



**FOR AN INNOVATIVE GOVERNANCE
AND MANAGEMENT AGENDA: NEW
PERSPECTIVES FOR THE NATIONAL REGIONAL
DEVELOPMENT POLICY (PNDR) IN BRAZIL**

**POR UMA AGENDA INOVADORA DE GOVERNANÇA E
GESTÃO: NOVOS OLHARES PARA A POLÍTICA NACIONAL
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Joao Mendes da Rocha Neto¹

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¹ PhD in Public Administration (UFRN).
Public Policy Manager at the Ministry of Planning,
Budget and Management and Professor at the
University of Brasilia. Brasília – DF, Brazil.
Email: jmdrn@uol.com.br

SUMMARY

The Brazilian regional policy is supported by the Federal Constitution, but its space in the public policy agenda is not reflected in the institutional conditions of its implementation. This framework has been formalized in the assessments by the Brazilian State control bodies, which has not considered the complex institutional environment in which the National Regional Development Policy (PNDR) is inserted and the strategies in the face of the multicausality of the problem. Thus, this article aims to promote a reflection on the PNDR management complexity, considering the multiple actors involved in its implementation. In this sense, the conceptual debate seeks to trigger an approach that is still little used in the Brazilian literature when it comes to territorial issues - wicked problems. The analysis is complemented by the use of official documents from various government institutions. The study is characterized as descriptive, with bibliographic support and documentary analysis, and it was demonstrated that the activation of the conceptual discussion and the constituent elements of a complex problem can contribute to an innovative and necessary PNDR management agenda.

Keywords: Regional policy; Regional inequalities; Territorial management.

RESUMO

A política regional brasileira encontra amparo na Constituição Federal, mas seu espaço na agenda de políticas públicas não se reflete nas condições institucionais postas na sua implementação. Esse quadro tem sido formalizado nas avaliações dos órgãos de controle do Estado brasileiro, que não tem considerado o complexo ambiente institucional no qual está inserido a Política Nacional de Desenvolvimento Regional (PNDR), a partir das diversas estratégias de enfrentamento em face da multicausalidade do problema. Dessa forma, o presente artigo tem por objetivo promover uma reflexão sobre a complexidade da gestão da PNDR, considerando os múltiplos atores envolvidos na sua implementação. Nesse sentido, o debate conceitual procura acionar uma abordagem ainda pouco utilizada na literatura brasileira quando trata de questões territoriais, os *wicked problems*. A análise se complementa com a utilização de documentos oficiais de diversas instituições governamentais. O estudo caracteriza-se como descritivo, com suporte bibliográfico e análise documental, e demonstrou que o acionamento da discussão conceitual e dos elementos constituintes de um problema complexo podem contribuir para uma agenda de gestão da PNDR inovadora e necessária.

Palavras-chave: Política regional; Desigualdades regionais; Gestão territorial.

INTRODUCTION

Regional issues in Brazil have alternated as an object of attention by governments, acquiring greater visibility and, therefore, institutional conditions for their confrontation, but there are also moments of being sidelined and absolute dismantling of this arrangement, what has as a mission to address existing regional inequalities.

Thus, regional policies have been the subject of analysis by the academia formal assessment by the Brazilian state supervisory and control bodies, which often do not adopt a systemic perspective, reducing the measurement of their effectiveness, and without considering that there is an environment that goes through political processes and decision-making instances that, in turn, unfold in several aspects worthy of attention, when it is a policy that faces a multicausal problem.

Thinking about the current framework of the National Regional Development Policy (PNDR) in Brazil also requires reflecting on aspects still little explored in academic reflections and formal assessments, all associated with the management of policy, most of the time neglected or treated superficially. In this sense, this article, far from exhausting the debate, proposes to punctuate some of these aspects, in order to provoke new discussions and maybe, contribute to the improvement of the of regional policy implementation process.



Given the aim of this article, under the methodological aspect, the research is characterized as documentary literature. Provided the multicausal nature of regional inequalities, it was opted, for the theoretical support that deals with *wicked problems*, understanding this study as an option capable of translating the complex framework in which the PNDR is inserted. The documentary research proved to be fundamental, since it took the assessments by Federal Court of Accounts (TCU) on the PNDR and, in its notes, evidenced a scenario of complexity in its implementation and, in an additional way, other government information was incorporated, as a support to the findings by inspection and control bodies, which reinforces the context of complexity.

The starting point for the discussion focuses on the theoretical debate of the *wicked problems* and, in the case of this article, other nomenclatures such as complex problems or perverse problems are used, understood as an innovative way of apprehending the intensity and multiplicity of causes for some still structural issues that afflict Brazil, both in the social and economic or even environmental aspects. In the case of the regional and/or territorial theme, the perspective of incorporations of the most diverse dimensions or aspects potentiates the need for an approach that avoids simplifications in facing the issues that, in general, demand an integrated strategy by several government agencies.

Thus, the text is structured from a brief theoretical exposition about *wicked problems*, rescuing their origins and some relevant contributions to understand the object of investigation. Then, it seeks to establish a correlation of theoretical debates with the notes made by TCU, in order to characterize the PNDR as a policy that requires new approaches, and it seems that such repositioning demands governance and management to be adopted by all actors who are directly or indirectly involved in its formulation, implementation and assessment.

