

Public policies, complementarity, and social transformation: Social mobility, equity, and a project for the future

Políticas públicas, complementaridade e transformação social: mobilidade social, equidade e projeto de futuro

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ABSTRACT This essay analyzes the role of complementarity among public policies as a driver of social transformation in contexts marked by deep structural inequalities, such as Brazil. Drawing on a critical and interdisciplinary approach, it argues that isolated or fragmented public policies have limited effects on social mobility and on overcoming inequities. The concept of complementarity is examined across its technical, institutional, and normative dimensions and is understood as a synergistic articulation among different policies and sectors aimed at promoting social justice. As empirical evidence, the essay refers to a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), which estimates that up to nine generations are required for children from the poorest families in Brazil to reach the national average income level. Theoretical contributions from authors such as Fraser, Sen, Rawls, and Dworkin are discussed, alongside concrete examples of complementary public policies in Brazil and internationally. The essay concludes that the institutionalization of complementarity is a fundamental condition for public policies to acquire transformative capacity and for the State to fully exercise its role as a promoter of equity and citizenship.

KEYWORDS Public policies. Inequality. Governance. Social mobility. Social transformation.

RESUMO Este ensaio analisa o papel da complementaridade entre políticas públicas como vetor de transformação social em contextos marcados por profundas desigualdades estruturais, como o brasileiro. A partir de uma abordagem crítica e interdisciplinar, argumenta-se que políticas públicas isoladas ou fragmentadas têm efeitos limitados sobre a mobilidade social e a superação das iniquidades. O conceito de complementaridade é explorado em suas dimensões técnica, institucional e normativa, sendo compreendido como articulação sinérgica entre diferentes políticas e setores, com vistas à promoção da justiça social. Utiliza-se como evidência empírica o relatório da Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), que estima serem necessárias até nove gerações para que os filhos das famílias mais pobres no Brasil alcancem a renda média nacional. São discutidas as contribuições teóricas de autores como Fraser, Sen, Rawls e Dworkin, além de exemplos concretos de políticas públicas complementares no Brasil e no exterior. Conclui-se que a institucionalização da complementaridade é uma condição fundamental para que as políticas públicas adquiram densidade transformadora e para que o Estado exerça plenamente sua função de promotor de equidade e cidadania.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Políticas públicas. Desigualdade. Governança. Mobilidade social. Transformação social.

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Introduction

The formulation and implementation of public policies represent, in contemporary democratic societies, the main institutional mechanism of State intervention in the material and symbolic conditions of social life. The modern state, far from exercising a merely regulatory function, is urged to promote distributive justice, equity, and inclusion, especially in contexts marked by historical and structural inequalities. Public policy, in this scenario, cannot be understood as a neutral technical artifact but rather as a social and political construction shaped by disputes over power, interests, ideologies, and values. As Pierson¹ points out, public policies are also processes that organize historical trajectories and create 'dependent paths', with lasting impacts on the possibilities of social transformation.

In Brazil, a country notoriously known for its inequalities of class, race, gender, and territory, public policy serves a dual function: on the one hand, it seeks to guarantee constitutionally guaranteed rights; on the other hand, it faces the historical challenge of changing persistent patterns of social exclusion. Such an undertaking, however, requires more than specific initiatives or isolated programs: it requires a public architecture sustained by principles of integration, continuity, and complementarity. It is at this point that the central hypothesis of this essay is inserted: the complementarity between public policies constitutes not only an efficient management strategy, but, above all, a necessary condition for such policies to acquire transformative density.

The concept of complementarity, understood here as the synergistic and interdependent articulation among different policies, sectors, and scales of action, enables the overcoming of the institutional fragmentation and technical isolation that often characterize public administration. The construction of effectively transformative public policies, therefore, implies thinking beyond sectoral models and incorporating the logic of intersectoriality,

federative cooperation, and a life-cycle vision. This means, for example, articulating health policies with education, social assistance with housing, and urban mobility with the environment, to produce cumulative and cascading effects on the social trajectories of individuals and groups.

