

# Paradiplomacy as an Instrument of Policy Change: A Case of Brazilian States during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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## Abstract

The present article presents the study of the phenomenon of paradiplomacy as a vector for change in public policies, taking the paradiplomatic performance of Brazilian subnational units and their policies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic as an example. The theoretical approach is the political sociology of public action and its three basic principles for understanding public policy: the sectoral-global relationship, the reference, and the interaction dynamics between the actors involved. COVID-19 presented several problems for constructing public policies that could combat the spread of the virus and its effects. Different federal entities took divergent actions for this task. Divergent actions led to a conflict between the federal government's indecision and the protagonism of some subnational units.

## Keywords

Paradiplomacy, Subnational Units, COVID-19, Brazilian Paradiplomacy

## 1. Introduction

The present article presents the study of the phenomenon of paradiplomacy as a vector for change in public policies, taking the paradiplomatic performance of Brazilian subnational units and their policies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic as an example.

Subnational units' international activities have long been studied in international relations. Its definition would be the international performance of subnational units that do not seek to form a new state. The action aimed at the independence of a subnational unit is known as protodiplomacy, as recently made by Cataluña in Spain or even the Quebec actions in the late 1970s. In paradiploma-

cy, action can be in agreement and/or in conflict with the interests and guidelines of the national government. The focuses of studies are concentrated on the areas of international activities of the subnational units and in the federative organization of these actions. Paradiplomacy can be a political strategy of a particular political party in search of greater national and international projection. However, the study of paradiplomacy through public policy theories is still incipient. This work intends to fill part of this gap. It also intends to understand the option for paradiplomacy as a vector of changes for local public policies.

The theoretical approach will be from the political sociology of public action from its three basic principles for understanding public policy: the sectoral-global relationship, the reference, and the interaction dynamics between the actors involved. The first key element concerns the relationship of a given sectoral policy with other public policies. This paper will approach the sectoral-global question for the federative levels. We want to explore federative issues of paradiplomacy through the sectoral-global relationship. The sectoral will be at the subnational level and the global at the federal level. About the reference, we want to know if paradiplomacy can be a vector for the paradigm shift in public policies of subnational units. Adopting an international insertion policy would present a degree of change for local public policies. Paradiplomacy brings the participation of new actors in the formulation and implementation of local public actions. This way, the actors involved must establish a new interaction dynamic.

COVID-19 presented several problems for constructing public policies that could combat the spread of the virus and its effects. Implementing social distancing policies and commercial restrictions, and keeping the essential part of the government running are some examples. Different federal entities took divergent actions for this task. Divergent actions led to a conflict between the federal government's indecision and the protagonism of some subnational units. Therefore, we intend to study the subnational units that opted for adopting paradiplomacy as a public policy in this specific pandemic scenario of adaptation and changes in public policies.

The methodology used is descriptive-analytical, targeting Brazilian subnational units' experiences. As explained above, the analysis will be made from the political sociology of public action. The paper is divided as follows: first, we will focus on the theoretical approach, and then analyze the Brazilian case of paradiplomacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, and finally, we will move on to conclusions.

## 2. The Theoretical Approach

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented numerous challenges for national and subnational governments in implementing policies to combat the coronavirus. The WHO has elaborated several guidelines with this same objective. Subnational units initially complied with these guidelines, not the Brazilian central gov-

ernment. This participation of subnational units may have worked as a vector for changing public policies to combat COVID-19. The best way to understand this is to understand the dynamics of existing relationships between national and subnational governments. And finally, we argue that one way to approach this conflict is through the political sociology of public action approach<sup>1</sup>.

The political sociology of public action (Jobert & Muller, 1987; Hassenteufel, 2008) assumes that public policy analysis must be integrated into a broader conception of state-society relations. We intend to analyze this subject using the referential theory or the political sociology of public action, mainly its sector-global relationship definition. Its composition comprises three elements: the sector-global relationship, the referential, and the actor's interaction dynamics involved in the power relations and regulation of a specific public policy.