WICKED PROBLEMS AND THE LINKS TO THE COMPLEX ISSUES: THE FIRST INCURSIONS

Despite advances, Brazilian regional policy still lacks legitimacy when it comes to justifying its presence on the agenda. This results from a strong instability in its decision-making arrangement, with consequences for implementation, and then reflecting in assessments by the control bodies that, in most cases, do not consider this complex context in which the policy operates.



Thus, discussing its improvement, from a design that considers a set of aspects that are behind its results, it seems a path to be treaded, especially when it is observed that regional inequalities arise from multiple causes and, therefore, they will require a transversal action of the government, that is, with an effective governance, which contemplates convergent strategies for technical and financial resource allocation, focused on the areas that still present indicators of this asymmetry.

Thus, the discussion that suggests greater adherence to the analysis of the regional inequalities in Brazil would be the *wicked problems* which, according to the theoretical debate, are presented from central characteristics. The first is the political conflict over the values behind the definition of a problem, the second characteristic would be the absence of an institution, structure or process that allows the location of the problem, ensuring the means for the solution, because, in general, they are issues with multiple causes and they will require convergent action of different governmental organizations, imposing an arrangement that the literature calls “institutional adjustment”. (Geuijen *et al.*, 2017)

Accordingly, the literature points to the work of Rittel and Webber (1973) as the starting point of the discussion about *wicked problems*, in a context of reaction to approaches centered on the rational-technical perspective for complex issues involving public policies. Such criticisms are justified, especially when the plurality of contemporary societies, which involve groups with multiple interests, are analyzed; values of the interested parties; institutional complexity, which covers the context of inter-organizational cooperation; and multilevel governance, in addition to scientific uncertainty in the search for the best solution in the face of fragmentation and gaps in validated knowledge.

Some scholars found this analysis useful to explain the difficulties in the areas of environmental and natural resource policy, in urban and **regional planning** (our emphasis), social and health policy, with new insights into why so many policies and programs fail to achieve their objectives and have unforeseen effects (Morner; Misgeld, 2013), including: ill-defined problems; ongoing problems or subject to popular criticism; superficial focus without addressing underlying causes; solutions; and weak knowledge for an effective implementation. In this sense, much of the main problems of public policy is “perverse” (Rittel; Webber, 1973), that is, there is difficulty in clearly defining the problem,



as well as indicating its solutions with precision.

The set of concepts that surround perverse or poorly structured problems has served to draw attention to the complexity of social, natural and political processes, as well as to alert to their imprecision and intractability in simplified formats. However, this concept also suffered from significant deficiencies, which limit its validity and usefulness. First, descriptions of these problems are often prone to totalization, it means, they regard problems as intractable masses of complexity so disposed to conflict and/or so complicated that they challenge definition and solution (Lazarus, 2009).

Therefore, the discussion of *wicked problems* hinders simplifying views of problems, that is, the approach recognizes that the solutions are not easy, nor clear and conclusive. In addition, Rittel and Webber (1973) affirm that there are no reliable criteria to evaluate the success of coping strategies and many times, there is no way to evaluate learning from the strategies adopted.

Also, for these same authors, Rittel and Webber (1973), some public policy problems were not likely to be placed in clearly defined boxes labeled as 'the problem', 'the desired result' and 'the ideal solution'. Consequently, the adoption of this perspective requires a considerable analytical effort, especially when it comes to problems with multiple causes and, therefore, explained from different epistemic and organizational views. The search for a resolution, more effectively, also demands an understanding of the institutional framework, without passion, when it comes to pointing out competing policies and programs.

It should also be considered that, in the approach for *wicked problems*, more recently, authors point to the need for a gradation, suggesting that these can be discussed within a scale that would involve a series of variables to classify them, reaching, at the limit, to so-called super perverse problems. (Head; Alford, 2015).

In the work by Head and Alford (2015), the authors detail that scale in subcategories extracted from the literature and create a typology based on the following aspects: a) complexity in the technical aspects, it means, the objective conditions of treating the problem; b) clarity and precision to define the problem, what enables effective interventions without generating others; c) the clarity of the problem for decision makers. The authors point out that there is a greater probability of a problem becoming complex, when knowledge about it has limitations or when there is



excess of information and there is no method to select them. Additionally, they identify that this may result in the impossibility of establishing causal links between some constituent elements of the question.

Moreover, in the effort of this classification, Head and Alford (2015) shed light on interested parties and their institutional arrangements, in addition to the power resources available to these actors. In this case, knowledge is also an important asset, because, in most cases, it is fragmented and there is asymmetry, which establishes an environment of unequal conditions in public policy arenas. The authors also call attention to the possibility of some of these interested parties gather means to ban the debate and therefore create obstacles to the treatment of the problem.

For that reason, it seems that the construction of a typology goes through two aspects: first, the knowledge nature and depth of that one has about the problem; and the second, the performance of actors and institutions with their resources and strategies.

Such an effort to build a typology of problems can be challenging. One difficulty is how to ensure that its dimensions and elements are the most relevant ones and allow a greater approximation to the real problem. In the case of Brazil, little has been discussed about public policies from this theoretical beam, the proposition of dimensions, and naturally, it will start from few options and it can demonstrate the existence of gaps that are incorporated and thus the scale of complexity expands, in a *continuum* spectrum, avoiding compartmentalization.

There has also been some impetus to formulate typologies of various kinds, seeking to classify different conceptions of problem nature; varying levels of public engagement and the strength of institutional ties; or the relative weight of various criteria of perversity.