The present analysis adopts a critical perspective on the role of public policies in promoting social mobility, understood as a key vector for reducing structural inequalities. When examining international data, such as that provided by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report², it is found that countries with a higher degree of complementarity in their public policies tend to have lower levels of intergenerational immobility and greater social cohesion. In the Brazilian case, the contrast is striking: the projection that it would take up to nine generations for individuals from the lowest strata of society to reach the national average income denounces not only the rigidity of the social structure, but also the limitations of disconnected or fragmented policies in their action².

Throughout this essay, an argument will be developed in favor of complementarity as a guiding paradigm of public policies aimed at social transformation. To this end, the text is organized into seven main sections. The first is dedicated to the conceptualization of public policy and to the reflection on its transformative purpose. The second analyzes the concept and mechanisms of social mobility, emphasizing its relationship with the reproduction of inequalities. The third section discusses the OECD report on intergenerational mobility in detail, providing comparative data across countries. The fourth investigates the distinction between inequality and inequity, drawing on contemporary political philosophers. In the fifth section, the concept of complementarity and its theoretical and operational foundations are developed. The sixth examines empirical cases and complementary public policy models with transformative potential. Finally, the

conclusion summarizes the arguments and proposes a normative view of complementarity as a structural strategy of social justice.

More than a theoretical exposition, this essay intends to intervene critically in the debate on the role of public policies in the formation of fairer societies, proposing that its strength lies not only in the redistributive intention but, above all, in the ability to articulate with each other in a coherent, synergistic, and strategic way. Complementarity, in this sense, is not a mere detail of institutional design, but rather a central category of analysis and action.

The concept of public policy and its transformative purpose

The definition of public policy has been the subject of intense debate in the social sciences, particularly at the interface among political science, public administration, and political economy. Although there are multiple approaches, there is a basic consensus: public policies are deliberate actions and decisions of the State aimed at addressing collective problems. However, this generic definition hides important theoretical and normative disputes. What is meant by ‘collective problems’? Who defines which problems are relevant and which instruments are appropriate to solve them? To what extent do these decisions reflect majority or minority interests, public or private?

Classical authors, such as Lasswell³, already warned that the field of public policies is not merely technical, but intrinsically political. Its famous formulation – ‘who wins what, when and how’ – establishes public policies as arenas of distributive conflict. Similarly, for Dye⁴, public policy is ‘everything that governments decide to do or not do’, emphasizing that the State’s omissions are as politically significant as its actions. Such a perspective contrasts with managerialist or technocratic approaches that

reduce policies to instrumental arrangements, ignoring their normative, institutional, and historical basis.

In contemporary literature, different currents contribute to the conceptual deepening of the theme. The policy cycle approach, for example, highlights the different phases of the process – formulation, implementation, monitoring, evaluation – recognizing that the decisions made at each stage affect the final results⁵. The perspective of historical institutionalism, on the other hand, emphasizes the role of political and administrative institutions in shaping political trajectories, generating what is conventionally called ‘path dependency’ – that is, the idea that past political choices restrict future options¹.

The theory of institutional change proposed by Hall⁶ is also useful for understanding the different levels of transformation of public policies. According to the author, policies can change in their instruments (first order), their objectives (second order), or their fundamental cognitive and normative premises (third order). Only this last type of change – the one that alters paradigms – is truly transformative. The discussion on complementarity, which will be developed below, is part of this third-order horizon: it is not just a matter of combining policies, but of reformulating the very model of public design and management.

Another crucial aspect for understanding public policies is the role of actors and interest coalitions. The advocacy coalitions framework, developed by Sabatier⁷, highlights the existence of groups of actors who share beliefs and values and act together over time to influence policy orientation. This view helps dispel the idea that policies are merely reactions of the State to external demands and reinforces their status as products of symbolic, strategic, and ideological disputes.

In the Brazilian context, the institutionalization of public policy as a field of study gained strength after redemocratization and the 1988 Constitution, which enshrined the principle of universality of social rights.

The normative framework established in the Magna Carta created conditions for the emergence of a series of public policies guided by the logic of citizenship – health, education, social assistance, and social security, among others. However, the realization of these rights has been uneven, intermittent, and often constrained by fiscal constraints, corporate interests, and governance deficits.

In this scenario, it becomes essential to discuss the purpose of public policies. If its function is only to mitigate damage or manage scarcity, its effectiveness will be restricted. However, if its purpose is social transformation – that is, the creation of structural conditions for overcoming historical inequities – then its design, implementation, and evaluation must be radically rethought. Public policy cannot be restricted to the field of administration: it must be at the center of the political agenda and the dispute for the future of society.

