



## POLICY BRIEF

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# THE BRAZILIAN SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM (PNAE) AS A DRIVER OF BRAZIL'S AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITION

## INCENTIVES AND INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS FOR THE PUBLIC PROCUREMENT OF HEALTHY AND SUSTAINABLE FOOD

### INTRODUCTION

Motivated by the goal of promoting the agroecological transition of family farming in Brazil, this study seeks to understand how this process can be leveraged through school feeding policies, exploring incentive mechanisms and institutional arrangements that strengthen the local production and supply of healthy and sustainable food, with the National School Meals Program (PNAE) as the main driver of this transformation.

This proposal aligns with a global movement that recognizes, based on various international experiences<sup>1</sup> – such as SchoolFood4Change (SF4C) and Cities Feeding the Future, driven by the School Meals Coalition<sup>2</sup> and the Agroecology Coalition –, the social and environmental transformative potential of school meals programs in advancing urban food policies capable of achieving multiple objectives, including climate resilience, through so-called "climate-smart school meals programs".

Aligned with Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12.7, food procurement for school meals is considered one of the main

1. Available at: <https://www.wfp.org/publications/state-school-feeding-worldwide>. Accessed 09 Oct. 2025.

2. The Comida do Amanhã Institute is a partner of the School Meals Coalition, which is in turn hosted by the World Food Program (WFP).

strategies for driving systemic change, as it serves as an entry point for articulating multiple activities. In this context, PNAE is recognized for going beyond the mere procurement of food products; guided by broader objectives, it departs from the general lowest-price rule, promoting family farming production.<sup>(1)</sup> However, there remains significant untapped potential to drive more sustainable and healthier food production.

In this context, PNAE stands out as a strategic program to enhance these enabling conditions, given its significant <sup>(1)</sup>economic and social impacts, in addition to its ability to articulate multiple policies, sectors and actors.<sup>(2)</sup> By connecting school meals to agroecology, the program can not only secure market access, but also drive the transformation of local production systems, strengthening sustainable practices that leverage the agroecological transition.

### **Box 1: Policy Brief Contributions**

This document places agroecology-based production and the agroecological transition process in a space of prominence, which differs from organic production. Although these processes are associated for legal purposes, with implications for public policies, there are significant differences between the two practices.

Conceptually, this study adopts the definition of agroecological transition aligned with the National Policy on Agroecology and Organic Production (PNAPO), understanding it as "a gradual process of change in practices and agroecosystem management, through the transformation of the productive and social bases of land use and natural resources". And, in line with the perspective of the Agroecology Coalition,<sup>3</sup> agroecology is understood as an integrative field that articulates science, practices, and social movements, guided by ecological sustainability, social justice, food sovereignty, and the recognition of local knowledge.

Based on the identification of regulatory gaps related to the agroecological transition, as well as the public bodies responsible for their regulation, this document presents proposals that include the creation of mechanisms and instruments to recognize and encourage the transition process. It proposes adjustments to federal regulations and new municipal and state

This document echoes the urgency of developing integrated public policies to recognize and drive the agroecological transition process, in order to encourage, expand and consolidate agroecological paradigms and practices, thereby contributing to the achievement of the SDGs.

## **METHODOLOGY**

For the development of this study, the methodological path included six main stages:

- i) literature review and documentary research of the main regulations in force within PNAE, as well as publications on family farming, agroecology, public procurement and institutional markets;
- ii) survey and analysis of Bills in progress in the National Congress with a thematic interface with PNAE and agroecology;

3. Available at: <https://agroecology-coalition.org/what-is-agroecology/>. Accessed 09 Oct. 2025.

- iii) semi-structured interviews with experts;
- iv) meetings and gatherings for dialogue and listening to municipal governments, farmers, local leaders, representatives of associations and cooperatives, among others;
- v) workshop with the participation of strategic guests from the federal, state and municipal public authorities, civil society and academia; vi) development of a diagnostic matrix for analyzing public policy options, aimed at prioritizing the final recommendations.

