

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series

Vol 1, No 1 (2020)

HAPSc Policy Briefs Series



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doi: [10.12681/hapscpbs.24952](https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.24952)

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To cite this article:

Contipelli, E., & Nagao Menezes, D. F. (2020). State performance in crises: A proposal for action for Brazil. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 1(1), 81–88. <https://doi.org/10.12681/hapscpbs.24952>

State performance in crises: A proposal for action for Brazil¹

Ernani Contipelli² & Daniel Francisco Nagao Menezes³

Abstract (in English)

The great challenge for government action at these times is to devise strategies that bring together at the same time: the ability to encompass different dimensions of the problem; mechanisms for dialogue and articulation with the multiple actors with competence to affect the measures put into action and the speed of response consistent with the urgency of the effects resulting from the pandemic. The text will analyze the challenges and responses of the Brazilian State to the COVID-19 crisis, based on multidimensionality and intersectoriality. Three points will be discussed in the article: a) political-institutional articulation between different governmental and non-governmental sectors; b) elaboration of a national pandemic containment; c) establishment of transparency mechanisms for ongoing actions and communication with society.

Abstract (in Spanish)

El gran desafío para la acción del gobierno en estos momentos es diseñar estrategias que se unan al mismo tiempo: la capacidad de abarcar diferentes dimensiones del problema; mecanismos para el diálogo y la articulación con los múltiples actores con competencia para afectar las medidas puestas en acción y la velocidad de respuesta consistente con la urgencia de los efectos resultantes de la pandemia. El texto analizará los desafíos y las respuestas del Estado brasileño a la crisis COVID-19, basándose en la multidimensionalidad y la intersectorialidad. Se discutirán tres puntos en el artículo: a) articulación político-institucional entre diferentes sectores gubernamentales y no gubernamentales; b) elaboración de una contención nacional pandémica; c) establecimiento de mecanismos de transparencia para acciones en curso y comunicación con la sociedad.

Introduction - Understanding the problem in Brazil

In the face of crisis situations around the world, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the discussion on the government's capacity to present adequate responses to the increasing number of demands characterized by the transversality, multidimensionality and intersectoriality that should comprise the strategies gains strength of state action on the effects of situations of this magnitude. In particular, when the context is marked by the predominance of scenarios guided by a high degree of dynamism, incomplete information, high levels of social tension and considerable susceptibility of governments to the performance of multiple actors inside and outside countries, in addition, of course, to growing

¹ To cite this paper in APA style: Contipelli, E. & Nagao Menezes, D. F. (2020). State performance in crises: A proposal for action for Brazil. *HAPSc Policy Briefs Series*, 1(1): 81 – 88. DOI: 10.12681/hapscpbs.24952

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expectations in relation to the State's action with regard to issues that directly affect the levels of social and economic well-being of populations during crisis situations.

In general, challenges in coordinating government action are directly related to multifaceted and intersectoral problems that require the participation of various actors and organizations. The literature (Barifouse, 2020; Conti, 2020; G1, 2020; Hustain et al. 2020; Larson, 2020) shows that gaps or difficulties in coordinating initiatives under the responsibility of multiple actors generate fragmentation of actions, dispersion of results, inefficiency of spending and prevalence of one-off and temporary effects on complex issues, such as the one we face in the face of the increase in cases of people infected with the coronavirus and its severe consequences for the public at risk and the economy of the countries. Given the scope of the current and future impacts of the pandemic on the social and economic conditions of the affected populations, it is pertinent to state that the crisis triggered by Covid-19 is characterized by both elements: multidimensionality and intersectorality. But, what does this mean in practical terms?

Firstly, large-scale epidemiological crises are multidimensional in nature and require measures that cover different areas, such as health, economics, the labor market, infrastructure, urban mobility, health, logistical and social issues of a broader nature.

Second, the coordination of multidimensional actions requires intersectoral action capable of bringing together, under common objectives, an extensive list of social actors - national and local governments, sectors of the private initiative and civil society entities -, due to the scale and complexity of the effort needed to tackle the pandemic and its effects. In this sense, it is necessary to establish dialogues and articulations with sectoral ministries responsible for actions of different axes, with states and municipalities responsible for carrying out actions and with different entities and actors from civil society, including a wide spectrum of partners ranging from representatives of sectors industry and commerce, leaders of social movements, representatives of other countries and international organizations. As a result of this diverse range of actors, the interactions necessary for proper management can vary enormously in the degree of systematization, periodicity, themes and objectives.

Multidimensionality and intersectorality are recurrent themes in the discussion about effective ways to manage complex situations that public agents face all the time. Despite this, the additional element found in crisis scenarios, especially crises of international proportions that involve public health issues, risk of morbidity and collapse of essential services to the population, is the urgency.