The debate about *wicked problems* makes sense in this article, due to the persistent problem of regional inequalities and their multiple causes in a country that is dynamic in some of its portions, but still finds problems to develop and integrate its large extensions, maintaining considerable contingents of the population in a situation of socioeconomic vulnerability.

To explain a little more about this overview, regional policies bring together a set of political and institutional elements that could be the subject of justification of the alternations in the agenda. Over the last 60 years, they had been in the center of the debate when Celso Furtado, along with other experts on the subject, put forward the issues of the Brazilian Northeast, so they proposed an institutional



arrangement capable of overcoming the problems that afflicted the region, but it also went through processes of centralization during the military governments which had national plans and, despite the various institutions already installed, the theme was treated by the *top-down* model.

After that mentioned period, the system was very weakened and at the end of the twentieth century was formally extinguished, being resumed in 2007, but problems related to governance and management could be noticed, which have been accentuated over the last years, making a policy in permanent questioning, when it comes to control and inspection state bodies.

Summarizing, it is understood that the set of aspects listed above signals an alternation of moments when the regional problem in Brazil perpetuates; the institutional arrangement of regional policy in its implementation weakens and the achievement of its objectives; the perspective of dealing with a multicausal problem with necessary instruments and resources, indicating convergence and transversality of resources and actions; reactions to the assessments of the control bodies, without further deepening in the search to reposition the policy, of its arrangement and, consequently, the actors who have some mandate that can interfere in it. Based on the elements discussed so far, it is understood that the next section of the article should focus on aspects that characterize *wicked problems* and their application to understand the PNDR.

WICKED PROBLEMS APPROACH WHEN APPLIED TO REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The use of the *wicked problems* framework would be the provoking element to understand public policies that aim to address complex issues from their causes and, therefore, that will require equally complex approaches in their confrontation. Most of the times, this is associated with a coordinated action that involves several government agencies, focusing on the problem and guiding convergence strategies.

In that manner, for elements of construction of a matrix, here called “explanatory”, which was already offered by Alford and Head (2017) and what can serve as a starting point to understand how the categorization of a problem, knowledge and action of actors are reflected in the compartmentalization of steps and their impact on the implementation of a policy that addresses structural and cyclical issues, such as PNDR, as shown in Table 1.



Table 1 | *Wicked Problems* explanatory matrix to government policy and program.

Characteristics	Definition
Structural complexity	Difficulty in dealing with the technical aspects of the problem.
Knowledge capacity	Not only is there little knowledge about the problem, but the nature of the problem or its solution is such that it is unknowable, that is, the relevant information is hidden, disguised or intangible; it comprises multiple complex variables; and/or its functioning requires taking measures to discover causal links and probable results.
Knowledge fragmentation	The available knowledge is fragmented among the several interested parties, each of them keeping a part, but not all of what is needed to solve the problem.
Knowledge structure	Knowledge receives too much or too little attention due to the way it is framed, thus distorting our understanding.
Interest differentiation	The several interested parties have reasons (or values) that are substantially in conflict with those of others.
Power distribution	There is a dysfunctional distribution of power among the interested parties, in which very powerful actors can overcome the less powerful ones, even if they constitute a majority consensus; or by which interests and power are divided.

Source: adapted de Alford e Head (2017).

These elements that would characterize a *wicked problem* indicate aspects that can be discussed in the most diverse public policies, acquiring greater or lesser importance, depending on what is necessary to face and the institutional context in which they are inserted. Therefore, in theory, they should be incorporated in methodological proposals for policy formulation and government programs.

As a result, it seems to make sense to use the Ex-Ante Guide for Evaluation of Public Policies, established by the Presidency of the Republic and published by IPEA, as a guideline, but to use it combined with the contributions of the theoretical beam on *wicked problems*. It is necessary to clarify that, according to the literature, there is no need for all characteristics to be present, as pointed out in Table 1, but the more of them can be identified, the more complex the problem is and, therefore, its solutions are as well.



The literature still asks for caution in the construction of typologies, especially regarding the quality of dimensions, their descriptions and analysis. Care is due to the fact that choices are made on understandable dimensions and other more complex elements and therefore subjective components - the subtleties escape, causing a selection bias. The approach requires the use of common categories, but also the incorporation of specificities, for a better understanding of complex problems.

Scholars of this topic state that the generic or totalizing discourse of complex problems does not encourage or facilitate the identification of degrees of perversity. This is especially true when adopting a binary perspective. The constitutive elements of these problems are fundamental for a decomposed analysis of them and, thus, for more appropriate and manageable solutions, avoiding generic interventions or those excessively “adapted” that, in face of some new events lose their effectiveness completely.

Given the characterizing elements, it appears that these problems require careful analysis, dialogue and action of the interested parts. The approach by Roberts (2000), focused on a head-to-head strategy that seeks to foster competition between social actors to reach understandings of the problem and possible advances to deal with it, can be positive. The competitive dynamics of this approach has the potential to intensify the search for new ideas on how to deal with problems, as well as risk generating intensified conflicts that consume resources and delay solutions, increasing litigation.

This strategy allows the incorporation of multiple inputs and perceptions, but requires wide dissemination and access to information; public meetings; and more or less formal hearings, in a work of institutional memory that requires systematizations, records and reports, collaborative work between organizations involved.

On the other hand, it is important to take into account the ‘advantage’ factor that affects the degree of conflict among interested parts. To the extent that both decision makers and parts involved take different positions on the causes and solutions for the problems, they are unlikely to discover ways to address them and, most importantly, work together to implement the changes. In this context, it is necessary to understand that if the decision maker or the parts involved has power, one position will be more significant than the others.



