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Technical Note

Analysis of the Research Results: "Corporate Investment and Support to Ensure Food and Nutritional Sovereignty and Security in Brazil (2020–2023)"

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The report *"Corporate Investment and Support to Ensure Food and Nutritional Sovereignty and Security in Brazil (2020–2023)"*, published by the Research Department of the José Luiz Egydio Setúbal Foundation, described the main characteristics of corporate contributions toward achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2, "Zero Hunger and Sustainable Agriculture," and 12, "Responsible Consumption and Production." Based on the results presented, we analyzed some data from the research, considering the Brazilian context in the fight against hunger and identifying the challenges and opportunities for private sector contributions in this area.

Given the broad scope of the study, several challenges emerged from the outset, including the feasibility of data collection through corporate reports. The first section of this note addresses the lack of corporate transparency, marked by the absence of reports or the superficial description of actions. Closely related to this issue, the second section examines how the lack of transparency may indicate greenwashing and socialwashing practices carried out by companies, as detected in the research.

Furthermore, based on the descriptive data on corporate-funded and supported actions presented in the report, qualitative aspects of these initiatives were explored against the complex backdrop of Food and Nutrition Sovereignty and Security (FNSS). In sequence, the sections addressed the lack of institutionalization of corporate philanthropy, with few companies linked to a foundation or institute of their own; the preference for allocating corporate socio-environmental investments to specific projects; the low level of institutional support for civil society organizations (CSOs); the concentration of actions in the stages of food production and consumption to the detriment of others with equal potential; the predominance of direct and circumstantial actions; the stakeholders involved; and the geographical locations where the initiatives were implemented.

1. THE LACK OF CORPORATE TRANSPARENCY

The disclosure of information through institutional reports on activities or thematic reports, such as those on sustainability and Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG), is part of a corporate transparency culture. Through these documents, private companies present to the public, and particularly to their shareholders, the status of their achievements and the progress of their operations.

All the efforts undertaken in the research were based on the use of corporate reports as a source of information on the activities of the private sector. The analysis began with the identification of actions promoting FNSS as described in these documents. However, numerous limitations were encountered during the data collection process. The foremost and most significant constraint was that some of the largest companies in three sectors that are highly relevant to the Brazilian economy (Food and Beverage, Agribusiness, and Retail) did not have activity or sustainability reports available for the period 2020 to 2023, which was the time frame of the study. In many instances, the documents were published only in alternate years, lacking a complete sequence that would cover the entire period under review.

The importance of transparency is demonstrated by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12, “Responsible Consumption and Production.” Its indicator 12.6 specifically aims to “encourage companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle.”

Standards developed by the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) and the International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) Integrated Reporting Framework have been adopted to standardize how companies communicate their strategies, governance structures, social and environmental actions, performance, and perspectives using pre-established models consolidated in the market. These frameworks guide the disclosure of relevant data for stakeholders, such as workforce diversity. Best practices also recommend including at the end of each report a materiality index that highlights the importance of each item required by the reporting standards, highlighting the main concerns and potential impacts for internal and external stakeholders. However, despite enhancing the quality and legitimacy of the information disclosed, adherence to these standards is not mandatory, and only a few companies - typically large ones - follow these standards.

Of the 150 companies analyzed, 98 (65%) had reports that included at least one action related to food and nutrition security. However, only 49 (32.67%)[1] of these companies had made their reports publicly available for all four years studied. These findings demonstrate that, although there is a perception of an emerging culture of institutional reporting among private companies, the practice is still in its early stages and requires further improvement and greater adherence by organizations. The importance of accountability goes beyond the frequent need to report results to shareholders; it encompasses transparency of the organization's actions before a wider range of stakeholders, which is often essential for securing social acceptance, preserving reputation, and maintaining a license to operate (Herremans, Nazari, & Mahmoudian, 2016). As evidenced in this note, an additional benefit is the provision of appropriate information to support the advancement of systematized and public knowledge.