In this essay, social transformation is understood as the structural and lasting modification of the living conditions of historically marginalized individuals and groups. This transformation is not synonymous with economic growth, nor is it to be confused with merely formal inclusion. It is a process of redistributing power, recognition, and opportunities – one that requires public policies that are not only effective but also fair. The transformative purpose of public policy, therefore, requires overcoming the paradigm of compensatory targeting and adopting a logic of integrated universalization, as defended by Bresser-Pereira⁸ in discussing the reform of the State and the construction of an inclusive social welfare model.

In addition, it is essential to recognize that public policies operate within complex systems, in which multiple variables interact dynamically and sometimes unpredictably. Such complexity requires integrated, interdisciplinary, and participatory approaches. Institutional fragmentation – typical of Brazilian federalism and the sectoral organization of ministries – tends to generate

uncoordinated, overlapping, or competing policies. The absence of dialogue across sectors, scales, and territories compromises both the efficiency of policies and their ability to produce lasting and synergistic impacts.

The complementarity between public policies emerges, in this context, as a technical and political requirement. Technically, fragmented systems waste resources, create redundancies, and complicate monitoring and evaluation. Politically, because policies that do not dialogue with each other tend to reinforce inequality and inequity instead of addressing them. As studies by the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA)⁹ on intersectoriality in the fight against poverty have shown, isolated actions have limited impact, while articulated policies promote cumulative and sustainable effects.

In view of this, conceiving public policies as instruments of transformation requires not only their expansion in coverage and scope, but also their integration into broader strategies for social development. Transformative public policy is not a one-off intervention, but rather an articulated, intersectoral, territorialized, and long-term process. Its purpose is not only to provide a service, but, above all, to rebuild the social bases of citizenship and human dignity.

Social mobility and tackling structural inequalities

Social mobility is one of the main indicators of a society's ability to promote distributive justice and intergenerational equity. It is the possibility for individuals or social groups to change their socioeconomic position over the life course or across generations. In modern democratic societies, upward social mobility – that is, the opportunity for an individual to improve their socioeconomic status relative to their parents – is often associated with the meritocratic ideal and the promise that individual effort can be rewarded regardless

of social background. However, the reality of unequal societies, such as Brazil's, reveals that this promise is far from being fulfilled.

According to authors such as Wright¹⁰, social mobility can be classified into two main types: intragenerational mobility, which refers to the changes that occur throughout an individual's life trajectory; and intergenerational mobility, which compares the conditions between parents and children. The latter is particularly relevant for assessing the extent of the reproduction of social structures and the role of public policies in their transformation. In a society with high intergenerational mobility, place of birth and family economic conditions carry little weight in determining individuals' destinies. On the other hand, low intergenerational mobility indicates that children tend to occupy positions similar to those of their parents, perpetuating inequalities.

Brazil is, unfortunately, among the countries with the lowest intergenerational mobility in the world. According to a study conducted by Neri¹¹, the probability of a poor young Brazilian reaching the top two income quintiles in adulthood is less than 10%. When broken down by race, the data reveal that black children have significantly lower upward mobility than white children, even when compared to parents with similar incomes. The research by Scalon and Salata¹² corroborates this finding: Brazilian social mobility is strongly associated with markers of structural inequality, such as skin color, geographic location, and access to quality basic education.

Such patterns indicate that social origin exerts a decisive weight on life opportunities. Starting inequalities – defined by Bourdieu as 'inherited capital' (economic, cultural, social, and symbolic) – function as mechanisms for reproducing social hierarchies, thereby limiting the effectiveness of targeted or sectoral public policies. It is not only about economic disadvantages but also about an interdependent system of accumulated disadvantages that affects individuals from early childhood through insertion into the labor market.

Children born into poor homes, with low parental education and in vulnerable territories, face multiple obstacles throughout their trajectory: precarious access to education, less health protection, absence of support networks, and greater exposure to violence and food insecurity.