This power is, in turn, a function of both an ‘internal’ condition and an ‘external’ one. The internal condition is the set of power resources that the actors have, whether financial, legal or prestige within the arenas (Lukes, 2005); the external one is the context or space of power in which external actors operate.

Moreover, despite being one of the elements of power, the literature points out that the availability of resources and the intention to apply them make the difference, which reinforces the centrality of the public budget. Thus, complex problems, on a large scale, require robust financing, as well as demand innovations and managerial skills in the search for solutions.

In some of the aforementioned agendas, although the mandate appears to be legally explicit, in most cases, there is no coordination to propose convergent strategies. One can call this an ‘institutional vacuum’ (Hajer; Wagenaar, 2003), in other words, there are no pre-established rules that determine who is responsible, who has authority over whom, what kind of responsibility should be expected. This context is quite evident in government programs and it is reflected in the allocation of resources that are often fragmented, according to different budgetary actions linked to different ministerial portfolios, which operate logically from the sectors.

Scholars of the theme call attention to the danger of an apparent convergence, called by them as ‘institutional inertia’ that creates a kind of intermittent stability in the system, which does not ensure that there is an optimal point of convergent action, which, according to theorists, environments marked by the ‘strategy of uncertainty’ and ‘institutional insecurity’, as pointed out by Koppenjan and Klijn (2004).

Sometimes this context can result in severe criticism to the failure by the government failure to deal with problems, leading public opinion to believe that the administrative authority ‘is not doing enough’ or ‘lacks leadership’, or even ‘is mistaken about its priorities’, among other negative judgments (Jones, 2015). Therefore, facing or not facing, or even facing, has the potential to affect government political capital.

Even in circumstances of cooperation, there is a problem of transaction costs, considering time and effort required to join the compartmentalized knowledge and systematize the problem, understanding its complexity. This framework of cooperation can be affected by the conflicting interests of leaders and other *stakeholders*, including within the government itself (Farrell; Hooker, 2013). The more divergent their interests, the more difficult it will be for policy managers to have full knowledge of the problem, since *stakeholders* can strategically produce key knowledge in the pursuit of controlling the agenda.



On the other hand, the search for the solution for complex problems has focused on governance, communication and coordination. Suggestions include developing collaboration strategies (Roberts, 2000); better consultation and use of third-party knowledge (Head, 2008); better transmission and integration of knowledge within networks (Webber; Khademian, 2008); interactive and adaptive ways identification to re-evaluate and renegotiate continuously, instead of trying to 'solve' (Head, 2014); and governance strategies based on new ways of observing and performing (Termeer *et al.*, 2015).

The discussion helps to understand that deciding by reading the reality, from the theoretical beam of *wicked problems*, is not always an easy choice, or even possible. Head and Alford (2015) pointed out that, in the context of public administration, such an approach constitutes a challenge to the almost rationalist ways of working in the face of high levels of uncertainty, diversity of positions and divergences around themes. Conversely, it is necessary to take the first steps in adopting this approach, considering the pedagogical effect of showing that during the formulation of policies and distribution of resources for their financing, there is less rationality than a large part of society thinks.

In this sense, the proposal to discuss the PNDR in the light of the theoretical debate of *wicked problems* signals an innovative and necessary approach to the complex picture that is observed in the policy assessment made by Brazilian control bodies that show management aspects that are not still duly appropriate and faced with the required depth.

CLARIFYING THE METHODOLOGICAL PATH: THE CENTRALITY OF THE PNDR OFFICIAL ASSESSMENT PROCESS

To analyze the PNDR from the perspective of wicked problems, the starting point will be the notes made by the Federal Court of Accounts (TCU) that qualify it as a policy at risk, among others in Brazil, (https://sites.tcu.gov.br/listadealtorisco/desenvolvimento_regional.html). It is necessary to clarify that this situation was due to the strong political and economic instability in the country from 2019, which was aggravated during the management by President Jair Bolsonaro through the absence of strategy and agenda for central issues. On this secondary position of the PNDR, Gumieiro (2023) corroborates with such interpretation when commenting that since the government by Michel Temer, the policy has fallen into a vacuum, accentuated in the management of his successor.



As follows, the recommendations made by the TCU in a sequence of audits were recorded in Judgments 1.655/2017, 4.056/2020, 141/2021, 1.448/2021 and 2.872/2021, resulting in the inclusion of the PNDR in a list of policies that present structural problems. In addition, Table 1 will be the axis for the discussions that derive from the findings of the court of accounts from the elements that contribute to characterize the object of the PNDR as a *wicked problem*.

In the TCU documents, the strongest conclusion is expressed at the outset when the Court of Accounts notes that: '[...] the National Regional Development Policy (PNDR) does not provide a reduction in inequalities between the poorest and richest regions in the country, despite the large volume of resources allocated to regional development', and it goes on to point out the reasons for this lack of effectiveness in three arguments: a) the territorial distribution of resources does not follow the areas considered priority by the PNDR, which puts at risk the allocation of credit offered by the constitutional funding funds to the most needy; b) 80% of the amount allocated directly and indirectly to states and municipalities are directed to towns with a high level of socioeconomic development; and c) only five out of thirteen sources of funding analyzed contributed to the development of municipalities.

