



RESEARCH NOTE¹

Social engagement in the creation of brand-new Brazilian universities as an opportunity for local interconnection with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

O engajamento social na criação das novíssimas universidades brasileiras como oportunidade de interconexão local com os Objetivos do Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS)

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Abstract: The objective of these Research Notes is to present a proposal for scientific research that aims to analyze the interconnections of agendas and premises that permeate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the creation of the “brand-new” Brazilian federal universities, both understood as development strategies. To this goal, it will use the qualitative approach to triangulate secondary data contained in specialized bibliography and documents from official entities in Brazil and international development agencies. Conforming the results, it is expected that the convergences between the national and the international actions for regional and sustainable development will be established, focusing on the institutional design of the “brand-new” federal universities in Brazil.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals; brand-new federal universities; development strategies.

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Resumo: O objetivo destas Notas de Pesquisa é apresentar uma proposta de investigação científica que tem como cerne analisar as interconexões de agendas e premissas que permeiam os Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável (ODS) e a criação das novíssimas universidades federais brasileiras, compreendidas ambas como estratégias de desenvolvimento. Para tanto, apoiar-se-á na abordagem qualitativa para triangular dados secundários constantes de bibliografia especializada e documentos de órgãos oficiais do Brasil e de agências internacionais para o desenvolvimento. Espera-se, ao final, que sejam estabelecidas as convergências entre as ações nacionais e as agendas internacionais de desenvolvimento regional e sustentável, com foco no desenho institucional das novíssimas universidades federais do Brasil.

Palavras-chave: Objetivos de Desenvolvimento Sustentável; novíssimas universidades federais; estratégias de desenvolvimento.

1. Introductory notes

This Research Note presents the design of a scientific investigation that aims to analyze the possible mutual learning relationships between the scheduling of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), on an international level, and the creation of the so-called “newest” Brazilian federal universities, as a national and localized proposal for development processes based on the logic of participation and social engagement in the construction of public policies.

This research originates from the confluence of debates and actions between researchers from the Federal University of Cariri, in Ceará, and the Universidade Salvador, in Bahia, who have been dedicated to understanding the extent to which it is possible to establish theoretical-empirical connections between national and development-oriented international organizations (territorial, sustainable and other connections).

The prior investigation that originated this study is ongoing and aims to analyze the creation of the four “newest”⁴ Brazilian federal universities (Federal University of Cariri [UFCA], Federal University of Southern Bahia [UFSB], Federal University of Western Bahia [UFOB] and Federal University of South and Southeast of Pará [Unifesspa]) as a territorial development strategy. In this context, emphasis has been placed on the action of multiple actors in the process of implementing the national public

⁴ These four institutions were considered “newest”, at the time, as they were the last ones created by Reuni between 2012 and 2014. To find out more, it is recommended to read the report “The democratization and expansion of higher education in the country: 2003 – 2014” (In Portuguese: A democratização e expansão da educação superior no país: 2003 – 2014), available [on this new website](#).

policy that instituted these universities: the Program for Supporting Plans for Restructuring and Expansion of Federal Universities (Reuni).

Among the many findings of the prior investigation, attention has been drawn to the fact that Brazil's institutional action reveals an alignment between the concept of development guided by the centrality of local, regional and territorial issues and the agendas and guidelines of International Cooperation for the Development, with the strengthening of access to education (at different levels) as one of its main pillars.

Therefore, this Research Note presents the design of an investigation that will analyze to what extent the interconnection between Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - the current agenda of International Cooperation for Development - and the creation of the newest federal universities finds a place in the construction of new organizational forms of higher education, since these institutions were imbued with a pedagogical and administrative commitment to interrelation with the territories where they were installed. And this represents a possible inspiration for the scheduling of international cooperation for development inserted in national public action.

By way of structure itself, this Note is arranged in five parts: in addition to these introductory notes, brief comments are made in Items 2 and 3 on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their international context and the new institutional format molded to the newest federal universities of Brazil, respectively. The Item 4, in its turn, demonstrates how the research perceives the interconnection between these two themes. Then, Chapter 5 presents the methodology and timeline defined for the investigation in question, while Chapter 6 informs what the expected results are. At the end, the references of the works cited throughout the text are displayed.

2. The SDGs and the international context

The programmers of International Cooperation for Development (ICD) first appeared after the Second World War as a strategy of the then recently created Bretton Woods institutions - and the UN, at the San Francisco Conference of 1945. The 1945 United Nations Charter, which formally established the United Nations, listed the objective of "employing an international mechanism to promote the economic and social progress of all peoples" (UN, 1945, Chapter IX).

International Development Cooperation is understood by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) as international actions that have the objective of helping other countries in their efforts for social and economic progress. The

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OECD recognizes as actors of International Development Cooperation: States, Individuals, Civil Society (Non-Profit Organizations), Multilateral Organizations, Philanthropic Foundations and the Private Sector (OCDE, 2019).

The International Cooperation for Development represents a relevant part of the relations between states, guided by values and interests of a specific vision of the world and of development itself. It is marked by its historical character, develops itself as a function of international relations and has imperative discourses and trends in each era on development, possible to observe by following its forums and consensus (Ayllón, 2007).

