

Popular restaurants: Brazilian urban experience on fighting against hunger and strengthening civil rights

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Abstract

During the Nineties, due to the victory of a progressive party, Belo Horizonte Municipality, Brazil, had the initiative of opening “popular restaurants”, as a priority of the Policy Against Hunger and Pro-Food Security. This public policy is now being multiplied by the introduction of the same program in many Brazilian Metropolitan Areas. This article analyses this successful urban practice, emphasising its aspects of social efficacy in struggling against hunger and malnutrition, and also increasing democracy and social participation. The basic assumption of this work is that Food Security is a basic civil “right” in all its aspects. Besides presenting the mechanisms of the working process and technology at “popular restaurants”, this article also measures the results of an adequate diet in improving the health of local poor population.

1. Popular Restaurants from the 40’s to the 60’s

In big urban centers in Brazil, specially after World War II, it was feared the possibility of food scarcity, strengthened by the population growth brought mainly by the fast urbanization processes. Besides, strong speculation by merchants on food trade brought to the Government strong concerns about measures to rationalize the flow of trade (warehouses), restrict food exports and fight price increases (Linhares and Teixeira Da Silva [1]).

Starvation and nutritional precariousness were then denounced by Castro [2], who attributed it to the fact that Brazil was unable to produce its own foodstuff, also being limited the people’s ability to buy it. The author advocated land reform and changes in the food commercialization circuits, through sweeping away what he called “the starvation industry”.

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Along the fifties, due to the fast populational migration processes from the countryside to big cities, the issue of price increases became even more crucial, taking into account the developmentalist project and the enlargement of democracy. Food prices, however, increased about 20% per year during the fifties, raising the price of worker's consumption basket and decreasing real wages of industrial workers.

Popular unrest in big cities generates demand for policies aiming at an immediate restriction of meal prices, specially for low-income strata. Popular Restaurants, offering cheap meals, followed similar initiatives involving restaurants facilities at universities and corporations. In a similar way, collective warehouses or supermarkets supplying cheap foodstuff to a vast majority of employees of a few big corporations (universities, State banks, etc.) date back from that time.

In 1952, Mr. Juscelino Kubitschek, then Governor of the State of Minas Gerais, put into operation three Popular Restaurants in Belo Horizonte, the State capital. Strategically, a preferential client base was defined for each one of them. The first one was dedicated to the working class and operated in the city's downtown. In the same year, Popular Restaurant no. 2 opened at a movie theater gallery, also downtown, assisting mainly students, but benefiting other people as well. Popular Restaurant no. 3, also located downtown, served bank, railway and industry employees.

The idea of opening Popular Restaurants at central locations, supplying meals day and night to a wide range of workers, students and other professionals in the fields of the arts, culture, media and broadcasting, etc, becomes not only nutritional policy but also an attempt to open room for democratic debate on serious local and national questions, specially on economic development.

Popular Restaurants inaugurated by then Governor Juscelino Kubitschek targeted occupationally-segmented clients, but as a whole they were able to reach a large share of the city's population. It happened during the social and political democratization process which followed the large Vargas Dictatorship (1930–45). Those restaurants worked until the end of the sixties, when they were closed down, as well as all the other Popular Restaurants throughout the country. As military ruling began, those places turned more and more into potential focuses of political unrest, in the eyes of the military governments. In Rio de Janeiro, the "Restaurante Central dos Estudantes – Calabouço" (the biggest popular restaurant who served the student community) was even assaulted by military forces, causing the death of a student.

The Popular Restaurants' initiative in Belo Horizonte was to be relaunched at the end of the eighties, due to the city government. In 1988, the City built the facilities where the Popular Restaurant has been working up to now, in the central area of Belo Horizonte, close to subway and bus stations. The building has around 600 square meters and may serve about 500 people per mealtime. Initially, it planned to offer meals in 6 shifts (from 10:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.), which would allow a daily turnover of 3,000 people by lunchtime.

In order to put the Restaurant into action, the City chose a management process in which the facilities were leased to private contractors who had full autonomy to

manage its services. The city government's role was limited to controlling prices and hygiene conditions, besides assuring that each meal offered 1400 calories.