In analyzing this framework, the TCU notes that the problem is distributed at all stages of the PNDR, from its formulation, implementation, monitoring and assessment, and lists the failures detected in the audits: a) the Regional Development Plans for the Northeast (PRDNE), the Midwest (PRDCO) and the Amazon (PRDA) were not approved by the National Congress (CN); b) as determined by the PNDR, the goal pacts were not formalized with states and municipalities; c) there is not enough integration between the tax incentive policy of the Manaus Free Zone and other regional development policies; d) the bodies responsible for the coordination between federal and interministerial are inoperative, which compromises the implementation of essentially decentralized policy, whose success is directly related to knowledge and meeting of the local needs; and) there is no systematic and satisfactory assessment of the PNDR results, programs, actions and fiscal incentives for regional development; and f) the indicators and goals of the PPA (Multiannual Plan) are not properly regionalized, contrary to the Federal Constitution.

In proposing ways to solve the problems identified, the TCU advocates the integration of mechanisms and instruments that are necessary for the regional development and it also exemplifies the need to: a) adjust strategies for the development and redistribution of federal resources with a focus on



the intensity and time to achieve the desired results; b) develop an integrated planning of the multiple sources of funding, which considers federal government spending in a regional way; and c) follow, monitor and assess, systematically and consistently, the application of resources and their impacts.

In this sense, what is entrusted in the TCU documents raises a new approach for the PNDR, although not signaled in the audit conclusions, since the elements that characterize a *wicked problem*, according to Alford and Head (2017), clearly complement in this theoretical-empirical study. That being so, this paper presented here is characterized as descriptive, with support by the document analysis, which enabled the set of analytical elements that will be discussed in the sequence, seeking to signal the need to discuss the assessment by PNDR, since it suggests weaknesses of governance and management which are not faced with necessary depth.

A PNDR limitation interpretation at the light of the *wicked problems*

When it comes to regional development, the contribution of Gueijen *et al.* (2017) and the seminal authors Rittel and Webber (1973) make room for reflection, considering that the authors define a *wicked problem* in the face of multiple causes, the understanding by the epistemic community that deals with regional inequalities in Brazil, which is evident in the work by Corrêa, Silveira and Kisrt (2019) when they discussed the breadth of the concept, considering the appropriation by different fields of knowledge, which makes their apprehension equally complex when it comes to formulae a confrontation strategy.

Therefore, in the formulation of a policy, this polysemy can be, at the same time, a gain, but also a problem, because in the different points of view, the desires of the most diverse actors are deposited, who orbit around the policy. In the specific case of the PNDR, such diversity was evidenced during the conference process that took place in 2012 and 2013 and it originated the PNDR - phase II. The documents that consolidate proposals are available in a repository of Ipea (Institute of Applied Economic Research) and point out aspects that seek different origins for the Brazilian regional problem, ranging from education to infrastructure, science and technology, among other factors, resulting in understanding the issue, clearly characterizing itself as a *wicked problem*.

In this sense, the first aspect to be discussed, from the characterization of Table 1, would be the structural complexity, considering that regional inequality in Brazil results from its model of development, historical and structural foundations, as pointed out by Theis, Butzke and Santos (2022), who revisited



some classic authors of the theme, such as Celso Furtado and Caio Prado, as well as Gilberto Freire, Manoel Bonfim and Darcy Ribeiro, who interpret the formation of the Brazilian society and territory from a bundle of contradictions that would reveal the processes of social and territorial inequality.

This refers to the reading of the national territory of the PNDR guided by a spatial typology that takes into account GDP and income. However, as evidenced by the debate of historical and structural issues, it is necessary to understand that behind the asymmetries revealed by the classification made by politics, there are issues related to access to basic services, science and technology, among others that reinforce the framework of regional inequality at the most diverse scales.

However, the discussion made by Bourdin and Ragazzi (2018) warns of the need to escape from explanatory models of regional problems, based on limited variables, otherwise the solutions are not adequate. This reflection serves, particularly in Brazil, where there is a wide spectrum of reasons associated with inequalities, but it also requires analysis on aspects that give specificities to the regional problem of the country, scenario that has many exogenous and dynamic factors that are not limited by the action areas of the PNDR.

Therefore, regional inequalities in the country are a problem with multiple causes, so they require multiple initiatives in their confrontation, with the formation of an agenda and, consequently, governance arrangements with horizontal and convergent action, besides an institutional engineering that can be articulated with other federated entities, which are very heterogeneous in their capabilities, what reflects in the achievement of the PNDR aims, making it a policy always exposed to assessments that do not consider the complexity of its mandate.

In addition, although regional inequalities are a recognized problem that must be addressed, as entrusted in the Federal Constitution, the understanding of each unit of government involved differs in strategies to overcome the issue and there is no tradition in the Brazilian State to deepen this multicausal approach, perpetuating a compartmentalized action, with the appearance of convergent, governance arrangements that, in most cases, are not effective in co-financing or convergence of actions for the priority regions of the PNDR, which had already been revealed by Rocha Neto (2016).

This establishes a connection to the second aspect that Table 1 shows: the low ability to understand the problem and, in this specific case, it is not a matter of having little information, but not



being able to establish the links within what is available and incorporate other elements that, despite appearing some subjectivity or non-adherence to the question, are secondary and never remembered when challenges arise.

In addition to the issue of knowledge fragmentation, it also corroborates to what will be called mono-solution or pseudo-integrated strategy, which accentuates the problem of coping strategies and institutional energy dispersion compartmentalization. In addition, there is the risk of distinct government agencies entering into direct competition, when there are political projects associated with the high management of these units, a fact already studied by Rocha Neto (2016).