The first key element attempts to manage the relationship between the sector considered in a specific public policy and the other government areas. Although the sector is Public Health in the study presented here, sectorial-global relations happen in multiple arenas. For example, Brazil is a federal state whose public health system supposes inter-federal cooperation. Therefore, policy actions needed support and complementarity from other government areas and subnational units. Subsequently, sectorial-global relations express how actors involved in public policy action articulate themselves. This relationship can also reveal the existing conflicts and power disputes inside public institutions. According to Jobert (1985, 2004), it is a mistake to consider the state as a unified and homogeneous entity and the public administration as a rational executor of governmental decisions. The various parts of government can represent, and often they do, distinct, often complementary, and sometimes conflicting social and economic interests. In our case, we can observe the conflict between the President and State Governors and between the judiciary and the executive branches concerning COVID-19 combat actions.

The second key element is called a referential and covers norms, learning, and references expressed in a public policy. The referential can also be described as the representation made by the actors involved in this action. This representation is how various actors and social classes understand the origin, development, and possible unfolding of the problem to be the target of the state's action. It also expresses the perception of the government's role. They are norms and references the actors build through their relationships, interactions, consensus constructions, and decisions. The referential shows how the actors see their respective roles, functions, values, and interests. We know the referential as a representation of global-sector relations in public policy. The referential might determine the social and geographical extension of a public policy. In this paper,

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<sup>1</sup>The World Health Organization guidelines can function as a public policy paradigm or referential. In one case, the SARS-H1N1, the Brazilian government followed WHO guidelines to reference its public actions. In the present case, the SARS COVID-19, the Brazilian government has not followed them primarily for ideological reasons. The primary guideline parameters had already been established in 2005 with the International Health Regulations.

we also consider the referential as a paradigm of public policies.

The third key element is concerned with the actors who work in the construction of the referential. The set of actors encompasses the state, local, regional, national, non-state, and international actors. The interaction dynamic among these actors is the essential aspect here. The policy decisions result from this interaction dynamic played by the different actors. New political relations might emerge depending on the actor dynamics interaction.

We should understand the three critical elements according to action cycles. Müller (2015) and Faure and Müller (2013) define the cycles as social configuration processes determining the state's role in public policy actions. They identify four cycles: 1) the industrial liberal, 2) the welfare state, 3) the state enterprise, and 4) sustainable governance. Each cycle corresponds to different economic, citizenship, and public policy regimes that express the referential in which the state is inserted. In the Latin American case, the cycles refer to other political forces acting in public policies. Brazilian republics' history alternates between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Moreover, the state's role has been crucial to all public policies in both cases. The Brazilian case relies on nowadays a cycle of economic crisis and social background favorable for populist governments. So common in Latin America, populist cycles comprehend charismatic leadership (as a figure of a political messiah or hero), demagogical public policies and a nationalistic discourse in order to engage people in supporting their government. Normally, they are fiscally irresponsible and have no concern to limit public expansion.

The Advocacy Coalition Framework has been used to describe and analyze the possible changes in public policy. According to Pierce, Peterson, and Hicks, this approach contributes to understanding the decision-making processes of changes in public policies. An advocacy coalition is a specific collective action to shape and change public policy, even within closed political regimes. It is based on the interaction of actors in the political subsystem; it differs from social movements, interest groups, or political parties. There are three steps to understanding policy change: the first is that its process requires a time perspective of at least a decade. Second, a policy change study should focus on policy subsystems, which are the actor's interactions in a specific area of public policy. Third: public policies can work as belief systems, which are "[...] assets of value priorities and causal assumptions about how to realize them" (Sabatier, 1988: p. 131). Sabatier and Weible (2007) also stressed: the importance of the context in which coalitions operate, a typology of coalition resources, and new paths to policy change.

The context is vital because the ACF successfully understands pluralist regimes, but it can also explain changes in the institutional context of developing countries. The typology of coalition resources is a complement to the belief system approach. A robust belief system can only engage in policy change if it has the necessary resources. Finally, the ACF's two new paths to policy change analyses are 1) internal shocks and 2) negotiated agreements. Initially, the ACF

focused on external shocks as a needed cause for policy change. However, this focus needed to be more comprehensive to comprehend policy changes originating from internal political demands or changes in the dominant coalition.

This paper considers the sectoral-global relationship in two fundamental aspects: 1) the first within Brazilian federalism and the relations between subnational units and the central government, and 2) in the context of the paradiplomacy exercised by some Brazilian states. The analysis focuses on understanding the performance of subnational units in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and how paradiplomacy can act as a vector of change in public policies.