In terms of transparency and information quality, the descriptions of corporate initiatives tend to be brief and superficial, offering limited detail regarding the nature of the activities, the players involved, and their geographical scope. This situation hinders a clear understanding of what was planned versus what was actually implemented, who the target audience was, who the companies' partners were, the budget, the location of the initiative, etc. This information is crucial for analyzing the planning and implementation of corporate

[1] The two percentages were calculated considering the universe of 150 companies.

initiatives, as well as their impacts on the promotion of FNSS.

Compounding this issue is the lack of evaluation metrics and monitoring descriptions for corporate actions. The absence of mechanisms to assess and understand the potential impact of these initiatives creates an information gap that limits the evaluation of the effectiveness of social investments. This shortfall not only impedes external assessments — such as the present study — but also affects the companies themselves, which struggle to gauge the actual and potential outcomes of their investments.

Corporate sustainability and ESG reports are not always audited by appropriately regulated third-party firms, as is the case with financial audits. Even when audits do occur, the reviewers often focus on making comments and observations directed toward the company itself rather than its stakeholders (ZAHID et al., 2022). As a result, the audit process appears to be more aligned with corporate interests than with providing independent evaluations that would empower stakeholders to hold companies accountable for their actions, for example.

2. GREEN AND SOCIAL WASHING IN PRACTICES RELATED TO FNSS

Terms such as greenwashing and social washing have gained prominence in the debate surrounding sustainability and corporate social responsibility. The Oxford Dictionary, the most frequently cited source in the literature (NETTO et al., 2020), defines *greenwashing* as "to mislead (the public) or counter (public or media concerns) by falsely representing a person, company, product, etc., as being environmentally responsible."[2] Socialwashing, on the other hand, refers to companies making misleading or unfounded claims to appear more socially responsible than they actually are (GOLDMAN; ZHANG, 2022). In essence, these terms are often used to criticize companies that, rather than implementing substantive changes to their operations, adopt superficial, low-impact practices and present them as

[2] Available at: https://www.oed.com/dictionary/greenwash_v?tab=meaning_and_use#11644342. Accessed in: May 15, 2025.

innovative and impactful strategies for social or environmental good. Although such actions may appear positive at first glance, they fail to make significant contributions to building a more sustainable future or meaningfully supporting communities. More often, they function as marketing strategies aimed at appealing to audiences concerned with corporate ethics rather than serving as effective responses to inequality or serious social challenges, such as the high rates of Food and Nutrition Insecurity (FNI).

Among the initiatives mapped in the research, several examples can be found of actions that, while considered good practices, are promoted as being more effective or impactful than they actually are. The lack of transparency and clear criteria in the information provided by companies hinder accurate assessment, but there is evidence that many of these actions are no more than routine practices — such as traditional farming techniques, compliance with mandatory legislation, or, in more extreme cases, implausible claims that border on misinformation.

By way of example, not all the corporate practices labeled as sustainable brought tangible environmental benefits. SDG 2.4, which promotes resilient and low-carbon agriculture, encourages the use of renewable and sustainable energy sources in food production. However, some companies claim to adopt practices such as reforestation, often planting eucalyptus, for woodchip production (used as an energy source). While technically renewable, such practices have questionable sustainability impacts, as they can lead to greenhouse gas emissions and environmental degradation rather than mitigation. This highlights a disconnection between rhetoric and actual outcomes.

Another example is the lack of disclosure by companies regarding the types of food being donated. Ultra-processed foods, for instance, often have low nutritional value, and donations of items that are near their expiration date or improperly stored can pose health risks. Although these donations may play an important role in immediate hunger relief, these types of food offer limited long-term benefits to individuals' health and nutrition.

These cases underscore the importance of moving beyond rhetoric and adopting corporate practices that are genuinely and materially aligned with sustainability principles.

This requires not only implementing robust verification mechanisms but also fostering a cultural shift within organizations, one that prioritizes real positive social and environmental impacts over marketing optics. As long as companies continue to engage in ambiguous or superficial actions, terms like greenwashing and socialwashing will remain necessary to expose the gap between corporate discourse and practice.

3. LOW ADOPTION OF INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF CORPORATE PHILANTHROPY

Corporate actions aimed at promoting FNSS were the central focus of the study, with the aim of understanding the initiatives undertaken by various segments within the food supply chain. However, a complementary yet relevant point deserves attention: the existence — or absence — of companies' own foundations and institutes, through which philanthropic efforts are institutionalized.