## CONTEXT

### PNAE, family farming and institutional markets

PNAE is one of the earliest and most impactful public policies for ensuring food and nutritional security and the human right to adequate food. The program provides daily meals to more than 40 million students enrolled in approximately 150 thousand public schools of basic education, located in the 5,570 municipalities of the country.

With the enactment of Law No. 11,947/2009, known as "PNAE Law", significant structural changes took place within the program. Among these changes, the strengthening of family farming stands out, through the requirement that at least 30% of the funds transferred by the FNDE (National Fund for the Development of Education) be allocated in the direct procurement of food products from family farming, rural family entrepreneurs or their organizations, as well as through the establishment of geographical criteria and priority population groups for the procurement of these foods. To this end, a Public Call was instituted, a simplified administrative procedure to operationalize the direct acquisition of food from family farming, which represented a break with the traditional logic of competition centered on the lowest price. <sup>(3)</sup>

4. Available at: <https://www.gov.br/fnde/pt-br/assuntos/noticias/fnde-anuncia-novas-diretrizes-para-garantir-alimentacao-escolar-mais-saudavel>. Accessed 28 Aug. 2025.

5. In Brazil, family farming is defined by Law No. 11,326/2006. However, nearly two decades after its enactment, it can be said that the category of "family farming" is characterized by different productive, social and cultural realities. This diversity stems from multiple factors, such as: farm size, natural conditions, farmers' profiles, land use and occupation, adopted technologies, and forms of production organization, resulting in a highly heterogeneous group.



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These changes have been progressively refined through Resolutions issued by FNDE, such as the recent enactment of Law No. 15,226/2025, which provides for an increase to 45% in the procurement of food products directly from family farming.

## PNAE and Family Farming: priority criteria

- **Population groups:** agrarian reform settlers, traditional indigenous communities and quilombola communities (Law No. 11,947/2009); formal and informal groups of women from family farming and of young farmers (Laws No. 14,660/2023 and No. 15,178/2025, respectively).
- **Geographic criteria:** defined by Resolutions No. 06/2020 and No. 03/2025, they follow a hierarchy beginning with locally produced food, that is, in the same federative entity in which the schools are located, passing to the immediate geographic region, intermediate region, state, and, finally, other states.
- **Organizational criteria:** priority is given to formal groups of family farming organizations, such as associations and cooperatives, with legal CAF (National Family Farmer Registration), followed by informal groups composed of family farmers with individual registrations (CAF física), organized in groups. Next, come individual suppliers with individual registrations (CAF física), which, in turn, have priority over the central cooperatives of family farming.

*An exception to the rule was established by the FNDE through Technical Note No. 3,744,623/2023, in which the Social Identification Number (NIS) obtained via the Unified Registry (CadÚnico) is deemed valid for the commercialization of products from family farming by indigenous, quilombola or other Traditional and Specific Population Groups under the PNAE.*

With direct effects on local development and on the increase of farmers' income, the institutional procurement of food from family farming, when combined with geographical criteria of proximity, as provided for by the PNAE, strengthen the formation of short supply chains, enabling public resources to stimulate the economy, foster local development and reduce environmental impacts by shortening distances, especially those related to food transportation.<sup>(3)</sup> The logic of short supply chains is closely related to the concept of Home-Grown School Feeding (HGSF), in which school feeding programs serve as instruments to strengthen local development, increase the income of family farmers, and improve public health.<sup>(2-5)</sup>

Studies carried out based on national experiences have shown that PNAE is an important instrument for increasing the income of family farmers, especially those with lower annual gross income. Important results were observed in local development, such a 9.8% growth in agricultural production and a 4.5% increase in family livestock, generating a

6. The National Family Farmer Registration (CAF) is an instrument of the National Family Farming Policy, established in 2017 to replace the Declaration of Eligibility for Pronaf in the identification and qualification of Family Farming Production Units and Rural Family Enterprises, serving as a basic requirement for access to various public policies.