The literature on accumulated inequalities has emphasized that social mobility depends on structural and institutional conditions that transcend individual capacities. As Esping-Andersen¹³ points out, robust welfare states tend to promote greater mobility because they act on the social determinants of inequality through universal systems of education, health, social protection, and employment policies. The Scandinavian model is emblematic in this sense: there, mobility is promoted through an articulated network of integrated public policies from childhood to adulthood. In peripheral capitalist countries, such as Brazil, the absence of universal systems and the fragmentation of public action constitute obstacles to the construction of sustainable trajectories of social ascension.

Furthermore, it is essential to highlight that social mobility is not neutral in relation to the historical and political context. Changes in business cycles, power coalitions, and economic policy paradigms can accelerate or block mobility mechanisms. The cycle of expansion of social policies that began in the early 2000s, marked by the creation of programs such as the Bolsa Família, the University for All Program (PROUNI), the Support Program for Restructuring and Expansion Plans of Federal Universities (REUNI), and the policy of increasing the minimum wage, promoted a significant expansion of consumption and access to higher education by the popular classes. However, as Souza¹⁴ argues, this mobility was more conjunctural than structural, since it did not translate into substantive changes in the distribution of assets, in power relations, or in the structure of the labor market.

This phenomenon, which Souza¹⁴ calls ‘almost middle class’, reveals that social ascension in unequal contexts can be fragile and reversible. The economic crisis of 2015-2016 and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic showed that millions of Brazilians who had risen economically returned to poverty in the absence of protective and complementary public policies. This reversibility reinforces the idea that public policies should not only promote punctual mobility, but, above all, structure conditions of permanence, stability, and social resilience. In other words, public policies should be conceived not only as levers of ascension, but also as support networks.

In this sense, social mobility cannot be seen as an exclusively economic process. It is a multidimensional phenomenon that involves access to quality education, health, decent housing, decent work opportunities, cultural recognition, and political participation. Therefore, promoting mobility requires intersectoral, continuous, and integrated public policies. The absence of articulation among policies – as often occurs in the Brazilian case – compromises the achievement of lasting results and perpetuates cycles of exclusion.

Finally, it is important to note that social mobility cannot be the sole criterion for evaluating social justice. A society can exhibit significant upward mobility and still maintain high levels of inequality. This is what happens when those ‘at the bottom’ improve their position, but those at the top continue to accumulate advantages at even higher rates. Thus, as Piketty¹⁵ argues, it is necessary to combine mobility with redistribution. Mobility is a necessary but not sufficient condition for a more egalitarian society. The challenge, therefore, is to build public policies that both promote vertical mobility and reduce the structural distances separating the different segments of society. The analysis of social mobility in this context serves as a starting point for discussing the effectiveness, limits, and potential of public policies in unequal societies.

The OECD study: Generations for ascension

In 2018, the OECD published the report ‘A broken social elevator? How to promote social mobility’, dedicated to analyzing the patterns of social mobility in the organization’s member and partner countries². The study had significant repercussions by highlighting the difficulties that various societies face in promoting intergenerational mobility and by proposing an agenda of institutional reforms to expand opportunities. One of its most alarming findings concerns the number of generations it takes for children from the poorest families to reach the national average income. While in Scandinavian countries such as Denmark and Finland this process can occur in two generations, in Brazil it takes nine generations, resulting in one of the highest levels of immobility among the countries analyzed².

This estimate goes beyond statistical data and reveals a structural flaw in Brazilian institutions’ ability to prevent the place of birth from determining social destiny. The persistence of intergenerational poverty indicates that the available public instruments have been insufficient, disjointed, or poorly implemented. Low social mobility thus expresses the absence of complementary public policies capable of breaking cycles of accumulated disadvantages.

The OECD report identifies central factors for social mobility, such as access to quality education from early childhood, educational equity, protected labor insertion, universal health systems and social protection, and the elimination of discrimination based on class, race, or territory. In all these aspects, Brazil has structural weaknesses, such as early inequalities in education, precarious work, unequal coverage of social security, and persistent barriers associated with race and gender.

In addition, the study highlights the high intergenerational elasticity of income in Brazil: about 60% of children’s income is explained by parents’ income, compared to less than 30% in countries such as Canada, Sweden,

and Australia. The greater this correlation, the lower the mobility and the greater the reproduction of inequalities over time.