Corporate foundations typically operate with greater autonomy than ESG or corporate social responsibility departments, enabling them to establish regular annual budgets dedicated to philanthropic contributions. A common practice in this context is the allocation of a percentage of the company's annual profit to philanthropy. When business rationality is applied to social investments, it often results in more efficient mechanisms for allocating resources to public goods. From this perspective, companies act as catalysts by providing their corporate foundations and institutes not only with financial capital but also with the operational infrastructure needed to optimize the management of social projects— from fundraising to implementation — while reducing administrative costs (KOUSHYAR; LONGHOFER; ROBERTS, 2015).

In general, within the sample analyzed, corporate social investment is executed in parallel to business management structures, typically under departments such as Corporate Social Responsibility or marketing, without independent institutionalization and with limited allocation of dedicated funds. One plausible explanation is the high structural cost associated with maintaining institutes and foundations, including ongoing activities and specialized staff. This pattern is reflected in the findings of the present study: among the 98 companies analyzed, only 36 maintain foundations or institutions specifically dedicated to philanthropic efforts, less than half of the observed universe.

4. THE PREFERENCE FOR UNIQUE, IN-HOUSE, AND SHORT-TERM PROJECTS

Corporate socio-environmental investments in initiatives supporting FNSS offer a wide range of structuring and implementation possibilities. However, an analysis of the 681 actions funded or supported by the 98 companies examined revealed that standalone projects were the predominant format, totaling 472 initiatives — representing 69.31% of all actions.

Projects are typically characterized by their smaller scope, target on specific groups, and short to medium-term objectives. Consequently, such initiatives lack the breadth and impact potential of programs, which act as thematic umbrellas that coordinate multiple actions around a coherent and more complex set of objectives, generally aiming for longer-lasting outcomes.

There is no hierarchy between projects and programs. Corporate funding and support for projects can be highly valuable, especially for enabling responsive, on-the-ground action. Nevertheless, in the context of the multifaceted causes of FNI, a dominant focus on projects limits the potential for investments that could yield broad, scalable, structured, and long-term impacts, critical elements to addressing hunger in Brazil.

The preference for short-term private social investments is often shaped by the expectations and pressures of the companies' investors, who tend to constrain long-term corporate commitments to socio-environmental responsibility, including the implementation of extended initiatives, such as programs (ERHEMJAMTS; HUANG, 2019). This trend reflects a broader pattern whereby corporate social action mirrors general management strategies. Erhemjamts and Huang (2019), for instance, show that corporations and investors inclined toward long-term investments are also more likely to prioritize sustained social initiatives.

In addition to programs, another underutilized yet essential model of initiative is multisectoral collaboration. Multisectoral initiatives offer a holistic approach to complex issues by integrating knowledge, values, and evidence from different sectors, often resulting in more effective and resilient solutions, while also fostering shared learning and adaptive practices among stakeholders (KURUVILLA et al., 2018). Despite their significance, only two cases (0.29%) of such type were identified in the study. These collaborative efforts are particularly relevant to advancing FNSS, as they foster cooperation among key actors — often from different stages of the food supply chain—toward shared objectives, thus building bridges, aligning priorities, and leveraging collective strengths.

FNI is a deeply rooted and multicausal problem in Brazil, shaped by intersecting socioeconomic inequalities, such as race, gender, and income (REDE PENSSAN, 2022). The preference for non-scalable initiatives, that have limited scope, narrowly defined target groups, and restricted geographic location, alongside a lack of engagement in cross-sectoral coordination or long-term transformation, results in localized impacts that, although valuable, fall short of the potential contribution that private investment could achieve.

5. INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT, MAINTENANCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS, AND THE SHAPING OF THE FNSS AGENDA

Given the complexity of designing and implementing actions aimed at promoting FNSS, carrying out a company's own project may require more effort than is feasible or desirable. Beyond the need for dedicated personnel, such initiatives demand expertise in mapping the needs of target populations, executing activities, and monitoring impacts. Acknowledging the challenges of direct corporate engagement, there are alternative approaches organizations can adopt, one of which is establishing formal partnerships with CSOs, allowing them to lead the initiatives.