In this sense, at the expiration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015, the development agenda was renewed with the establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the United Nations Summit on Sustainable Development. The document Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development announced 17 Goals and 169 targets, which can be measured through 230 verifiable indicators, to be met by 2030, “leaving no one behind”, which involve diverse themes such as: poverty eradication, food security and agriculture, health, education, gender equality, water and sanitation, energy, sustainable economic growth, infrastructure, reducing inequalities, sustainable cities, sustainable patterns of consumption and production, climate change, protection and sustainable use of oceans and terrestrial ecosystems, peaceful, just and inclusive societies and partners in implementation (ONU, 2015).

The SDGs incorporate innovative elements in their design, highlighting the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. It prioritizes the fight against poverty and hunger, but with a strong anchoring in the defence of human rights and the call for the reduction of inequalities within and between countries, as a primary element.

The SDGs make a strong call for global solidarity that integrates all development actors (Gil, 2018). Thus, the 2030 Agenda has been implemented through formal and informal mechanisms: traditional donors - the Development Assistance Committee (DAC/OECD); developing countries - the G-77, the BRICS and regional groups; and emerging global governance structures such as the G20; and networks of civil society, business and academic organisations (Gil, 2018). According to the OECD (2020), the scale and complexity of the present sustainable development challenges call for a multi-

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stakeholder approach that draws on contributions from all parts of society - government, private sector and civil society.

Among the 17 SDGs, two can be highlighted as the opportunity for direct interconnection with the Brazilian development experience through the expansion and internalisation of higher education. The first of these is Sustainable Development Goal 4: Quality Education - ensuring access to "inclusive, quality and equitable education and promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all" (ONU, 2015a). This Goal expresses the importance of access to and permanence in education at different levels (including university education) as a driving force for empowerment, freedom (and liberation) and access to employment and income generation as keys to the realisation of human rights, sustainability and development.

In addition, it can be seen that Brazilian universities (especially public ones) have been urged to connect with foreign networks to carry out their teaching and research actions, primarily in a movement of internationalization of higher education personnel. Thus, channels for analytical studies on the social, economic, political and institutional reality of countries have been increasingly created. These initiatives may produce knowledge for the adoption of state actions aimed at "Reducing Inequalities" "within and among countries", which is characterised as SDG 10 (ONU, 2015b).

One of the marks of the brand new Brazilian federal universities was the need to promote regional and international integration in the design of these institutions (Ministério da Educação, 2014). It can be seen, a priori, that their consolidation as a successful experience may represent an action aimed at its consolidation and strengthening, since human education, regardless of the level, can be a strand to settle inequalities (SDG 10) and free people through access to income and freedom (SDG 4).

Not only the Goals (and the targets and indicators that derive from them) will be analyzed, but also guidelines dear to international organizations for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, such as the concept of localization. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the previous experience of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) brought evidence of the importance of "localization" for the achievement of the SDGs, understood as: (i) awareness raising and engagement of local actors, (ii) accountability mechanisms, (iii) participatory planning and service delivery, (iv) local economic development and (v) partnerships (UNDP, 2017).

Thus, after these initial considerations about the SDGs, we move on to analyse the approximations in which its objectives and guidelines can be perceived in Brazil's experience with the structuring of its brand-new federal universities. This is, therefore, the object of the next section.

3. The context of the newest federal universities

If in the international context the SDGs points to the need to promote integration, reduce inequalities within and between countries and quality education, among others, as principles for development, at the national level Brazil has adopted the territory as a unit of analysis and management as the locus for the implementation of public policies that integrate higher education and other economic, environmental, cultural and social initiatives, for example. This was the motto for the establishment of Reuni, which provided opportunities for the internalization of higher education in the country.

Thus, it was up to Brazilian political-institutional action to enable the incursion of federal institutes and universities towards spaces not covered by the country's large urban centers. This assertion would be guaranteed from the institutional articulation that federal universities have when relating to other local actors with goals to make their teaching, research and extension activities. This relationship, in turn, would enable the implementation of four axes that are opportune to territorial development: reduction of regional asymmetries; inclusion in local dynamics; approximate relationship between curricula and social demands; and regional and international integration (Ministério da Educação, 2014).

This was the format adopted by Reuni in its last and third phase, when the principle of regionalized education prevailed, "as it starts from the reality of life, with its limits and potential, and builds knowledge for the modification of this same reality, considering people as knowledge producers" (Baptista & Campos, 2013, p. 99, free translation). In this scope, talking about regionalization of education, especially higher education, would give to the university institution, under Reuni, the possibility of taking over the territory (or region) beyond a simple indication of the place of its installation, facing the chance to take on local needs and potential in its political, pedagogical and administrative design. This, therefore, was the peculiarity that four ones considered newest federal universities took on.

However, for the regionalizing factor of education in these institutions could be possible, the process that created the universities had to innovate. For this reason, other

social actors who are generally on the sidelines of such initiatives were integrated – since, in Brazil, traditionally it is only up to the State (and some public and political agents) to act in this type of action. Thus, the institutional innovation that established the newest federal universities was given when representatives of civil society and private initiative, in addition to other public agents, were called to participate. Whether through Work Groups (UFCA) or the organization of Social Forums (UFSB), for example, multiple and diverse social actors have imprinted their interests and motivations in these newest universities, to a greater or lesser degree.