The OECD also emphasizes that social mobility is a multidimensional phenomenon, shaped by policies that act across the life cycle, from early childhood care to the labor market and social protection. The absence of an integrated architecture weakens the impact of sectoral policies and prevents the production of cumulative effects. Brazilian experiences show that important policies, such as cash transfers or educational financing, have had their effects limited by the lack of articulation with other areas.

Finally, the report emphasizes that social mobility requires long-term policies, with institutional continuity and intersectoral coordination. The experience of the Nordic countries demonstrates that it is possible to combine economic development and social justice through universal, well-articulated systems of education, health, work, and social protection. In this sense, the diagnosis that the ‘social elevator’ is broken in Brazil should be interpreted not as resignation but as a call to reconstruct public policies based on integration, synergy, and social justice.

Inequity, justice and social transformation

The naturalization of social inequalities is one of the main obstacles to the construction of fairer societies. To address it, it is essential to distinguish inequality from inequity – a distinction that is not only conceptual, but also political and normative. While inequality can be understood as an empirical fact, inequity refers to unjust, systematic, and avoidable inequalities. All inequity is an inequality, but not all inequality is iniquitous, with direct implications for public policy and the definition of state responsibility.

The World Health Organization¹⁶ defines inequities as ‘unnecessary, avoidable and

unjust inequalities’, attributing a clear moral judgment to them. Inequalities produced by social exclusion, by the arbitrary distribution of resources, or by the reproduction of historical discrimination cannot be accepted as inevitable, and must be treated as public problems that require deliberate action by the State.

In contemporary political philosophy, social justice offers important references for this debate. Fraser¹⁷ proposes a three-dimensional approach to justice, articulating redistribution, recognition, and representation as inseparable dimensions of equity. Public policies that act only in one of these spheres tend to be insufficient: redistribution without confronting discrimination, recognition without material change, or participation without real impact result in partial or symbolic responses.

Sen¹⁸, in turn, shifts the focus of justice from the simple distribution of resources to the expansion of individuals’ real capacities and freedoms¹². Justice must be evaluated by the concrete possibility of people leading the lives they value, which depends on social conditions such as access to health care, education, security, and political participation. This implies recognizing the need for differentiated policies to address structural inequalities and promote substantive equity.

Rawls¹⁹ reinforces this perspective by stating that, according to the principle of difference, inequalities are acceptable only if they benefit the most disadvantaged, and by highlighting the importance of the social bases of self-respect. Dworkin²⁰ complements this argument by arguing for equality of resources, according to which it is up to the State to neutralize unchosen disadvantages, such as social or ethnic origin.

In the Brazilian context, marked by persistent inequalities, these approaches show that inequity is a moral and institutional failure. Overcoming them requires universal, intersectoral, and articulated public policies capable of addressing the roots of inequalities. As Santos²¹ points out, there is no democracy without

social justice, nor social justice without a State committed to inclusive redistribution. Thus, the complementarity between public policies should be understood not as a management detail, but as a requirement of justice and a condition for lasting social transformation.

The complementarity of public policies: Concept and foundations

The idea of complementarity between public policies has gained increasing attention in the field of applied social sciences, public management, and democratic theory. It is a concept that goes beyond simple administrative coordination and proposes a structuring logic for the formulation and implementation of integrated, coherent, and interdependent public policies. Complementarity, as understood in this essay, refers to the ability of public policies to act synergistically to enhance their effects, avoid overlaps and gaps, and produce structural impacts on people's lives.

In the specialized literature, there are at least three senses in which complementarity can be understood: technical-operational, institutional, and normative. At the technical-operational level, complementarity refers to the concrete articulation between policies and programs – for example, between health and education, or between social assistance and housing – so that the services offered to citizens are coordinated, continuous, and effective. This dimension encompasses data sharing, integrated planning, intersectoral flows, and multiprofessional teams.

At the institutional level, complementarity entails the construction of federative and intergovernmental arrangements that enable cooperation among different spheres of the State – Union, states, municipalities, and among different government agencies. This requires collaborative governance mechanisms, agreed goals and responsibilities, articulated

financing, and unified monitoring and evaluation systems. Finally, at the normative level, complementarity is understood as a guiding principle of public policies, based on the idea of social justice and the overcoming of structural inequities. This is a political and ethical imperative: public policies must engage in dialogue with one another because social problems are complex, interdependent, and multifactorial.