The first attempt to operate the Popular Restaurant was frustrated by an accident in one of its kettles, whose explosion damaged the restaurant's facilities. The restaurant's operations at that time limited to the inauguration day in December 1988. It was believed that this accident originated from political sabotage and/or from deliberate action by the nearby restaurants. In 1990, the Popular Restaurant began operating again under the same management standards formerly adopted. During that period, the Popular Restaurant worked until 1992, when it was closed down because the contractor could not make its undertaking economically feasible. Its prices were similar to those charged by nearby private restaurants, and its quality was poor. By the time of its closing down, the Popular Restaurant served a daily 400 users, well below its operating capacity.

In July 1994, the Popular Restaurant was relaunched, serving as one of the instruments of a comprehensive food supply and food security policy implemented by the City at that time. The main difference regarding former attempts lies in the new management model. City administration opted for a public management model, in which the city government (the City Food Supply Department) was in charge of managing all services, including financial controls, the design of the meals' menus and the purchasing of food and other inputs through public procurement procedures. The only outsourced input was the labor force to operate the restaurant (Lavinás and Nabuco [3]).

2. The Worker's Party political decision: implementing the Food Security Program

Food security issues became prominent since World War II, due to food shortages that happened then. Proposed solutions stressed increases in food production (FAO/WFS [4]). Since the eighties, FAO developed a wider concept of food security, emphasizing food affordability, availability and quality (Shejtman [5]; FAO [6]).

In Brazil, that topic came into public debate in 1987, when the 1st National Conference on Food and Nutrition, considering that food of adequate quality and in sufficient amounts along all his or her lifetime was a citizen's unquestionable right, submitted to the National Constitutional Chamber (then working on the country's new Constitution) a proposal for creating a National Food Security System. During the government of President Fernando Collor de Mello, in 1989, the Worker's Party stressed the notion of Food Security on its "Parallel Government" (shadow cabinet) program, declaring adequate nutrition as all citizens' right and government's duty. In 1992, already during President Itamar Franco's government, the Worker's Party issued a policy document, containing the framework for implementing a nationwide Food Security policy and for creating a National Council for Food Security ("Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar – CONSEA). In 1993, the Federal Government adopts a National Plan

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for Fighting Starvation and Extreme Poverty, based on the following principles: partnership between public powers and civil society, decentralization and accountability in using public resources. Through CONSEA, civil society began playing a stronger role in selecting priorities and management procedures. Based on the Plan for Fighting Starvation and Extreme Poverty, several measures were undertaken, of which we might remark: assisting undernourished children and pregnant women under nutritional risk; renewing and decentralizing the school meals program; reviewing and enlarging existing Worker's Catering Program and launching the Emergency Food Distribution Program.

As the Worker's Party won the 1993 local polls, food supply and food security became prominent targets for the city government in Belo Horizonte, as stated in the party's program for those elections. Food is a crucial issue to poor people in Brazil and most of its regional capitals. Nutritional deficiencies affect an estimated 2 million people (Peliano [7]). In Belo Horizonte, one third of its 2 million inhabitants must be considered close to the statistical "poverty line", and one fifth of the whole population lies below this critical limit, or in beggary conditions. This picture is aggravated by the fact that 20 % of the children between zero and three years-old suffer from some degree of malnutrition (PBH/SMAB [8]). To cope with that, the City created its Department of Food Supply (Secretaria Municipal de Abastecimento Alimentar – SMAB), to centralize in a single agency the planning, coordination and implementation of public action regarding food supply.

SMAB's goal was the implementation of food supply policies, driven by the concept of food security, who assumes feeding of adequate amount and quality to the whole population in each and every stage of life. It also assumes: 1- assuring access to food in such a way that these expenditures do not imply the commitment of a substantial share of households' income; 2 - providing availability of food produced in an environmentally sustainable way; 3 - producing information on price behavior and on better usage of food (reducing waste in food processing) (Nabuco et al [9]).