With due proportions, different countries have already faced situations of calamity caused by climatic events, environmental tragedies and emergency scenarios in public health of national and international scope. Brazil, for example, has already had to mobilize efforts and create management arrangements responsible for implementing measures to mitigate social and economic impacts resulting from the electrical blackout experienced in 2001, due to prolonged periods of drought in the semiarid region in 2013-2014, or in other scenarios of health emergencies, such as the Zika epidemic that occurred in 2015-2016, aiming to reduce the impact on the population's living conditions. Obviously, the scenario faced now differs enormously from the situations mentioned, however, measures taken in previous cases aimed at defining management arrangements can serve as an apprenticeship to understand the possibilities of government action at this time.

There is no standardized manual that allows defining exactly which procedures or measures must be implemented to guarantee the confrontation of atypical situations and devastating effects in different dimensions of human life, as demonstrated by the Covid-19 pandemic since the beginning of 2020; however, countless works and researches that have been and continue to be developed demonstrate that there are experiences already implemented in other countries, or in other crisis situations experienced by Brazil itself, that can contribute to the design of minimum guidelines, without which the probability of acting in a punctual, fragmented manner and often in opposite directions it becomes significantly elevated. In this sense, it is crucial that the following guidelines are considered as guiding efforts to coordinate action within and outside the governmental sphere:

- definition of a management body recognized as legitimate and valid by all the actors involved in the crisis resolution process;
- clear definition of the roles and competencies of each of the bodies and actors involved;
- definition of action flows and protocols that guide the interaction and participation of the different actors;
- establishment of mediation and conflict resolution instances;
- creation of mechanisms that allow the quick monitoring of the implemented measures and their results, aiming at eventual course corrections and necessary adjustments;
- use of instruments of transparency and accountability for government action with society as a whole.

In the wake of these guidelines, the first and most usual measure taken by governments in the face of crises is the establishment of committees responsible for dealing with the crisis and its repercussions,

the so-called crisis committees, crisis offices, emergency committees, among other denominations. In Brazil, this instance is materialized by the Crisis Committee for Supervision and Monitoring of the Impacts of Covid-19, established by Decree No. 10.277 (Brasil, Decreto, 2020), of March 16, 2020, under the coordination of the Sub-section of Articulation and Monitoring of the Civil House of the Presidency of Republic, with the participation of representatives of 27 bodies, such as ministries, public companies and regulatory agencies. Of course, the simple formal creation of a coordination body in crisis situations is not enough to guarantee the adequacy or success of necessary measures coping with the impacts observed in the moments that precede the emergency situation, at its peak and in progress, and even in the post-crisis period, due to the possible consequences derived from the crisis scenario.

In general, the moment or timing of the creation of these bodies is crucial to ensure that adequate responses are given to the different situations that are outlined along the trajectory of the crisis. There is a fine line and a difficult balance between anticipating risks, preventive action, aiming to mitigate possible effects of the crisis, and the creation of instances of this nature when the crisis is in place and its effects are already felt by the population. In spite of this, after the constitution of the body responsible for coordinating efforts aimed at facing and containing the crisis caused by Covid-19 and its effects, it is important that the coordinated action of the government structure is able to encompass three major fronts of action.

First front: political-institutional articulation between different governmental and non-governmental sectors

Multidimensional problems require intersectoral solutions. Convergence between government initiatives does not mean demand for centralization in the execution of public policies. The coordination of efforts carried out by different actors according to their competences and areas of specialization reduces the possibilities of: i) overlapping actions with similar scopes; ii) the occurrence of specific improvements to the detriment of structural changes caused by the dispersion of actions; iii) dichotomy between concentration of public investments and maintenance of service gaps; and iv) waste of highly disputed human, bureaucratic and financial resources within bureaucratic instances.

To make articulations of this nature feasible, it is crucial to guarantee formal instances and permanent communication channels, which involve the essential actors for the good performance of crisis coping strategies, avoiding asymmetry and mismatch of information, reducing the chances of divergent

orientations in relation to related matters passed on to the population, as well as the negative impacts of the dispersion of efforts in the fight against the effects of the pandemic.

It is extremely important that, in addition to periodic meetings, there is the definition of interlocutors responsible for dialoguing and keeping the different actors involved informed about the strategies to be adopted, the measures under discussion and those already put in place, as well as alignment efforts of speeches and narratives with sectors such as:

- economic sectors with the greatest impact;
- Federation units (states and municipalities), prioritizing those with the highest pandemic incidence and / or greatest vulnerability;
- Legislative and Judiciary powers;
- countries and international organizations;
- third sector and civil society organizations with great capacity for social mobilization.