A common model for corporate engagement is the establishment of partnership agreements in which companies commit to funding or supporting specific actions already being implemented by CSOs, such as projects, programs, or campaigns. However, there are other forms of collaboration, such as institutional support for these organizations. This type of investment involves unrestricted donations or contributions toward maintaining the CSO's physical headquarters or staff, for instance. From the perspective of CSOs, access to flexible resources for infrastructure improvements, staff training, and the payment of fair wages is fundamental to ensuring institutional governance, memory, and continuity, necessary conditions for undertaking more complex, long-term change-oriented work.

Although institutional support is essential for maintaining CSOs and their long-term, locally rooted efforts, investments in specific initiatives are more commonly favored by companies. This preference is often linked to the reputational benefits such support provides, as it ensures greater points of contact with the public. As a result, within the 681 actions analyzed in the study, only 27 (3.96%) involved provided institutional support for organizations engaged in FNSS, including cases in which funding was allocated for organizational maintenance and a specific activity. Only 16 (2.35%) actions were classified as organizational support, i.e., aimed specifically at sustaining, expanding, or strengthening the operational capacity of implementing organizations.

This preference for action-based support over unrestricted funding for implementing organizations has two major implications for social investment. The first, already mentioned, is the corporate quest for visibility for their investments, even if this means forgoing a greater and more significant contribution to FNSS. The second result is the emergence of biases within the field of social action. Since companies tend to allocate resources to high-visibility initiatives, CSOs increasingly tailor their proposals to match donor expectations, often sidelining other urgent and underserved areas of intervention.

Institutional support not only ensures that corporate efforts are effectively leveraged but also guarantees the continuity of CSOs that play a vital role in implementing initiatives, acting in direct engagement with target populations and their in-depth understanding of FNSS-related needs. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the argument outlined here is not about replacing corporate investments in specific activities with institutional support. Rather, it calls for a more balanced allocation of resources, recognizing that both approaches are essential to improving FNSS indices in Brazil.

6. THE GAP IN ACTIONS ACROSS THE INTERMEDIATE STAGES OF THE FOOD CHAIN

Considering the food chain as the path food takes from production to consumption, the actions analyzed in this study were predominantly concentrated at the extreme links of the chain, with 363 actions (53.30%) on consumption and 324 (47.58%) on food production.[3] However, there is a notable scarcity of initiatives targeting the intermediate stages of the chain — such as storage, transportation, and processing — which are equally critical in the fight against FNI.

The causes of food loss and waste are well-known and multifaceted, stemming from issues such as improper handling in the field, inadequate packaging, overcrowded transportation vehicles, poor road conditions, bulk sales, excessive product handling by consumers in retail environments, and the overstocking of goods on store shelves (JUNIOR & SOARES, 2018). In the case of grains, for instance, losses during storage can reach up to 50% of total production due to technical inefficiencies in storage silos (COSTABILE, 2017). Since FNI can also be mitigated by redistributing food that would otherwise be lost or wasted, these facts underscore the critical role of intermediate links within the food chain.

To better understand the relationship between the commercial activities of the companies studied and their investments in FNSS along the food chain, the research cross-referenced data on commercial and socio-environmental investments by chain link. The analysis revealed, once again, that the production and consumption stages are prioritized both in business operations and in socio-environmental actions. This pattern holds across all three sectors examined: agribusiness, food and beverage, and retail.

Although many companies operate commercially in other links of the chain, particularly in storage and transport and logistics, virtually no FNSS-oriented actions were identified in those areas. This gap highlights a disconnection between one dimension of hunger and a potential solution to it: despite substantial food losses in the intermediate stages of the chain, they remain largely neglected by the socio-environmental investments

[3] The percentages refer to the total number of actions (681). Each action may occur in more than one link of the food chain.

of major companies in the food sector.