The grasp on this subject is hegemonized by some fields of knowledge that tend to make readings of the problem from its theoretical beams, as well discussed by Theis, Butzke and Santos (2022), who pointed out the primacy of the economy and geography in the debate on regional development, but warn that: “[...] it does not result only from the contribution of these two fields of knowledge. It is an object of multidisciplinary study, because it refers to an unequal development process (economic, social, political and space) – and it does not fit in one or two disciplines of human knowledge” (Theis, Butzke and Santos, 2022, p. 5).

Therefore, the mastery of certain fields of knowledge and research institutions ends up guiding the theme and, consequently, the governmental agenda, including making the theme more permeable in some institutions than in others that do not see themselves as part of the issue, nor of the solution.

Certainly, the visibility and sensitivity of the Brazilian society have alternated over the theme of regional inequalities. These had greater attention and space on the agenda in the 1960s, suffered from the centralization promoted by military governments in the 1970s and, in the 1980s, were obscured by the economic crisis. Even in the 1990s, when the country underwent a stabilization of its economy, the policy was secondary, with some episodes at the end of the last century that resulted in the extinction of its main operating organs in the macro-regions. (Monteiro Neto *et al.*, 2017)

The resumption of the agenda in the 21st century also went through a series of alternations, with a greater vigor in the first decade, when the first PNDR was formalized and the planning system for regional development was reconstituted. This trajectory of the last century and the most recent



times of the regional agenda acquires better contours in the work developed by Monteiro Neto *et al.* (2017), which contextualizes the recent path.

In addition to those facts, the country has been marked by economic and institutional instability that dismantled a series of agendas since 2016, among them, regional development that, even with the edition of the second version of the PNDR, failed to implement the instruments entrusted in the policy, which results in the manifestations of the TCU judgments already listed.

However, it is in the implementation phase that the last two characteristics manifest themselves more clearly, the differentiation of interests constitutes a complex mosaic in which corporations, political projects and institutional mandates are mixed up and create an environment of difficulties for the achievement of the strategies entrusted in the PNDR and thus the problems of low effectiveness are revealed.

In a complementary way, the distribution of power also occurs asymmetrically among actors that are associated with the PNDR, either in the operation of its instruments, or in the mandate to assess the policy, from its parameters, often without an approach that considers the context, which leaves the policy in a constant position of fragility.

Although Gueijen *et al.* (2017) pointed out that the absence of an institution makes it difficult to locate the problem, in the case of regional development, this characteristic can be approached from another perspective. There is location and institutionality, however, the units of government that deal with the subject do not have a legal mandate or enough political force to face a problem that has multiple causes and therefore requires convergent strategies of several government agencies, that is, there is a need for what the authors called 'institutional adjustment', which has been sought over the years by the construction of different governance arrangements, with very limited advances.

The elements distribution of power and divergent interests will be treated jointly, because in the operation of the PNDR, they are inseparable components, counting on several institutions and tasks related to the policy, as detailed in Table 2.



Table 2 | PNDR implementation arrangement and assessment.

Institution	Attribution
MDR	PNDR formulation and implementation through program means.
Sudene, Sudam and Sudeco (bound to MDR)	PNDR implementation through programs and proposers of the Regional Development Plans, PNDR instruments. They act in the granting assessment of credit instruments from tax incentives.
Regional banks (Bound to Ministry of Economy)	PNDR funders through the Constitutional Funds.
Civil House	The PNDR Governance Centre presides over the Chamber of National Integration and Regional Development, in view of its role of government coordination.
Ministry of Economy ¹	acts as the coordinator of the Multiannual Plan, the main planning instrument of the federal government that, by legal force, must be regionalized.
National Congress, CN	decides on the amount and allocation of budgetary resources linked to the PNDR.
Supervision and control bodies	supervises the application of resources linked to the PNDR and analyzes the effectiveness of strategies to achieve the objectives.

Source: Federal Constitution; Law 8.443/92; Decree 9.810/2019.

The debate on *wicked problems* serves as an element of reflection on the problems encountered by the TCU in relation to the PNDR, when it comes to the sources of funding, whether funds or budget resources. The assessment made by the Ministry of Economy on the Funds corroborates the findings by the Court of Accounts, as well as having great power to weaken the policy, considering the veto power that binds in the center of government, concluding in its assessment: “[...] the low effectiveness of these [Constitutional Development Funds] in achieving their objective of contributing to the economic and social development of the supported regions” (Ministry of Finance, 2018, p. 136).

The PNDR financing issue has been marked by the incidence of actors in the legislative, as well as the executive, when it comes to safeguarding interests, either by the protection and guarantee of certain economic sectors, such as to new ones that access these actors with decision-making power. The article

1 From 2019 to 2022, the Ministry of Economy received assignments from four portfolios that were extinguished: Finance; Labor and Employment; Development, Industry and Trade; and Planning and Budget.

by Lopes, Macedo and Monteiro Neto (2021) summarizes these movements towards “restructuring” of the PNDR financing instruments.

Hence, there are actors with veto power positioning themselves contrary to the main financing instruments of the PNDR, which sometimes corroborates to a view of low effectiveness of policy before society and within the government, in its various spheres, which refers to the debate made by Head and Alford (2015) when dealing with the different resources that the actors involved in a *wicked problem* have.