multiplier effect on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), in which each R\$ 1.00 of demand for family farming and livestock products resulted in returns of R\$ 1.52 and R\$ 1.66, respectively. Positive impacts were also observed on national GDP, with a 0.65% increase in national income.<sup>(6,7)</sup>

Despite this potential, there are challenges for the implementation of the PNAE in the context of Brazilian federalism. Other studies indicate that the successful inclusion of family farming in the program is strongly linked to municipal administrative strategies and institutional frameworks, requiring a well-structured coordination between demand-side actors (education and nutrition) and supply-side actors (food, technical assistants, and farmers), to ensure program effectiveness and to transform it into an instrument for local development.<sup>(8)</sup>

## PNAE, agroecology and agroecological transition

The prevailing form of family farming in the national scenario is conventional family agriculture, widely recognized, and so named, as a production model marked by a strong dependence on external inputs, high production costs and negative environmental impacts, such as soil degradation, pollution of water resources, intensive use of pesticides and synthetic chemical fertilizers, and greenhouse gas emission. In opposition to this model stands agroecological and organic family farming.<sup>(9,10)</sup>

Established by Law No. 10,831/2003, known as the "Organic Law", the definition of an organic production system refers to "one in which specific techniques are adopted through the optimization of available natural and socioeconomic resources and respect for the cultural integrity of rural communities" (Article 1º). The same Law defines that organic systems also encompass "ecological, biodynamic, natural, regenerative, biological, agroecological, permaculture, among others", commonly recognized as "alternative models".

In 2012, as a result of civil society mobilization, the National Policy on Agroecology and Organic Production (PNAPO) was instituted through Decree No. 7,794/2012, which is an important normative framework for the development of public policies aimed at agroecology, as well as for valuing and recognizing the multiplicity of agroecological initiatives in progress.<sup>(11,12)</sup>



### Box 3: Main instruments and public policies related to agroecology

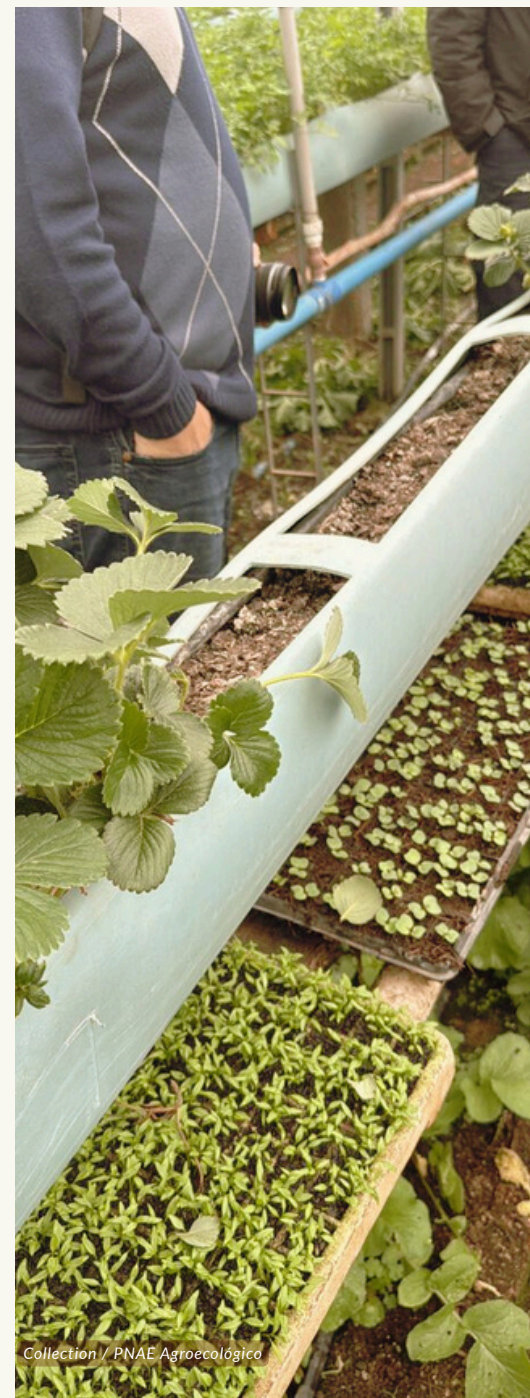
- National Plan for Agroecology and Organic Production (2013-2015; 2016-2019; 2024-2027);
- Specific credit lines for financing agroecological production, through the National Program for the Strengthening of Family Farming (Pronaf) and the Crop Plans - Pronaf Agroecology;
- Consolidation of institutional markets, mainly the Food Procurement Program and PNAE;
- Public Calls for Agroecological Technical Assistance and Rural Extension (ATER);
- Support for territorial networks and civil society organizations - Ecoforte Program