It is essential for corporate policies and private socio-environmental investments to reflect the entirety of the food chain and address the multiple facets and root causes of FNI. Combating hunger requires more than boosting production, distributing food baskets, or encouraging conscious consumption. It demands restructuring logistics systems, minimizing losses throughout transport, processing, and storage flows, and ensuring that the food produced reaches the population in sufficient quantity and quality.

7. PREDOMINANCE OF DIRECT SUPPORT INITIATIVES

The initiatives analyzed in this study revealed a wide range of goals, demonstrating the diversity of directions available for corporate funding in the field. However, there was a predominance of initiatives focused on the “adoption of best practices and corporate responsibility principles” (46.99% of actions), as well as on “hunger relief” (40.38%) and “food production” (29.52%). In contrast, in the period studied, there was a significantly lower incidence of initiatives aimed at “nutritional security” (13.80%), “access to water” (6.61%), “strengthening of family farming” (4.85%), “reuse” (4.55%), “waste reduction” (2.64%), and “reducing food loss” (0.44%).

FNSS encompasses multiple dimensions and social actors. Combating FNI has become increasingly complex due to the intersecting impacts of the covid-19 pandemic, the dismantling of Brazilian public policies related to FNSS in recent years, the intensification of climate change, and the ongoing war in Ukraine (SOFI/FAO, 2022; II VIGISAN/REDE PENSSAN, 2022). This multiplicity of causes implies the need for both an expansion of the scope of initiatives and a diversification of investment focus, particularly toward underrepresented aspects.

Many of the mapped actions had a short-term nature, such as the distribution of food aiming emergency hunger relief during crises like the pandemic or natural disasters. While these efforts are essential, their contribution to structural and long-term change is limited. They address immediate food access without necessarily aiming to ensure that assisted families achieve FNSS on a permanent basis. Furthermore, the lack of transparency in corporate reports regarding the types of food donated hinders any assessment of the nutritional adequacy of those donations.

The profile of the actions suggests a rise in corporate engagement, particularly in response to attention-grabbing crises, such as the pandemic and floods on the São Paulo coast. This reactive approach reveals that moments of widespread attention can trigger engagement and increase investment toward ensuring FNSS. It is crucial to consider the potential continuity of these initiatives and whether the levels of social investment mobilized during such events can be sustained to support long-term hunger reduction programs.

A key component of FNSS, nutritional security, when addressed at all, was often limited to the provision of organic food and nutrition services frequently restricted to employees of the financing companies. The Brazilian Food Insecurity Scale (EBIA in Portuguese), published in 2014 by the now-defunct Ministry of Social Development and Fight Against Hunger, highlights that inadequate access to adequate food can hinder child development, compromising physical health and cognitive performance.

Reducing food waste and promoting reuse represents another critical frontier in achieving FNSS. With approximately 55 million tons of food wasted annually in Brazil, an amount eight times greater than the needed to feed all individuals experiencing severe FNI[4] (CONSULTORIA DO AMANHÃ; INTEGRATION; UNIÃO SP, 2022), initiatives that promote responsible consumption could significantly mitigate waste and redirect usable food. Yet, initiatives in this domain accounted for less than 5% of all actions and saw limited engagement from key stakeholders across the food production chain.

Efforts that focus on the reuse and redistribution of food that has not reached the end consumers in retail settings can play a vital role in this context. Such food, when unsuitable for consumption, can be transformed into compost for agriculture, and when in good condition to be consumed, can be redirected to CSOs and food banks, which donate it

[4] People experiencing hunger report having faced, over the past three months, a "severe reduction in both the quantity and variety of food, which may have included going an entire day without eating or consuming food only once per day" (MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, FAMILY AND FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER, 2023).

to families facing FNI. Moreover, initiatives that raise consumer awareness and empower community leaders to share knowledge about reducing household food waste are other valuable possibilities.

Another area lacking in investment is the “strengthening of family farming”. Its importance is related to job creation and food supply diversification. Public policies have underscored its importance, such as the Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos (PAA, in Portuguese), which makes direct food purchases from family farmers without public bidding, redistributing the products to those in FNI, and the Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar (PNAE, in Portuguese), which establishes 30% of its budget for the direct purchase of products from family farming —thus promoting sustainable and local development. Expanding investments and incentives in this area offers a promising path for enhancing the resilience of food systems and sustainably addressing FNI.