### 3. The Brazilian Case

By putting into action, the three critical elements of public policies, we have the following scenario: the sectoral-global relationship presents, on the one hand, a conflict between the Ministry of Health and the health system with the presidency of the republic, on the other hand, a conflict between the federal executive and State governors. All the articulation marks these conflicts take up the sectoral-global relationship of public policy to combat COVID-19. Since the beginning of the pandemic, the country has already in its fourth health minister. The first, the politician and doctor Luis Mandetta, was sent away for disagreeing with the Republic's President regarding the quarantine and social isolation policies. The second minister, physician Nelson Teich, came from the private sector and needed to gain experience working in the public area. His stay was approximately one month, and his departure was due to differences in the conduct of isolation, quarantine, and treatment of the pandemic. The Minister who most remained in office was a General with no experience in public health administration but who obeyed the commands given by the President. It was the most incredible friction between state health secretaries and governors. Many federal government's requests to suspend measures to combat COVID, implemented by state governors, were denied by the country's Supreme Court. In fact, the federal government's strategy was to do the minimum concerning social distancing, lockdowns, commercial restrictions, or other activities alike recommended by the World Health Organization. They expect a rapid economic recovery in the view of 2022 presidential elections.

In this context, subnational units, such as the states of São Paulo and Maranhão, took paradiplomatic initiatives intending to initiate their policies to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. According to [Rei, Granziera, and Gonçalves \(2020: p. 55\)](#):

In the Brazilian case, the treatment of COVID-19 evidenced the phenomenon of the action of Subnational Governments, represented by many Municipalities and States that, in line with international norms issued by the World Health Organisation, represented by the Pan-American Health Organisation for the Americas, assumed a divergent position from the posi-

tion of the Head of the Federal Executive Power, facing him. In this context, it is also evident the manifestation of several institutions in defense of the Right to Life and Health, protected by the Brazilian Federal Constitution and by the International Treaties of Human Rights<sup>2</sup>.

According to the authors (Rei, Granziera, & Gonçalves, 2020), the union government tried to limit the actions of subnational governments. In addition, more articulation and governance of health were needed to integrate subnational governments and civil society. In this context of federal conflict, the Supreme Court decided on the autonomy of subnational units in constructing policies to combat COVID-19. The conflict lasted throughout the pandemic (Leite Filho, 2021) and opened space for expanding Brazilian paradiplomacy, including states and municipalities. The Northeast Consortium, for example, acted to purchase protective equipment and respirators. The National Front of Mayors (FNP) created the National Vaccine Consortium of Brazilian Cities. The government of Maranhão also acted for the acquisition of masks and respirators.

(...) What draws attention is the phenomenon surrounding the autonomous way Subnational Governments have positioned themselves, choosing and deciding according to what they understand to be the most technically and scientifically correct. These entities, located in the corners of the country, aligned themselves with the Global Health Governance of the World Health Organization to the detriment of the clear and forceful position of the Presidency of the Republic, which was contrary to international health standards (...) (IDEM, p. 62)<sup>3</sup>.

The conflicts even took place in the vaccine issue; while the federal government was delaying the purchase of vaccines, the state of São Paulo began to produce them in partnership with a Chinese pharmaceutical company. Thus, the sectoral-global relationship came to encompass not only conflicts of interest or overlapping areas of government or part of the population; the relationship began to be shaped and shaped according to the clash of narratives in a fragmented and polarized political environment.

The paradiplomatic actions of the state of São Paulo developed in the 2010s. In 2019, a state office was opened in China to attract investments. Differences between the government of the state of São Paulo and the federal government began before the pandemic because they had different environmental policies (De Sousa & Rodrigues, 2021). The conflict is aggravated by the different policies to combat COVID-19. The agreement for developing a vaccine against the coronavirus was made between the state of São Paulo and China through the actions of the Butantan Research Institute and the Chinese company Sinovac. The vaccine was named CoronaVac.

In the conflict surrounding CoronaVac, the first explanatory factor is the

<sup>2</sup>Author's translation.

<sup>3</sup>Author's translation.

role that the different spheres of the federation attributed to China. The SP government played a prominent role in its foreign relations, recognizing the country's importance, especially the economy, and the desire to deepen Sino-Paulista relations pragmatically. (...) On the other hand, diplomacy de Araújo questioned the role of China for Brazil and sought with the Trump administration an alignment of the PEB that excludes cooperation with China. Concerning CoronaVac, the vision of China in the federal government was not compatible with the promotion of a vaccine of Chinese origin as something that would help to mitigate the problem of the pandemic in the country (De Sousa & Rodrigues, 2021: p. 58).