According to the typology proposed by Cunha et al [10], SMAB's action is structured along three main axes – market regulation, counterbalancing policies and urban practices, all of them encompassing several goals or directions. The agricultural and food market regulation axis include supply-side policies in the food markets put into action by the public administration. This axis evolves around three basic directives: systemic directive, searching new channels or circuits for commercialization; competitive directive, promoting competition among different retail traders; finally, the normative directive, through the establishment of rules and regulations for trading, as far as health, hygiene and consumer services are concerned. The second axis, that of counterbalancing policies, involves public intervention on food availability. The basic directives it encompasses are the structural one - oriented towards the regular supply of meals to both the state-run and the state-subsidized school, health care and social care networks; the emergency one - oriented towards supplying foodstuff to supplement nutritionally those individuals who are biologically vulnerable to malnutrition and to those people who are under environmental hazards; the subsidized commercialization one – refers to

public intervention through permanent commercialization of foodstuff and/or meal, partially subsidized by the public budget. The third axis, that of urban practices, involves actions which try to deal with the specific features of urban lifestyle and the problems of urbanization, linked to food issues in a direct or indirect way. Its basic directives are the information one, oriented to the dissemination of information on prices and nutritional characteristics of foodstuff; the agricultural/environmental one, oriented to the dissemination of technical information and the better usage of urban natural resources, preventing their waste; and the multi-purpose one, encompassing activities linking food issues to other public purposes, such as leisure and culture.

Among the policies in group 2 (counterbalancing policies), the subsidized commercialization branch emphasized dealing with non-domestic catering (out-of-household meals) on behalf of low-income workers in and out of the formal labour market, retired people, the unemployed, etc to assist those groups, Belo Horizonte city government decided to put the Popular Restaurant back to operation again in 1993.

Apparently, bringing a Popular Restaurant into life is meant to feed a given portion of the low-income population, such as seen during Mr. Kubitschek's government. However, the project's goals reached far beyond: by putting back to work a Restaurant who had been unsuccessful under the previous two mayors, the City now tried to demonstrate how efficient public operation could be, through a public management model who might overcome formerly existing problems to become a sustainable, democratic and successful accomplishment.

Another goal was to allow the city and its suburbs to keep and increase the life quality standards desired by its communities, without jeopardizing future generations' life standards. This initiative, besides its strong effects in terms of social justice, wouldn't imply large public expenditures, which could also ensure the project's economic sustainability. It might act as a strong incentive to the small farmers located at the rural districts around the city, who would sell their crops to the Restaurant, thus raising farmer's output and income, as well as the quality of life in the suburbs. Besides, the increase in the life quality at the city's "hipercentro" (downtown and its surrounding high-income, highly urbanized districts) was assured by the redevelopment of a formerly idle and degraded urban section.

Generally speaking, recent Brazilian experience in the operation of Popular Restaurants has emphasized a general sustainability picture, in which vast portions of the population faces starvation or does not feed adequately. That means a space where quality, nutritionally balanced meals are supplied to a great number of people who live in, work at or pass by highly populated areas. Besides, it promotes nutritional education by the hands of nutritionists, social workers and other professionals, who counsel clients on a healthier and cheaper diet, including a better usage of raw food and stimulating the sell of food products in public facilities with cheaper prices and whose production has been ecologically adequate.

By selling nutritious meals by prices affordable to low-income people, Belo Horizonte Popular Restaurant's model already stands for a successful experience in the field of Food Security, and it has been providing to workers the

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access to decent catering without compromising a significant share of their income.

The several visitors who attend the facilities in order to emulate its model in other Brazilian cities, such as Rio de Janeiro, Curitiba and São Paulo, testify the successful results of that initiative. Another important feature is the positive acceptance of the initiative by the population of Belo Horizonte. According to a survey conducted by the City in 2001, 89.0% of interviewees state that they knew or they had learnt from the Restaurant. Among those who had already attended the facilities, opinion about them sounds extremely positive. Some 90.1% of the interviewees considered services rendered of excellent or good quality. Similarly, the following items have been evaluated in a highly positive fashion (excellent and good): the variety in the menus served (77.0 %), the services to the client (79.0 %), cleanness and hygiene (87,7 %). Still from that survey, one may learn an almost unanimous approval by the interviewees regarding the City's initiative to build new units of the Popular Restaurant.

The Belo Horizonte Popular Restaurant is presently serving about 4,500 daily meals (lunch and nighttime soup), operating on top of its existing capacity. Those physical constraints on the facility restrict the amount of people that may be assisted each day. Besides, its location favors only those who live in or work at the city's "hipercentro", since it wouldn't be reasonable for potential users to spend money and time on commuting to enjoy those services.