In line with PNAE's strategic dimension, special attention must be given to prioritizing the procurement of organic and/or agroecological foods, as established in FNDE Resolutions No. 4/2015 and No. 6/2020, which also provide for the possibility of a price increase of up to 30% to these foods.

While agroecology-based production is legally encompassed within the framework of organic production – according to its legal definition – it can be stated that, although they are complementary, these practices are fundamentally distinct. In this sense, all agroecological production is necessarily organic; however, not all organic production is agroecological.

Whereas organic production systems are based on the use of natural processes, without pesticides, other synthetic inputs, or genetically modified seeds, agroecology-based production encompasses a multidimensional approach (spatial, food-related, ecological, economic-productive, political-organizational, technical and sociocultural). It extends beyond the mere absence of chemical inputs, incorporating sustainable soil management, natural inputs, biodiversity conservation, the valorization of traditional seeds, and the promotion of productive diversity, with strong social, cultural and political relations. Agroecological production does not admit monoculture and seeks to regenerate ecosystems and promote social justice.<sup>(8)</sup>

This issue has direct implications for implementing the prioritization provided for in the FNDE Resolutions, which frame agroecological production within the scope of organic production, since only the latter is legally recognized. As a result, agroecological foods can only be purchased by PNAE when certified as organic. This framework not only makes



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agroecological practices less visible but also discourages the process of agroecological transition.

Despite those efforts, the implementation of public policies oriented toward agroecology and agroecological transition faces complex challenges. Among these, the permanence of political support and economic incentives that prioritize the conventional production model stand out, as do the challenges related to designing instruments from a systemic perspective, based on the co-production between the State and civil society.

In addition, there is a regulatory gap related to the absence of instruments for identifying and characterizing agroecological transition and agroecology-based production systems, which limits their recognition for the purpose of instrumentalizing public policies.<sup>(13)</sup> Although intended as PNAPO instruments, they have not been implemented to this day.

On the other hand, experiences that highlight the need for formal recognition of agroecological transition are already underway in the states of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, based on the Agroecological Transition Protocol (ATP) and the Agroecological Transition Assessment Instrument (ATAI), respectively, in addition to international initiatives such as the tool "TAPE" (Tool for Agroecology Performance Evaluation), developed by FAO.<sup>(19)</sup>

This instrument is necessary to ensure legal certainty in the development and implementation of public policies that seek to prioritize this category. Specifically within PNAE, it serves as a critical instrument for prioritizing the purchase of food products originating from agroecological transition with public funds.

#### **Box 4: Agroecology and agroecological transition**

Agroecological transition is understood as both the action and the effect of shifting from one mode to a different one, implying a process that unfolds in concrete reality over a period of time, based on an intricate and complex configuration of causes, consequences, and effects in the new situation established.<sup>(15)</sup>

From this perspective, agroecological transition involves the "application of principles and concepts of Ecology to the management and design of sustainable agroecosystems" over time, grounded on local knowledge that, integrated with scientific knowledge, gives rise to the construction and expansion of new socio-environmental knowledge, thereby permanently feeding the agroecological transition process,<sup>(16)</sup> which gradually acquires greater technological, methodological and organizational complexity, depending on the objectives and goals established and on the desired level of sustainability.