4. Research convergences

Regardless of the scale of action, it is a fact that the participation of multiple actors was crucial for a socially centered process (Boullosa, 2013; 2019), in the implementation of Reuni, ensure that the newest federal universities were aligned with local dynamics, reducing asymmetries and integrating as planned by the Federal Government at that time. However, more than having channels through which people could participate, it was the engagement of these same individuals that prevailed and was decisive for these institutions to assume the commitment to their territories beyond the indication of their place in their own names.

Therefore, if the newest federal universities, which were born in a context of regionalized education that had as its justification the integration, dynamization and regional (and international) dialogue with an objective to the development this spaces, what can be inferred is that the engagement of multiple and diverse social actors was the amalgamation of national development projects were interconnected to local processes of participation and observation of social, environmental, economic and political-institutional dynamics, for example.

In this context, the same discussion can be directed to the SDG agenda and inspire two convergences with the experience of creating the newest federal universities in Brazil. The first one concerns the fact that the SDGs represent an international effort aimed at the development of countries, guided by the prescriptive and guiding discourse for the political action of its signatories. However, it is questioned to what extent this standardization could not represent a top-down conformation vis-à-vis the local perspective of sustainable development when it encourages bottom-up actions to consider aspects of the territory (culture, society, environment and politics, among others). What fundamental aspects for the success of this observed local development experience do not

find equivalents in the SDGs, their goals, indicators and their main guidelines, for example?

Second, the debate on a possible connection between the international development agenda, within North-South and South-South Cooperation, for example, raises a very tenuous approach to the case of the establishment of the newest Brazilian universities when considering the need to have social engagement so that both objectives – even if on different levels – can be achieved. In this case, the national experience of creating regionalized universities as agents for inducing development, which contain participation rates, can be an inspiration for concrete actions for the realization of the SDGs, *mutatis mutandi*, by different countries around the globe. After all, different development proposals, when faced with international actors, must consider participation so that it effectively occurs (Castro & Silva, 2017). Thus, for this and other answers to be given, the methodological path presented in Chapter 5, which follows.

5. Proposed methodology and schedule

The task of determining the methodological path of a scientific research depends, above all, on the body that its object assumes. In the case of the investigation in *focus*, the search for possibilities of intersection between the SDG agenda and the creation of the newest Brazilian federal universities can represent a challenge, given the need to identify the interconnections between the two distinct experiences in materiality and temporality.

As they are eminently diverse phenomena, discussing how the two experiences are connected can represent a methodological difficulty - in terms of data collection and analysis techniques -, after all, it contrasts with an international and generalist initiative to schedule actions aimed at the sustainable development of countries with a concrete and localized experience of a national State in favor of the expansion and internalization of its public higher education network.

To resolve this issue, we started with the contributions of the work of Chankseliani and McCowan (2020), who discussed the relationship between the SDGs and higher education. In particular, they locate two very important points in this relationship: a) the fact that there is an engagement with issues related to the development of societies, such as the expression of the so-called “third mission” of the university as a human institution; and b) the presence of universities socially and regionally engaged in development processes, listing examples in countries such as South Africa, China, Sudan and Brazil.

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For the investigation proposed in this Research Note, the perspective of creating the newest federal universities will be joined as a dimension of analysis.

Thus, Chankseliani and McCowan (2020) present a university format that Almeida Filho and Souza (2020) present as necessary in a world where social problems are increasingly aggravated: the concept of a prototype university. For this reason, the two authors propose that the university should assume a proactive format of action in society that would extrapolate training for work and contain extension, research and culture actions aligned with citizenship, ethics, respect and engagement with the development processes.

Based on this idea, therefore, the methodological path provided for the research is based on the qualitative approach, given the need to know the phenomenon of the newest federal universities in the portion that touches the international discussion of the SDGs. This is due to the qualitative approach offering conditions to deepen the analysis of empirical objects that are unfeasible for a purely numerical discussion (Gibbs, 2009).

Next, Data Triangulation will be used as a methodological bet for the “confrontation” of three groups of secondary data (Flick, 2009; Gibbs, 2009): a) specialized national and international bibliography; b) official documents of Brazilian government agencies; and c) compositions on the SDGs within the framework of the United Nations and international development agencies.

Table 01 presents the proposed schedule:

Table 01: Activities and Schedule

		Year of 2021											
Activities	Responsibles	Schedule (months)											
		01	02	03	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11	12
Start of activities	Research coordination	X											
Establishment of a study group	All team	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Selection and systematization of complementary bibliography	Scientific Initiation Scholarship	X	X										
Document collection and systematization - document research	All team			X	X								
Systematization and analysis of data	All team					X	X	X					
Preparation of scientific articles and partial research report	All team								X	X	X	X	

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scholars from two Brazilian states; and strengthening the inter-institutional research practice in the country;

b) Tangible: the production of, at least, two scientific articles that will publish the findings of this investigation is expected.

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