Building new Popular Restaurants means not only the City's political decision to widen the access to affordable, quality catering to more people, but also a claim from the community itself. Aiming at a wider client base for the Popular Restaurant, the City of Belo Horizonte (PBH) is currently building two new Popular Restaurant units.

Given an existing potential demand, a new Popular Restaurant will be located at an industrial neighborhood whose average household income lies significantly below city average. Since it concentrates low-income inhabitants and faces large workers' daily movements to its industrial plants, building a new Popular Restaurant there is fairly reasonable. By its turn, the town's hospital district hosts a large flow of people coming from the city as well as from other neighboring towns in the metropolitan area and from small countryside cities. They come for medical attention at one of the many healthcare facilities located at this district. Most of them are low-income citizens demanding the State's free medical care networks, and can't afford quality catering. Besides those clients, a Popular Restaurant at the district would also serve those who work at the healthcare facilities and other people who study or work there or who simply pass by.

Another remarkable benefit from these Popular Restaurants is a considerable effect on the regulation of prices for the other restaurants nearby.

3. Results

Besides being an instrument for fighting starvation in the city's downtown, a wider goal of the Popular Restaurant (a fully achieved goal) was to demonstrate that a

government program, in spite of all its red tape, can reach financial efficiency and social effectiveness. The Popular Restaurant assists some 4,500 people a day, serving lunch for US\$0.50 and soup (in the night) for US\$0.20. It has a large diversity of clients: retired people, shops' employees, self-employed people, students and other kinds of workers from both the formal and informal labor markets.

Prices have been kept unchanged since the Restaurant's opening, and there has been no service interruption thereafter. The unit cost per meal is US\$0.72 and the City affords a monthly US\$25,650.00 in subsidies. Considering the project's deep social impacts, costs paid by the administration are not high. Since the 1994 opening, direct subsidies have been growing, and that may be explained by the changes in the structure of the restaurant's operational expenditure, together with the option for charging clients the same prices. The purchase of foodstuff inputs fell from 65 % of the overall costs in 1994 to 51% in 2001. That fall may be attributed not only to the efficient procurement system developed by SMAB (who allows significant price reductions on foodstuff purchases) but also to an increase on personnel expenditures, whose share on the Restaurant's expenses raised from 29% to 39% along that time. Staff growth and correspondingly higher personnel-related expenditure were necessary to cope with the increase in the daily number of clients, and may be charged with the relative increase of that kind of expenses among the Popular Restaurant's overall costs. During the same period, the number of restaurant clients stepped from 1,770 to 4,500 people per day, meaning a 148.5 % growth (Table 1).

It should be added that the Popular Restaurant is just one of the intervention tools within the wide Food Supply and Food Security Policy promoted by the City of Belo Horizonte (PBH), recognized nationally and abroad as an innovative, efficient, sustainable and well succeeded public management practice. The work by SMAB has been object to several research undertakings, such as Project "*Poverty and Governance in Latin American Cities: Three Cases Studies in Urban Social Policy*", coordinated by SUR/Chile and financed by Canada's *International Research Center-IDRC* in 1996 (Coelho [11]). It has also been played up at the International Cities' Conference – Habitat II, held in Turkey in 1996, when the United Nations recognized it as one of the 22 *Best Practices* in public management in Latin America and the Caribbean. Apart from that, city officials from all around the country frequently request detailed information and visit projects being implemented, wishing to replicate that policy (or some of its components) in their own communities. What's more, SMAB's policies were highlighted by the Public Management and Citizenship Program, an initiative by Fundação Getúlio Vargas (a major Brazilian academic institution and think-tank) sponsored by the Ford Foundation and the Brazilian National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES). The goal of this Program is to reward innovative experiments taken by regional or city governments or by indigenous organizations from the whole country. Criteria used to select nominees and winning candidates outline the introduction of changes as compared to former practices (on a quantitative or qualitative basis); those who have meant increases in citizens' life quality; those who may be replicated or transferred to other regions or administrations; those

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who collaborate in increasing, or consolidate, the dialogue between civil society and public agents; and, at last, those who employ resources and opportunities in a responsible way, under the perspective of self-sustainable development (Santos [12]). As a result of having won that prize, PBH's Food Supply and Food Security Policy has been one of the ten experiments assessed by the "Alliances and Partnerships in Fighting Poverty" Program developed by the World Bank and Fundação Getúlio Vargas (Teixeira [13]). This last program intends to identify, analyze and disseminate the several features of emerging social and government practices who consistently demonstrate to have concrete and direct impact on the quality of life and on the social inclusion for impoverished people.