In other words, one of the major problems faced by the PNDR lies in its financing, considering that the robust resources of the funds are directed at the private sector, which has always left the public investment strand fragile, especially infrastructure, always necessary for the underdevelopment regions in the country. In the discussions of the PNDR and its second version, the National Fund for Regional Development was present, however, found strong resistance from government sectors responsible for economic policy. The solution to this impasse occurred with the institutionalization of a Regional Sustainable Infrastructure Development Fund, through Decree n. 10,918, of December 29, 2021.

This is an innovation, considering that that Fund should be managed by a contracted company, a situation that has already occurred, and is intended for Public-Private Partnership projects in infrastructure. It is noteworthy that at no time does the Decree remit to the PNDR, whether in orientation to the priority territories, whether in adherence to the instruments of macro-regional planning, or even in the main bets presented by the policy. Thus, what could be a robust investment instrument would serve, in theory, to overcome one of the main PNDR bottlenecks does not relate to the policy.

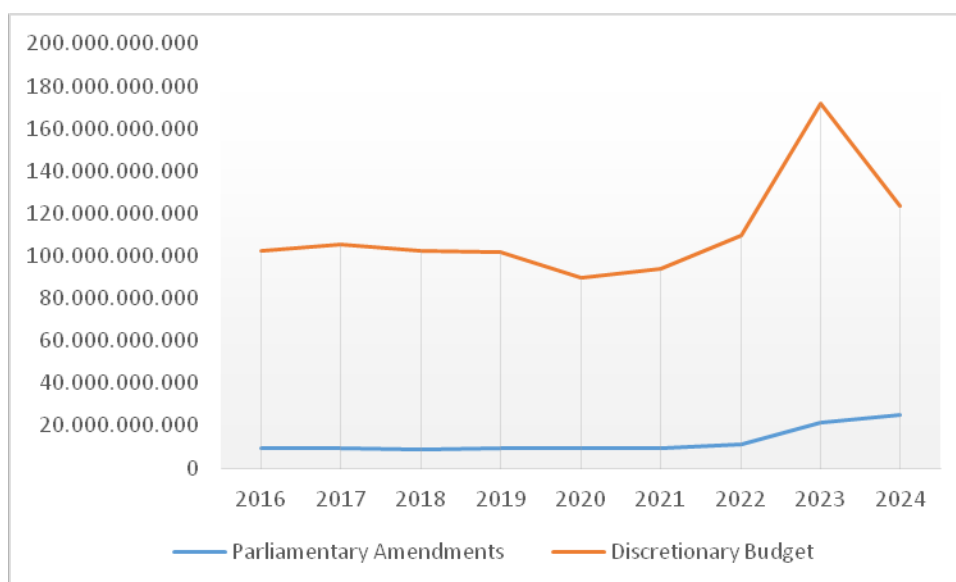
Since the government of President Dilma Rousseff (2010-2016), the operation of the Funds has been separated from the formulation of the PNDR, from the organizational point of view, as an exclusive secretariat was created dedicated to the planning and application of funds, which was not effective in order to avoid the distribution of resources to areas that should not receive them from the policy, as observed in the TCU judgments that assessed the PNDR.

During the subsequent management (2019 to 2022), the mandate to take care of these financing instruments proved to be unstable, sometimes being in charge of a department linked to the Executive Secretariat of the Ministry of Regional Development, and then constituting itself as a Final Secretariat, with mandate to address the issue.



Also, about the PNDR financing, it was observed a fall in the discretionary values allocated to the main budgetary actions in recent years, as shown in Chart 1, and, on the other hand, the expansion of resources of parliamentary amendments, notably the RP-9, known as ‘Secret Budget’, which were invested without observing the strategic guidelines laid down in the PNDR, neither from the sectoral point of view, nor induce development for the priority areas.

Graph 1 | Budget Evolution in the area of Regional Development – 2016/24



Source: Portal of the Federal Budget Secretariat /MPO, 2024.

Not only but also, tax incentives have been subject to constant negative assessments by successive governments. The discussion of concessions given to various productive sectors is always at the heart of the debate on the crisis of public finances and therefore, today, it finds a coalition that advocates against it, regardless of the party that is ahead in the government in the country.

One of the points listed by the TCU was not processing the plans at the NC, which is due to an option of the MDR (Ministry for Regional Development) management, from 2020, for not sponsoring the long-term planning for the regions. It should be noted that, there is an exceptional scenario, considering that, since mid-2020, the National Congress has been in great demand for the approval of measures to face the health crisis of the Corona Virus, which repositioned government and legislative priorities.

The lack of appreciation and formalization of the plans by the legislative weakened the dialogue with the federal entities that, at the time of its formulation, were mobilized to offer contributions, and one of the relevant instruments for the PNDR, the Goal Pacts, which must be concluded in the format of agreements, with subnational governments, have not advanced and were the subject of notes by the TCU.

In the most contemporary phase of the PNDR, this adjustment is expressed in the Goal Pacts that propose an institutional engineering with horizontal alignments between different ministerial portfolios, as well as there is a guideline for collaborative and complementary action with subnational entities. Rittel and Webber (1973), in their contributions to the debate on wicked problems, deal with the perspective of the multiple levels of government involved in policies, as one of the foundations for the definition of these complex problems.