Widely known as the five levels of agroecological transition,<sup>(17)</sup> the process begins with: reducing the use of costly and environmentally harmful external inputs (1); followed by the gradual replacement of these inputs and conventional practices with more ecological alternatives (2); leading to the redesign of agroecosystems to function based on internal ecological processes of self-regulation (3); the re-establishment of links between producers and consumers to support farmers in transition (4); and, finally, the construction of a new food system grounded on the foundations created by sustainable agroecosystems and of new economic and reciprocal relations; (5) and based on equity, participation, democracy, justice, and sustainability.

The role of government and public policies is central to the scalability of the agroecological transition, both in productive systems and in the design of public procurement arrangements. Structuring policies such as the PNAE go beyond merely guaranteeing market access, serving as strategic levers to bring production and consumption closer together, strengthen short food supply chains and drive a democratic and inclusive agroecological transition, thereby contributing to the simultaneous achievement of multiple sustainability goals – economic, environmental, social, nutritional, health-related and cultural – in an integrated and comprehensive manner, across different levels and scales, influencing the transformation of food system metabolism.<sup>(11)</sup>

This ability to generate multiple benefits has strengthened the debate around agroecological transition and prompted a call to action based on the understanding that transitions require the implementation of long-term processes that must begin urgently.<sup>(18)</sup>



## BARRIERS

Several challenges, here referred to as barriers, that still hinder the agroecological transition and the procurement of these foods by the PNAE were identified through a literature review, documentary research and, above all, through dialogue with municipal managers and farmers. The main barriers mapped, regarded as central to the agroecological transition, are detailed in **Box 6**.

### Box 5: Main barriers to the agroecological transition and to the acquisition of these foods by PNAE

- **The absence of a regulation to recognize the category of agroecological transition** for the purposes of differentiated procurement of foods for PNAE represents an institutional gap. Under the current legal framework, these foods cannot be procured except as organic products, leading to missed opportunities to strengthen local economies and induce broader changes in food systems. <sup>(11, 18, 19)</sup>
- **Absence of annual adjustments to the per capita value and obstacles to the payment of differentiated prices for organic and agroecological products**, resulting in budgetary insufficiency in PNAE, which compromises compliance with school meals guidelines, mainly due to the rise in food prices. <sup>(20, 21)</sup>
- **The difficulty in accessing bioinputs, equipment, machinery, credit lines, and water represents an obstacle to the production of agroecological foods**, primarily due to regulatory, bureaucratic, and market barriers related to bioinputs, as well as a misalignment between formal credit requirements and the gradual and adaptive nature of the agroecological transition process. <sup>(10,22)</sup>
- **Low levels of investment in continuous and specialized technical assistance and consulting for agroecological production**, with limited and underqualified technical teams to implement agroecology-based approaches. <sup>(20, 23, 24)</sup>
- **Difficulties in including seasonal and culturally appropriate foods in adequate amounts in the menus and public procurement calls**, due to a lack of alignment between meal planning and the actual food supply in the territory, to an absence of mapping of local and regional production, and to low intersectoral coordination between education and agriculture sectors, among others. <sup>(25-27)</sup>
- **Difficulties in procuring food from family farming when school meals management is outsourced**. In these contexts, failure to comply with the minimum 30% quota for procurement from family farming is frequently observed, as well as the allocation of public resources to contracted companies. <sup>(20, 28, 29)</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the main barriers previously identified, a detailed analysis of an initial set of 15 recommendations was carried out related to regulation and operational adjustments; PNAE financing; support for agroecological production and access to institutional markets; and governance. Treated as potential policy options, the initial recommendations were analyzed in terms of their main benefits and trade-offs, a process that supported the prioritization of the final recommendations.