Table 1: Clients, structure of expenditure, incomes and subsidies –
Belo Horizonte Popular Restaurant – 1994–2001

	(%)							
	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Foodstuff	65,10	62,22	51,65	46,47	43,49	46,42	48,02	50,71
Personnel	28,57	31,11	41,85	43,31	45,89	42,89	40,96	38,77
Other expenses ⁽¹⁾	6,33	6,67	6,50	10,22	10,62	10,69	11,02	10,52
Total	100,00	100,00	100,00	100,00	100,00	100,00	100,00	100,00
Income/Expenses	83,08	88,93	81,72	71,30	70,59	65,69	65,73	59,16
Unit Subsidy US\$	0,23	0,12	0,21	0,36	0,34	0,28	0,28	0,29
Clients/day	1.770	2.699	2.902	3.056	3.141	3.378	3.947	4.339
Source: SMAB/PBH								
Obs.: (1) Cooking gas, water, electricity general maintenance and cleaning								

4. Closing remarks

In Brazil, public action and social policy on food issues have been systematically misplanned and have shattered resources amongst projects who were often overriding and uncoordinated. On the other hand, we shouldn't underestimate the difficulties involved in getting to people in need. Physical dispersion is significant, and those more in need are not able to be adequately assisted by health or education services, being almost always excluded from the labour market.

The above problems affected the main food-related programs undertaken by public authorities in recent times. Besides, those programs are usually implemented under case-specific and uncontinuous orientation, and assist only to part of their potential beneficiaries. Some instances of recent food-related initiatives by the Brazilian government may be quoted: the PRODEA – Food Distribution Program; the PNLCC – National Program for Milk to Children in Need (catering vouchers) and PAT – Workers' Catering Program.

PRODEA was launched in 1993 having as its goal the emergency supply of food to families affected by droughts, floods, etc. It was based upon the usage of public food stores under the risk of deterioration. Due to miscoordination with other social programs oriented towards reducing poverty and permanently inserting needed families into the labour market, the program used to be weakened at those moments when there were no serious social crises or environmental emergencies. On the contrary, it was stimulated when those circumstances occurred, and/or during electoral season.

The country's most significant initiative in voucher-based catering programs, PNLCC, was launched in 1986 targeting those families earning no more than two minimum wages a month and having children under eight. The main criticisms of the program include high costs incurred, voucher misuse and its narrow reach. Besides, nutritionists criticize the freedom for beneficiaries to choose foodstuff by using vouchers as a purchasing instrument, arguing that food distribution in kind is more effective from the nutritional point of view and highlighting the absence of a nutritional education component in that policy (Campino [14]).

PAT program had among its objectives the improvement of the worker's nutritional conditions, offering them nutritional education and, thus, raising their quality of life. Only the workers in the formal labour market may benefit from it, including those who earn more than 5 minimum wages a month. The main problem in the program refers to its focus, who doesn't include neither workers in the informal labour market nor those families more in need.

Facing those problems that affect the main food assistance programs implemented in this country, the choice of Popular Restaurants as instruments to fight starvation becomes an interesting one, specially in urban-metropolitan areas. This kind of public intervention allows low-income population to gain access to a balanced and nutritious meal, besides having strong regulatory effects by provoking widespread price reductions for meals in the Restaurants' surroundings, while increasing meal quality. Nobody suffers restrictions from access, and effective nutritional education action becomes possible. There are subsidies from public budget, but they do not jeopardize the sustainability of these actions. Restaurant facilities may also be used for other initiatives, like income-generating activities, cultural activities, nutritional education and direct trading of vegetables, fruits and other food products. Using those facilities, in a democratic way, for open debate on food supply and food security topics raises further issues for public and private action, widening citizens' interests in their wider environment, surpassing the narrow limits of their town. Topics on the price and quality of food lead to debate over their sources, their production, the agrarian structure, land concentration, the need to reach democratic access to land, etc. Users join their own associations for management participation, or community organizations for the purchase of food, self-supplying production, attention to workers' and their families' nourishment, etc. That leads to deeper conscience about several problems brought to the city's life, as well as to the search for a better quality of life for its inhabitants.

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