition formed by the networks and movements *Rede de Renda Brasileira Básica* (Brazilian Basic Income Network), the *Coalizão Negra por Direitos* (Black Coalition for Rights), *Nossas* (a network of citizen engagement initiatives), and the organizations Ethos Institute and Inesc. Also, the coalition counted on the mobilization of society informed by the media in favor of the approval of the emergency aid via unconditional cash transfer (Ferreira, 2020; Orofino, 2020; Roque & Ferreira, 2020).

However, journalistic reports from the period and interviews by some of these actors showed that the proposal was defended by coordinated civil society groups that focused on influencing the legislative branch to approve a policy able to meet the expectations. The process of choosing the policy venue is a strategy of actors and policymakers to obtain recognition and adherence to their proposals.

According to an article by Orofino (2020), in the context of the pandemic and based on their activities campaigning for basic income, these organizations identified the federal executive branch's intention to adopt a cash transfer policy in the face of the crisis, although with characteristics and amounts very different from those they advocated as minimal and essential to overcome the pandemic. In portraying the executive power's proposals for the adoption of cash transfer policies, the group *Renda Básica Que Queremos* (basic income we want) (2020, p. 2, our translation) stated:

[...] [The executive branch] announced its intention to do something similar to this [universal basic income], but limited to a specific number of independent professionals – about 38 million adults, who would receive BRL 200.00 for just three months to support the whole family [...] civil society organizations advocate an alternative proposal to reach twice as many people, for twice as long, with less bureaucracy and greater support for families.

When discussing the Brazilian government's initial suggestion for the policy's design and, especially, the proposed amount to be transferred, the organizations engaged in the debate exposed that the Minister of Economy, Paulo Guedes, "by giving the impression that the Executive was already doing his best to deal with the crisis, anticipated civil society and guided the public debate based on his own assessment of what 'can' and what 'cannot' be done, elaborating an openly insufficient proposal" (Orofino, 2020). This made the executive branch unfertile ground for advocacy, closed to the reception of new proposals and demands from organized movements. Therefore, the concentration of the debate in the legislative branch is understandable. The legislative offered an environment for fruitful discussion, allowing the incorporation of elements collected in the public debate, including a rise in the amount of handouts.

The models and designs chosen for the formulation of the policy did not come from a consensus, as expected. In the legislative houses (Chamber of Deputies and Senate), several proposals were parallel, dividing opinions and forming coalitions around ideas and designs, including and excluding beneficiaries, increasing and decreasing the benefit. As Orofino (2002, our translation) highlighted:

In Congress, opposition leaders proposed a bill that provided for an ambitious emergency basic income [...] In the Senate, another bill was being submitted by Senator Randolfe Rodrigues (Rede-AP). [...] the project around which a consensus was formed was that of the federal deputy Eduardo Barbosa (PSDB-MG).

The approved emergency basic income would be totally different without the pressure and engagement of policy communities, without the media as the main vehicle for real-time information, and the expertise of actors and institutions already in place as implementation mechanisms. It is important to recognize the contribution of international examples and recommendations in the process of policy design, considering that other countries were facing the same public problems (Leite, Peres & Bellix, 2012) and had already been implementing actions to supplement the population's income – such as the cases of Germany and China (Gentilini et al., 2020), where the pandemic began and peaked before hitting Brazil in all its severity.

Time is a first-order variable in emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The larger and more structured the policy community, the smaller the information gap between the public and decision-makers. The greater the public involvement in the policy process and the greater the expertise on viable solutions, the greater the chance of selecting and formulating a policy. These are the main characteristics to understand how the emergency basic income via cash transfer not only enters the agenda but becomes an immediately viable solution.

The accelerated process in the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, the social pressure for the President's approval without vetoes, avoiding major obstacles and debates, was only possible due to the political and social context caused by the pandemic. In a regular context, such incompatibility between the legislative and the executive would be a scenario for never-ending disputes and negotiations. Focusing events leave no time for negotiation and accelerate the process.

## 5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Studies on focusing events are scarce in Brazil. In the international literature, such events are more often explored when analyzing public policy changes motivated by natural disasters, such as hurricanes, earthquakes, and tsunamis.

This study sought to identify the characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic as a focusing event based on the principles of Kingdon, Baumgartner and Jones, and Birkland, highlighting its influence on agenda setting and selecting solutions in public policy formulation. Future studies in the field of policy analysis that focus on other moments of the process – research on formulation, implementation, and evaluation – using other promising theoretical references in the area that help understand the multiple aspects of a complex issue such as the pandemic.

Among the various government actions proposed by decision-makers, the object of analysis was the cash transfer emergency income, from scheduling to formulation. From a strong theoretical basis, we were able to understand the characteristics of the pandemic as a focusing event, its unexpected and sudden occurrence, the rarity of occurrence, and the need to deal with countless unplanned subjects, the direct involvement between public and policymakers, and the influence on the media in the information process about the event and its consequences, in addition to a large number of people and areas involved.

We were also able to analyze the characteristics that support the universal basic income as a possible solution to be considered in processes of policy selection and formulation: the existence of a cohesive, active, and organized policy community; social participation and mobilization; media engagement in expanding the conflict and in the processes of concentrating attention and proposing viable solutions to mitigate the pandemic's economic impacts on families; previous availability of data, indicators, expertise, and structures (bureaucracy, institutions, tools); examples from international agencies and actions already implemented to combat the same scenario abroad.

This brief analysis is a first attempt to understand the starting point, conditions, and facilitators of a focusing event in agenda-setting and policy formulation. Future studies should emphasize policy implementation mechanisms, state capacities resulting from the approval of universal basic income, and the policy's limits, scope, weaknesses, and potential.

In this sense, studies by Bartholo, Paiva and Souza (2020), Cardoso (2020), Chimini and Xavier (2020), Gonzales and Lotta (2020) analyze the Brazilian federal government's emergency basic income, pointing out the configuration of its institutional arrangement, the process of mapping the target audience, the actors included and excluded in the policy's design, the issues with social technologies,

the use of previously existing systems, the role of the bureaucracy, and the complex federative relations affecting the policy's design and implementation.

New studies may contribute by emphasizing the possibilities of extending such emergency aid or even maintaining the policy after the pandemic putting into practice the original characteristics of basic income, i.e., universal and unconditional. This study sheds light on one of the many possible paths of an agenda that opens up amidst such challenging times in societies worldwide.

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