8. PARTNERSHIPS WITH COOPERATED MEMBERS ARE MORE FREQUENT THAN WITH SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES

The initiatives to promote FNSS involved several stakeholders throughout their design, implementation, and impact stages. Among these, cooperative members and suppliers were the most frequently engaged, featuring 31.72% of the mapped actions. As integral components of corporate supply chains, suppliers and cooperative members received support to enhance the quality of their products and processes, an increasingly common prerequisite for companies to integrate industry associations and obtain certificates. Consequently, in addition to benefiting suppliers and cooperative members, such actions may also yield financial returns for the sponsoring companies themselves. A comparable dynamic was observed in relation to internal employees of the companies studied, who in some cases received nutritional care. While these initiatives directly improved the workforce wellbeing, they also indirectly benefited the companies by enhancing their relationship with employees and the overall quality of life of workers (PORTER; KRAMER, 2011). However, this type of action was relatively rare, accounting for only 3.08% of the cases.

The second most frequently engaged stakeholder were the communities located near company facilities, involved in 30.98% of the initiatives. With advances in technology, companies have increasingly valued qualified labor, and in order to attract such talents, they have promoted development and technical training initiatives targeting individuals from surrounding communities (RICO, 1997). Given the operational ease provided by geographic proximity, local communities tend to receive more initiatives aimed at mitigating the impacts of business activities. Moreover, these communities represent target groups that are more accessible and easier to engage. Often, residents are relatives or acquaintances of the organization's employees, and they may also constitute potential future workers (RICO, 1997).

Finally, interactions with companies' end consumers were sporadic, occurring in only 8.08% of cases. In certain initiatives sponsored by retailers, for example, consumers contributed as donors, providing food or financial resources for fundraising campaigns.

9. LOCATION OF INITIATIVES AND THE PREFERENCE FOR PROXIMITY

As a country of continental dimensions, Brazil faces structural challenges that impact its population to varying degrees across regions and states, and one of these is FNI. Therefore, identifying the geographic distribution of company-financed or supported initiatives becomes a critical data for understanding the scope and direction of corporate socio-environmental investment within this thematic area.

The Southeast and South regions, particularly the states of São Paulo and Paraná, registered the highest number of initiatives promoted or supported by the companies analyzed. The state of São Paulo alone accounted for 146 (21.44%) initiatives, also hosting the largest concentration of company headquarters, with 37 (37.76%) out of the 98 analyzed. Paraná comes second, with 125 (18.36%) initiatives and 20 (20.41%) company headquarters. At the regional level, the Southeast concentrated 240 (35.24%) actions and the South 207 (30.40%).

The clustering of initiatives in these regions reflects a pattern of favoring implementation in economically developed areas, often at the expense of regions with lower development indicators. In 2022, the North and Northeast regions reported severe FNI rates of 7.7% and 6.2% of households, respectively (MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT, FAMILY AND FIGHT AGAINST HUNGER, 2023). Yet, these same regions had the lowest initiatives financed or supported by the analyzed companies, with only 133 (19.53%) cases in the Northeast and 109 (16.01%) in the North.

Another relevant factor in understanding corporate social investment dynamics is the geographic proximity of these initiatives to companies' headquarters. Of the 98 companies reviewed, 84 carried out at least one initiative in the same state where their headquarters are located. On average, 52% of the initiatives took place within the home states of the respective companies.

Consequently, when aiming to finance or support FNSS-related initiatives as part of their socio-environmental strategies, companies tend to prioritize locations near their operational bases, driven by convenience and vested interests. This geographic bias limits the reach of corporate efforts, often excluding areas and populations with greater needs related to FNSS.

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Acknowledgment of the Use of Artificial Intelligence in the Preparation of this Technical Note: ChatGPT was employed as an auxiliary tool for the rephrasing of sentences to enhance clarity. Additionally, Consensus was utilized for the retrieval of scientific articles. In all instances, the content generated through these tools was thoroughly reviewed by the authors and incorporated only when deemed accurate and appropriate.