The final recommendations, presented below, are the result of a collective, dialogical, and analytical process, and are considered strategic for the improvement and/or proposition of new regulations and instruments aimed at promoting significant changes to advance agroecological transition through school feeding.



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## REGULATORY FRAMEWORK

### **1 TO REGULATE THE AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITION CATEGORY FOR THE PURPOSE OF DIRECT PROCUREMENT FROM FAMILY FARMING.**

#### **PATHWAYS:**

resumption of actions already outlined in the National Plans for Agroecology and Organic Production, in order to consolidate a regulatory framework for agroecological transition that can guide public policies aimed at direct procurement from family farming. This process should be conducted by governmental bodies at the three levels affected by the theme, with support from state (and/or municipal, if any) agencies for technical assistance, rural extension and agricultural development, and debated within intersectoral governance spaces. Academia, research institutions, civil society organizations, public policy councils, social movements, agroecological networks, and family farmers should participate in the process, in order to ensure that the criteria and instruments of identification and assessment reflect the concrete conditions of production, valuing local knowledge and strengthening the democratic construction of new public policy instruments. Experiences accumulated by agroecological organizations and networks, as well as existing tools, such as TAPE/FAO, IATA/RJ and PTA/SP, should be considered.

### **2 TO PRIORITIZE THE PROCUREMENT OF FOOD PRODUCTS IN AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITION WITHIN PNAE, ENSURING INSTITUTIONAL MARKET ACCESS FOR FARMERS IN TRANSITION AND STIMULATING AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITION.**

#### **PATHWAYS:**

through a Resolution issued by FNDE, the main federal body related to implementing this recommendation, and/or through specific regulations at the state and municipal levels, via their Secretariats of Education. To this end, it is necessary to regulate specific criteria for identifying and characterizing agroecological transition, as expressed in Recommendation 1, in order to ensure legal certainty for public managers. Given that the prioritization of procurement is operationalized through a Public Call process, official guidelines for its improvement – so as to provide for and specify preference for the procurement of these foods – should be issued by the FNDE and implemented by the EEx (Implementing Entities). Intersectoral coordination with strategic bodies related to family farming and institutional procurement can support and facilitate this process.



## MANAGEMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BRAZILIAN SCHOOL MEALS PROGRAM (PNAE)

### **3 TO ISSUE A TECHNICAL NOTE RECOGNIZING AND ENCOURAGING THE PROCUREMENT OF FOOD PRODUCTS IN AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITION, WITH RESOURCES FROM THE PNAE.**

#### **PATHWAYS:**

issuance of a Technical Note by the FNDE confirming the absence of legal or regulatory obstacles for the EEx to procure food products from agroecological transition using PNAE resources, primarily those that already have specific regulations for the identification and characterization of the agroecological transition category, thereby ensuring legal certainty in the program implementation. In addition to a favorable statement, the position should address potential additional percentages to the current values to incentivize such procurement. PNAE's Steering Committee and Advisory Group should be consulted and involved in the process.

### **4 TO INCLUDE IN PNAE'S OUTSOURCED MANAGEMENT CONTRACTS CLAUSES TO ENSURE THE PROCUREMENT OF FOOD PRODUCTS FROM FAMILY FARMING, WITH PRIORITY GIVEN TO FOODS FROM AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITION AND/OR AGROECOLOGICAL AND/OR ORGANIC PRODUCTION**

#### **PATHWAYS**

at the federal level, this recommendation is limited to FNDE, primarily within PNAE's technical area, through the publication of a Technical Note expressing this guidance, respecting the autonomy and responsibilities of each federated entity. At the state and municipal levels, this prioritization of procurement of food from family farming, agroecological and/or organic production and/or agroecological transition should be included into the bidding documents for contracting school food services providers. The consultation and involvement of the Steering Committee and the Advisory Group, as well as the National Forum of School Feeding Councils, can enhance the process. Likewise, within the scope of EEx, School Feeding Councils (CAE) play a relevant role.