Another element that refers to the debate, Gueijen *et al.* (2017), is the institutionalization of an arrangement that, in theory, should strengthen the PNDR, the Chamber of Integration and Regional Development with ministries of the government center, created by Decree n. 9,810, which held a single meeting in 2020 for its installation, without practical results in relation to strategic definitions, which reinforces the fragility of the PNDR governance when it comes to intra-governmental coordination and the formation of cross-cutting agendas.

The regionalization of expenditures has always been a challenge and it has often been pointed out by the TCU as a PPA failure, with evident repercussions on the regional issue. The judgments of the TCU that has assessed the PNDR in recent years have shown that PPA regionalization and, consequently, expenses, is a constant point in the assessments, as shown in the excerpt: “The most serious consequence is that there was no joint processing of these planning instruments of the PNDR with the Multiannual Plan (PPA), as required in art. 165, § 4º, of the Federal Constitution and Complementary Laws 124/2007, 125/2007 and 129/2009” (TCU).

In the 2020-2023 PPA, under the argumentation of constituent element reduction of the Government Programs, which imposed a fusion of two rather complex themes, the urban and the regional, which made it very difficult to establish assessment methodologies on the results achieved by both policies: Regional Development and Urban Development, at a loss to both, when it comes to measuring progress and problems.



Regarding the last aspect pointed out by the TCU, which deals with PNDR monitoring and assessment, in addition to the difficulties already pointed out, there are technical elements that interfere with the results and efficiency of the policy. In the current situation, it is worth mentioning the delay of the population survey, which has direct impacts on the spatial performance of the PNDR II, which continues to operate with a reference from the PNDR I and with data from the 2010 Census. It is possible that the changes are not so substantive when the IBGE publishes the census data and the MDR update the typology, given the economic crisis that has been established in the last eight years, but the absence of this updated information leaves the policy always exposed to errors when it comes to the application of resources in the territories.

This complexity that involves the PNDR makes it possible to resort to the debate made by Rittel and Webber (1973), when they highlighted the difficulty of simplifying views when dealing with *wicked problems* and the solutions, equally, are not so obvious, leading to assessment that disregard, often this complex framework of actors involved and its effects on politics. This debate is complemented by the discussion of relative efficiency, proposed by Herbert Simon and brought, more clearly to the Brazilian literature, by Oliveira and De Paula (2014) when they conclude this understanding:

With regard to the public sector, limitations such as the difficulty of identifying the values to be pursued, the impossibility of considering the perception of all involved for the choice of ends, the fallacy of neutrality of decisions about public policies, the incomparability of policies that deal with distinct priorities and the limits of their own rationality were discussed as factors that call into question the use of such criterion of efficiency as a guide for decision-making in public management as advocated in management public administration. (2014, p. 125)

This discussion can not only serve the PNDR, but also other public policies that are assessed, without considering their contexts. This clarifies the need for different methodologies in these manifestations of inspection and control bodies that consider specificities associated with the depth of the problem to be faced and the complexity found in its implementation. In this sense, the work of Stoffel, Rambo and Freitas (2019) draws attention not only to the discussion of scales, but also to the rooting of structural aspects that will configure a mosaic of inequality that in turn, will have a distinct time to reverse this situation of socioeconomic precariousness.



FINAL REMARKS

The elements discussed in the text point to a set of challenges to be faced in the PNDR improving process, which calls for a strategic redefinition: changing the perspective of the policy assessment process, the complexity of its mandate and the institutional context necessary to achieve its objectives.

The *wicked problem* approach indicates the need to trigger a set of other theoretical beams in the field of public administration that can contribute to assessment improvement and, most importantly, to reposition governance and management strategies, making the PNDR a less fragile policy from the point of view of its effective contribution to overcoming the problem of regional inequalities.

Thus, the characterizing elements of a *wicked problem* pointed out by Alford and Head (2017) highlights: a structural complexity of the problem that is multicausal, associating even with structural issues of the development model adopted by the country and therefore, forged for centuries, which implies the need for a policy or group of them that is not exposed to alternations of political projects; the capacity of knowledge about regional inequalities is wide, but little deepened by institutions important for their confrontation, which makes this collection innocuous, since the causal bonds are not established, nor can institutions realize their part in the cause of the problem; this falls on the third element, the fragmentation of knowledge, which reaches government institutions always in the sectoral bias of their mandates, which compartmentalizes understanding and hinders the awareness of senior management and bureaucracies about their role in tackling the problem; the structure of the knowledge of the problem as it has been taken to Brazilian society is little knowable and therefore needs to be translated into the form of factual elements, generation of employment and income that are at the core of the PNDR and so necessary points to Brazilians.

The last two characteristics are at the heart of the problems of governance and management of the PNDR, considering the complex arrangement that exists for its implementation, is constituted by institutions that have agendas not always adherent to the principles and objectives of the policy, although they gather legal mandates and, therefore, power spaces that are not always aligned with the PNDR implementation.



The option for a first study based on Alford and Head (2017) demonstrated that the characterizing elements of a *wicked problem* are present in the PNDR and then, the starting point of this repositioning would be behind a debate on the governance of the PNDR and the construction of a convergent identity, of multiple government agencies, around the issue, in which each of them could see their part in the problem of inequalities and contribute convergently from their mandate.

Under the aspect of management, the PNDR needs to be looked internally, because part of the problems revealed by its deliveries and assessed by the control bodies are constituted as outputs, lacking approach on the technical and institutional conditions that operate those who make the policy, effectively attacking the causes that reveal themselves before the all kinds of weaknesses not achieved by the assessments.

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