Second front: elaboration of a national pandemic containment

The clear advantage of defining a National Strategy for Confronting and Containing the COVID-19 Pandemic would have the main advantage of avoiding the dispersion and fragmentation of isolated and, at times, contradictory actions carried out by the numerous actors with the capacity to act on pandemic. The proliferation of measures implemented by multiple actors at different times, with no minimum coordination efforts, tends to amplify the feeling of disorder and panic in society by emitting divergent signs or orientations on certain topics, in addition to considerably increasing the chance of overlapping actions, waste of resources of all kinds, service gaps or effectiveness of the measures implemented.

Until March 30, 2020, only at the federal level, 59 measures were published (Rache et al. 2020) aimed at reducing the impact of the pandemic, which deal with the most varied topics, such as health, agriculture, transportation system, social protection, employment protection, budget rules and release of resources for different purposes that, it seems, are not part of a cohesive strategy led by the federal government under the figure of the crisis committee responsible for ensuring the coordination, convergence and complementarity of the measures put in place action.

It is worth highlighting the relevance of combining the process of developing a cohesive action strategy with the creation of mechanisms that allow the rapid monitoring of the implemented

measures and their results, aiming at possible course corrections and necessary adjustments to ensure the achievement of the expected results and effectiveness implemented measures.

By way of illustration, a national strategy to confront and contain Covid-19 could be structured along the following lines:

- axis 1: epidemiological-sanitary plan and measures to contain the virus;
- axis 2: mitigation of economic impacts resulting from measures of isolation and social distance;
- axis 3: strengthening of the social protection network as a way to resolve the impacts on areas of greatest social and economic vulnerability;
- axis 4: measures to protect work, employment and income generation in the face of the impacts caused by the pandemic;
- axis 5: package of measures to support the states and municipalities most affected by the pandemic.

Third front: establishment of transparency mechanisms for ongoing actions and communication with society

Crisis moments, by definition, tend to generate reactions and behaviors based on the sensation of chaos and panic in the affected populations. The establishment of transparency mechanisms in relation to the set of measures and efforts adopted by governments and periodic channels of communication with society are crucial to mitigate the social and psychological impacts arising from the uncertainty and insecurity that have guided the daily lives of different institutions and families. The taking of a position and the establishment of these communication and accountability channels contribute not only to the strengthening of democratic arrangements for the management of public affairs, but also have the potential to welcome, at least in part, the concerns expressed by the population. In the same sense, these mechanisms can still have significant impacts on the consolidation of political leadership in times of worsening crises and disruption of the conditions of normality that guide daily life with measures such as social distance and reduced circulation of people.

How to do this?

1. Define specific spokespersons to publicly address the pandemic. It is not necessary for communication to be centralized under the figure of a representative, it is possible for representatives to be appointed due to expertise, institutional competence or body to which they belong (ministers, high-level government officials, governors, mayors, specialists in certain themes, among others).

However, it is crucial that there is coordination and convergence between speeches and responses given to society as a whole, to resolve possible communication failures and to avoid that opposite or contradictory orientations are passed on to the population.

2. Define timeliness and frequency with which communication is made. This adds greater reliability and predictability to government action in the face of the daily changes experienced at the height of the crisis. At first, there will be an increase in hospital admissions, however, in the long term the trend is the reduction.

3. Establish the type of information (content and format) and communication channels that are of public knowledge, especially from the media, research bodies, think tanks, universities and society in general.

4. Respond quickly to new situations that arise, including assuming the asymmetry and incompleteness of the variables and evidence available for decision making or providing more explanations about certain events.

General considerations

Coping with crises is a short, medium and long-term process that requires continuity and maintenance of investments in transversal public policies, combined with strategies to sustain the effects of these measures. It is essential to ensure the combination of the policy agenda aimed at the immediate impact and noticeable results in the short term and the structuring ones, aimed at breaking the conditions for reproducing the social and economic effects resulting from the pandemic. Part of these results are not necessarily noticeable in short periods, they are changes whose effects can be felt with greater intervals, for example. However, the non-investment in these actions contributes to deepen and strengthen the factors that influence the reproduction of the vulnerabilities that already mark Brazilian society in different dimensions.

It is believed, therefore, that facing crises, among so many other dimensions, cannot do without a government concern with the coordination of its actions, since the delivery of expected results to society will only be carried out with the interaction of a diversity of actors, not only linked to the state, but also to civil society and the private sector. This document lays down the minimum bases for an action proposal to face the crisis, strongly based on the establishment of good coordination mechanisms.

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