**5 TO GUIDE THE EXECUTION OF MUNICIPAL RESOURCES ALLOCATED TO THE PNAE IN ALIGNMENT WITH FEDERAL REGULATIONS, ENSURING BOTH A MINIMUM PERCENTAGE FOR DIRECT PROCUREMENT FROM FAMILY FARMING, AS WELL AS PREFERENCE FOR FOODS ORIGINATING FROM AGROECOLOGICAL TRANSITION AND/OR AGROECOLOGICAL AND/OR ORGANIC FOODS.**

**PATHWAYS**

publication of a Technical Note by the FNDE providing guidance on the use of municipal resources allocated to PNAE. At the state and municipal levels, the prioritization of allocating own-source resources may arise from the local executive branch itself. National bodies with attributions related to the improvement of public management and legal guidance on matters concerning financing and programs, such as the Office of the Comptroller General of the Union (CGU) and the Office of the Attorney General of the Union (AGU), can drive the process through technical guidance and recommendations. The entire process should be developed in a democratic and participatory manner, with the support of the respective oversight bodies.

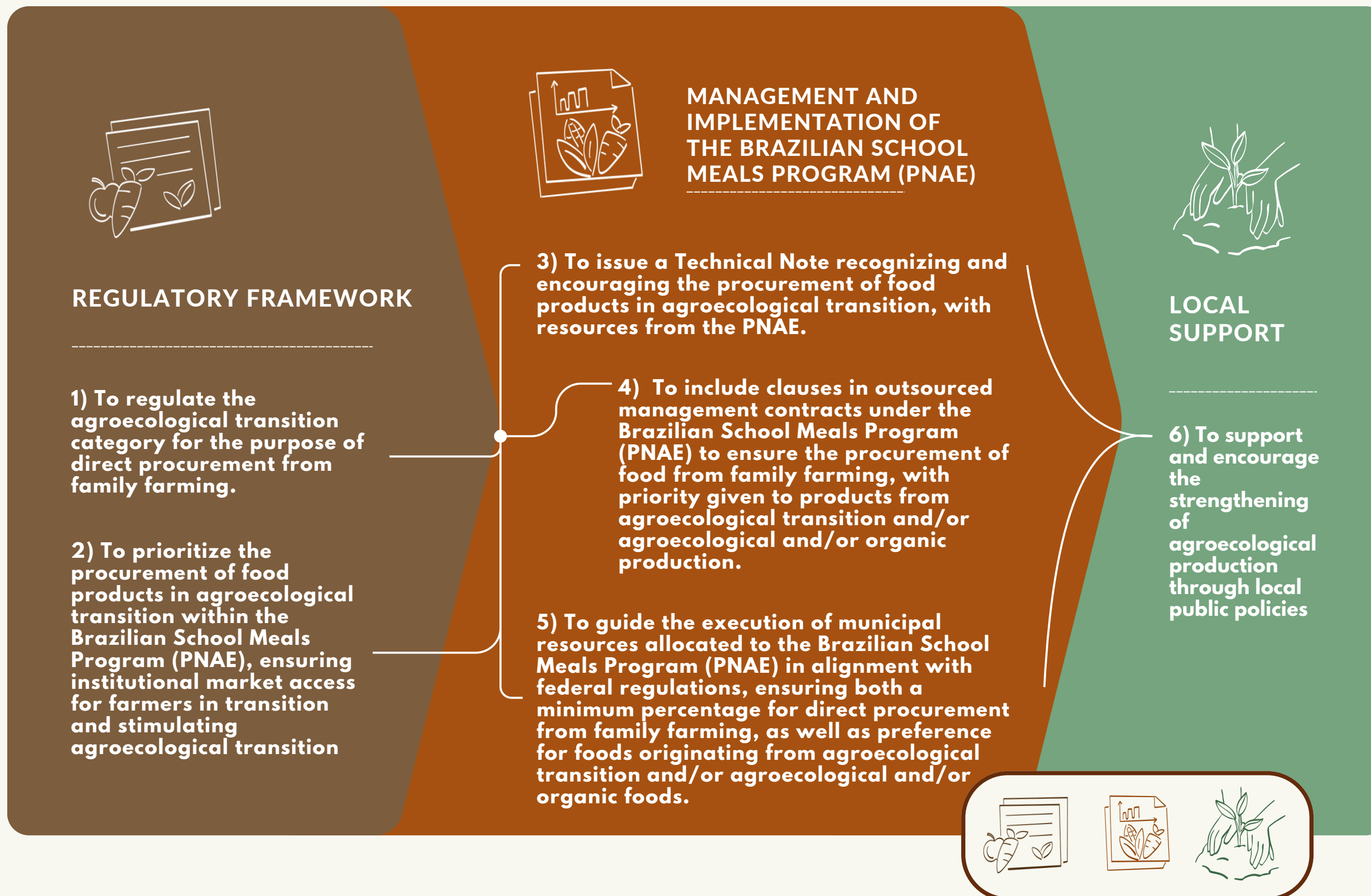


## LOCAL SUPPORT

### 6 TO SUPPORT AND ENCOURAGE THE STRENGTHENING OF AGROECOLOGICAL PRODUCTION THROUGH LOCAL PUBLIC POLICIES

#### **PATHWAYS:**

to encourage the diversification of food production, with species adapted to the climate and local food culture, and the inclusion of socio-biodiversity foods in public food programs menus and in programs aimed at promoting short marketing circuits/food supply chains, such as farmers' markets and direct purchase from producers. To prioritize women and youth in ATER (Technical Assistance and Rural Extension) programs for agroecological transition and continuous technical training focused on agroecology, ensuring the protagonism of these groups. To strengthen projects that articulate seed banks, agroforestry systems and family agroindustries, creating adequate conditions for local processing and the separation between conventional and agroecological products. To train agroecological associations and cooperatives in management, logistics and finance, and in solutions for associativism. To establish and implement progressive targets for the procurement of foods in agroecological transition and organic foods in public purchases, and to ensure adequate price formation in Public Calls to ensure economic viability. To support the creation of programs to promote participatory