Authors such as Sabatier⁷ and Howlett and del Rio²² argue that the absence of complementarity reduces the effectiveness of public policies, by generating duplications, inconsistencies, coverage gaps, and even contradictory effects. A classic example is housing policies that promote the resettlement of populations in peripheral areas without coordination with urban mobility or education policies, resulting in increased segregation and vulnerability. Similarly, health policies that ignore the social determinants of disease – such as poverty, violence, or racism – tend to produce insufficient or ineffective responses.

Complementarity, therefore, should be thought of as a transversal logic, which crosses all stages of the public policy cycle: formulation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. It requires, already at the time of policy conception, the identification of links to other areas, the expected effects across different areas, and possible synergies. In implementation, it requires institutional and operational integration of devices. Monitoring and evaluation require shared indicators and systems that allow capturing the combined effects of policies on beneficiaries.

In addition, it is necessary to recognize that complementarity has a temporal dimension. Public policies must be thought of in long cycles, with intergenerational horizons. This means that it is not enough to add existing policies: it is necessary to build coherence and continuity between them. The Brazilian experience has shown that, on many occasions, a change of government entails the

interruption or discontinuity of successful public policies, either for ideological reasons or due to budgetary disputes. The lack of institutionalization of complementarity contributes to the fragmentation and instability of the social protection system.

In this sense, the institutionalization of complementarity requires a paradigm shift in administrative culture. It requires public managers to abandon the sectoral logic, compartmentalized and hierarchical, and start to act in a collaborative, horizontal, and results-oriented manner. It also implies valuing social participation, as active listening to citizens and communities is essential for identifying real needs, local priorities, and more effective ways to articulate policies. Social participation, in fact, is itself a factor of complementarity, as it allows for the building of bridges among technical knowledge, popular experiences, and social demands.

Another fundamental point is financing. Complementarity cannot be built without adequate, stable, and linked resources. The traditional budget model, based on appropriations per ministry or per program, often makes it difficult to articulate policies. It is necessary to move towards intersectoral financing models, based on integrated funds, federative consortia, and incentives for cooperation. In Brazil, some experiences – such as the Pact for Health, in the early 2000s, and the Program of Articulated Actions in basic education – sought to move in this direction, although with limitations and varied results.

The international literature offers successful examples of applying the principle of complementarity. In Scotland, the integrated care model in the health system integrates medical, social, and community services to provide continuous care to vulnerable populations, such as older people and people with disabilities. In Canada, First Nations governance programs involve coordination among health, education, economic development, and indigenous culture to promote the

autonomy and well-being of communities. In Latin America, experiences such as Chile's Social Protection System and Uruguay's Care System show that it is possible to build complementary public policies even in contexts of limited resources, as long as there is political will and adequate institutional design.

In Brazil, experiences such as the Bolsa Família Program (2003–2021) and the Unified Social Assistance System (SUAS) represented important attempts to institutionalize complementarity. By conditioning the transfer of income to school enrollment and health monitoring, Bolsa Família sought to articulate different policies around common objectives. Suas, on the other hand, by organizing social assistance into a network with shared financing and standardized services, sought to integrate previously dispersed actions. However, both experiences faced important challenges, such as political discontinuity, fiscal constraints, and difficulty coordinating among federated entities.

These examples show that complementarity is not only a normative ideal, but also a possible, albeit challenging, practice. For it to be effective, political, technical, and institutional conditions are necessary. Among these conditions, the following stand out: 1) political leadership committed to equity; 2) technical capacity for integrated planning; 3) legal and regulatory frameworks that encourage cooperation; 4) flexible and results-oriented organizational structures; 5) interoperable information systems; and 6) administrative culture based on collaboration and innovation.

Finally, it is important to highlight that complementarity should not be confused with 'full integration' or policy fusion. Each policy has its own specificity, target audience, and logic of action. The objective is not to annul differences, but to promote articulation around common objectives. It is about building convergence in diversity, strategic alignment, and cooperation between different public and social agents.