In addition to the state of São Paulo, the state of Maranhão (Oliveira & Neri, 2021) also stood out in paradiplomacy as a form of action to combat the coronavirus pandemic. According to Alvarenga et al. (2021):

The government of the state of Maranhão conducted a surprising international trade and logistic operation for the purchase of mechanical ventilators, organizing a "wartime operation" in the midst of a global commercial and geopolitical dispute between the main international powers. This operation can be characterized as a concrete example of "paradiplomacy" and Global Health Diplomacy (...). However, there were factors, actors, actions, and strategies that made this undertaking possible and that are part of a recurrent and growing phenomenon in Brazil since the late 20th century. The operation by Maranhão was an external action promoted by a subnational entity that practiced paradiplomacy, but that faced difficulties that blocked adequate prevention and the fight against COVID-19. To overcome these adversities, the state pursued local and international partnerships, in addition to demonstrating its alignment with WHO and PAHO guidelines and policies, besides its action in the area of Global Health Diplomacy (Kickbusch & Liu, 2022).

The federal government issued 3049 regulations related to COVID-19 in the year 2020, according to the *Boletim Direitos na Pandemia* (2021). For the authors, the excessive number of norms confirms that they lack rights where they, the standards, exist in excess. This excess would express the conflict between the federal government's strategy, on the one hand, and subnational units and the judiciary, on the other hand. Furthermore, the National Contingency Plan for Human Infection by the new Coronavirus COVID-19 (Ministério da Saúde, 2020) did not reference human rights as Brazilian law and International Health Regulations required. Therefore, there are strong indications that the federal government did not act to contain the virus, believing that the economic recovery would be faster in this way (*Boletim Direitos na Pandemia*, 2021).

Regarding the analysis of the second key element, the referential is concerned, and it reflects the conflict described above. We started from the premise that WHO guidelines were already constituted as a paradigm in Brazil. Thus, it is

possible to compare the current government's actions with the existing benchmark to highlight their differences. However, what happens is that the steps coming from the republic's presidency are more than a paradigm shift; they are its denial. Currently, the activities of the Ministry of Health seek to balance the demands for the end of restrictions coming from the federal government and the need to contain the transmission of the virus and the organization, through federative cooperation, of a national immunization plan.

Regarding the interaction dynamics of political actors, it oscillates between cooperation between subnational units, which continue to be related to the IHR guidelines, with possible participation of the Ministry of Health and the Unified Health System—SUS and open conflict with the federal government. According to [Abrúcio, Grin, Franzese, Segatto, and Couto \(2020\)](#), the federative dynamics during the current period is a confrontation of two federative models: the first based on cooperation with federal coordination following the 1988 Constitution and the second based on a centralizing and hierarchical in national issues and dualist in intergovernmental matters, reducing the union's participation in helping its subnational federated entities.

According to [Gomes et al. \(2023\)](#), conflicts between the central government and subnational units marked the interaction dynamics of these political actors during the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic in Brazil. While the central government's concern was focused on avoiding the stoppage of economic activities, subnational governments focused their policies on the issue of the health of their populations.

At this point, it is possible to recover the approach of the Muller and Faure cycles to understand this reality. If cycles reveal how societies see themselves and imagine their future, how to describe the cycle in a divided and polarized society, the country is in a cycle of strengthening populism in a global context of attacks on democracy and strengthening fascist political positions ([Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018](#); [Stanley, 2018](#); [Mounk, 2019](#)). Furthermore, there is also an attack on the progress of the Enlightenment, something that [Bobbio \(1994\)](#) had already noticed in the Italian extreme right at the end of the last century. The conflicts that arise through federalism are also conflicts between authoritarian and democratic paths. The populist cycle intensifies the conflict by making the simplistic division of reality and transforming science into a discourse.

#### 4. Final Remarks

Subnational units acted as active international actors in Brazil's public policies to combat COVID-19. Their actions could be understood within the political sociology of public action approach, mainly in the component that explores the sectoral-global relationship in the context of federalist configuration. We consider the sectoral component to be subnational governments and the global component to be the federal government. The existing conflicts between subnational governments and the federal government were the main characteristic of this re-



lationship during the pandemic period, and these problems were expressed in the paradiplomatic performance of some Brazilian states and municipalities.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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