and/or audit certification. To this end, the City Hall and its Secretariats, especially Agriculture, Education, Economic Development and Environment, play a fundamental role in coordinating and improving policies that support family farmers engaged or with potential engagement in agroecology. Articulation via the Intersecretarial Chambers for Food and Nutrition Security (CAISAN) is also strategic for governance and systemic action, as well as the establishment of inter-institutional partnerships and the guarantee of social participation through municipal councils such as the School Feeding Council, the Council for Sustainable Rural Development, the Council for Food and Nutrition Security, family farmers and their representatives, social movements, non-governmental organizations, among others.



## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The Brazilian School Meals Program (PNAE) stands out as one of the oldest and most successful public policies in the country, and it is internationally recognized for its potential for socioeconomic transformation and for guaranteeing fundamental rights. In the current global context, this articulation between school feeding and agroecology is seen as a catalyst for change, integrating health, sustainability, and social justice to transform food systems.

Despite the recognition of the Brazilian School Meals Program (PNAE) as a driver of the agroecological transition, the challenges remain significant. Among the main barriers is the institutional regulatory gap for recognizing the agroecological transition, resulting in legal uncertainty and restricting the inclusion of farmers who already adopt sustainable agroecological practices.

In light of these and other challenges, contributions were presented aimed at placing agroecology-based production and the agroecological transition in spaces of institutional prominence within the Brazilian School Meals Program (PNAE) and, consequently, across other related public policies.

This is a strategic moment to advance the agroecological transition through the Brazilian School Meals Program (PNAE), given its potential to catalyze structural changes in food systems across these agendas. Such articulation can generate multiple economic, environmental, social, and public health benefits, contributing to the achievement of the SDG goals.

## CREDITS

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