Complementary public policies as vectors of social transformation

Social transformation is not the product of punctual, sectoral, or fragmented actions. In societies marked by historical and structural inequalities, such as Brazil, overcoming inequities requires public policies organized in articulated, sustainable systems oriented towards long-term objectives. The complementarity between public policies, discussed in the previous section, not only improves administrative efficiency or public management, but also redefines the role of the State as an agent of social justice. Complementarity is, therefore, a concrete way through which public policies can become true vectors of structural transformation, promoting redistribution, recognition, and political inclusion.

This perspective requires, first of all, the construction of a new culture of planning and public management. This means abandoning the paradigm of politics as an emergency response and replacing it with a model of state action grounded in broad diagnoses, integrated problem analysis, and agreement among sectors, levels of government, and civil society. Social transformation cannot be seen as an accidental or diffuse result of isolated policies. Rather, it must be the deliberate product of a national project that recognizes that social problems are systemic and that, therefore, responses must be equally systemic.

In this sense, the literature on public policies already identifies the notion of policy mix – that is, the arrangement of different instruments and programs to achieve a specific collective objective – as a strategic tool for dealing with the complexity of contemporary public problems¹⁹. However, the challenge is not only to combine policies, but to do so in a synergistic, coherent, and sustained way. Therein lies the transformative differential of complementarity: it is not limited to the

coexistence of policies but also promotes their active coordination to amplify results and build cascading effects over time.

Early childhood education offers a paradigmatic example. On their own, programs to expand public daycare centers may have a limited impact on children's cognitive development if they are not accompanied by school feeding policies, ongoing teacher training, early diagnosis of disabilities, child mental health care, school safety, and family support. When these policies act in a coordinated manner, the results are significantly superior in educational indicators, health, future income, and the reduction of inequality of opportunity. It is a synergistic, long-term investment with multiple benefits for society.

Health policy is another fertile field for observing the effects of complementarity. The Unified Health System (SUS), structured as a public, universal, and decentralized system, created the institutional basis for the articulation of preventive, curative, and promotional actions in health. However, its effectiveness depends on dialogue with other policies – such as basic sanitation, housing, education, urban mobility, and social assistance. The Family Health Strategy (FHS), by incorporating multiprofessional teams and territorializing primary care, represents a concrete example of complementarity in action. Studies by IPEA show that municipalities with greater FHS coverage and with integrated sanitation policies have better indicators of infant mortality, vaccination, and control of chronic diseases⁹.

In social assistance, Suas is structured as a federative network of services, benefits, and programs, articulated through the Social Assistance Reference Centers (CRAS) and Specialized Social Assistance Reference Centers (CREAS). These centers function as gateways to basic and special social protection, and their performance depends directly on articulation with other sectors – such as health, education, justice, and public security.

The effectiveness of Suas, therefore, is linked to its ability to complement policies and to operate as a territorial articulator of rights. Where this articulation exists, the results are noticeable: reduction of domestic violence, greater school permanence, prevention of the institutionalization of children and the elderly, among others.

These examples indicate that complementarity has a decisive territorial dimension. Public policies are implemented in the territory, where citizens experience the action of the State. Intersectoral management in the territory is, therefore, a condition for complementarity to materialize. The experience of intermunicipal consortia, localized social protection networks, and intersectoral forums points to the importance of institutional structures that operate at the local level, with the capacity to articulate and adapt to specific realities. Social transformation does not occur in the abstract – it takes place in neighborhoods, communities, urban peripheries, and historically neglected rural areas.

Another fundamental aspect is public governance. Complementarity between policies requires institutional arrangements of cooperation, dialogue, and co-responsibility. This means that the different bodies and spheres of government must act as part of a system rather than as bureaucratic islands. The Brazilian experience shows that, when there is political will, it is possible to build integrated governance mechanisms – such as intersectoral pacts, shared management committees, and intersectoral action plans. The challenge is to institutionalize these practices so that they do not depend on the circumstantial goodwill of managers or specific leaders.

Social participation is also a key element of complementarity. When citizens are called upon to participate in the formulation, monitoring, and evaluation of policies, the State becomes more responsive, policies become more adjusted to local realities, and the results

are more sustainable. The creation of public policy councils, thematic conferences, and participatory budgets is an example of institutional mechanisms that can facilitate the articulation of policies, the construction of consensus, and democratic vigilance over the direction of state action. Complementarity, therefore, is also a citizen practice.

In addition to political and administrative factors, the evaluative dimension must be considered. The construction of complementary public policies requires evaluation methodologies that capture their systemic effects. Traditional evaluation, focused on isolated indicators, often ignores cross-sectoral impacts and synergy between programs. More sophisticated evaluation models – such as policy network analysis, aggregate impact models, and theory-of-change approaches – are better suited to understanding the complexity of complementary interventions. The production of evidence on the combined effects of policies is essential to feed back into planning and justify the allocation of public resources.

Finally, it is important to note that complementarity is not merely a management technique; it is a political choice. Opting for complementary public policies is opting for a State oriented to social justice and inclusion. It is important to recognize that the problems faced by the most vulnerable populations cannot be solved with simplistic or isolated solutions. They require an articulate, sustained, and transformative response. As Bresser-Pereira⁸ summarizes, it is necessary to ‘move from a regulatory State to a strategic State, capable of coordinating development policies with equity’.

This paradigm shift is especially urgent in a global context marked by multiple crises – health, economic, climate, and democratic – that amplify vulnerabilities and challenge the capacity of States to respond. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the limits of fragmented systems and reinforced the importance of integrated policies. The fight

against hunger, unemployment, violence, and climate change requires articulation between social, economic, and environmental policies. Complementarity, in this scenario, is more than desirable: it is indispensable.

Final considerations: From intervention to transformation

The analysis developed throughout this essay demonstrated that the complementarity between public policies is not only a technical or administrative choice, but also a political, ethical, and institutional requirement. In contexts of historical inequalities such as Brazil's, where the initial conditions of life largely determine social destinies, fragmented, discontinued, and uncoordinated public policies are incapable of producing real mobility, combating inequities, or transforming exclusionary structures.

The starting point was the conceptualization of public policies not as neutral instruments of state provision, but as political technologies of social transformation. Next, social mobility was examined as a concrete expression of distributive justice and as a criterion for evaluating the effectiveness of public policies. The OECD report was used as strong empirical evidence of Brazilian structural rigidity, demonstrating that it takes up to nine generations for children from the poorest families to reach the national average income². This data signals both a failure of the meritocratic promise and a denunciation of the absence of a transformation project sustained by coherent and complementary public policies.

The distinction between inequality and inequity was also discussed, in the light of the contributions of authors such as Fraser, Sen, Rawls, and Dworkin¹⁷⁻²⁰, to show that social justice requires actions that go beyond material redistribution: it demands

recognition, participation, and empowerment. Complementarity, in this context, emerges as the only possible strategy to face the multiple dimensions of exclusion. Policies that act in silos, without dialogue with one another, tend to reinforce inequalities; policies articulated synergistically can generate lasting, structural impacts.

The section dedicated to the definition of complementarity presented its technical, institutional, and normative foundations. It was shown that complementarity is not restricted to the formal integration between programs, but presupposes a new logic of state action: centered on the territory, guided by shared goals, supported by governance and participation mechanisms, and supported by evaluation systems that recognize the complexity of public interventions. Complementarity, thus understood, is both a means and an end: it organizes public action and, at the same time, guides its transformative purpose.

The empirical examples presented – from early childhood education to family health, from social assistance to international experiences – demonstrated that complementarity is viable, even if challenging. What is often lacking is not technical knowledge, but political will and institutional commitment to a fairer social project. The complementarity between public policies, when institutionalized, becomes an antidote to clientelism, fragmentation, and discontinuity – three of the greatest diseases that corrode state action in Brazil.

Thus, more than a management principle, complementarity must be recognized as a foundation of social justice. It allows the State to cease to be a mere repairer of damage and become an agent of transformation. To this end, it requires a profound reform of institutional structures, an administrative culture focused on cooperation, and an active and demanding citizenship. In times of democratic crises and the intensification of inequalities, it is urgent to

resume the horizon of transformation^{8,18}. This horizon begins with the construction of public policies that not only coexist but, above all, reinforce each other – public policies that walk together towards a more egalitarian, solidary and democratic future.

Authorship contributions

Guimarães RM (0000-0003-1225-6719)* contributed to the conception, design, and analysis of the manuscript. Moreira MR (0000-0002-8581-3777)* contributed to the analysis and critical review of the manuscript. ■

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