Regional Governance in Brazil's Unified Health System: a conceptual essay

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Abstract *This article is a conceptual essay aimed at supporting analyses of the regionalization processes implemented in Brazil's Unified Health System, from the perspective of regional governance. The authors conducted a literature review in the social sciences, public administration, and critical geography, focusing on the concepts of governance, territorial governance, and regional governance in the debate on development. In dialogue with these contributions to the analysis of recent regulation and implementation of health sector regionalization in Brazil, with special reference to use of the Organizational Contract for Public Action (COAP) in the country's health regions, the article concludes that the research on governance as a modern approach to linking public policies highlights the timeliness of developing methodologies and critical reflection on the relevant national processes in Brazil for future health sector proposals, thereby pointing to a new stage in the improvement of the Unified Health System.*
Key words *Regional governance, Territorial governance, Government planning, Regionalization, Public policies and health*

Introduction

Regionalization has been a recurrent guideline in strategies for decentralization of government provision of healthcare in Brazil since the 1980s. Such objectives as optimization of installed capacity, rationalization of care, economies of scale, integration of Municipal systems, and overcoming barriers and differences in access have led to various alternatives in the organization of health sector action at this territorial scale, sometimes reinforcing local autonomy in the management of initiatives involving inter-municipal associations such as regional consortia, and other times reinforcing the hierarchical organization of care via Federal regulation and State-level command.

During the 2000s, Brazil's Federal health sector legislation and rulings have prioritized the region as the scale for government planning in the States, establishing planning instruments with a regional scope, criteria for the definition of health regions, and channels for negotiation and shared management in the provision of medium and high-complexity care in the region[1-3] and the integration of cooperative healthcare networks linking all levels of complexity.

Government strategies in this context have reinforced the federative nature of intergovernmental relations (i.e., between levels of government) in Brazil, local autonomy in priority-setting, decentralized decisions and responsibilities on planning and resource allocation in the regions to the State and Municipal governments, and proposed comprehensive criteria for the demarcation of health regions, such as cultural, economic, and social identities and the existence of shared communications and transportation infrastructure networks.

Regionalization received new impetus in Brazil's recent history with Decree No. 7.508 of June 28, 2011, which regulates Law 8080/90 in terms of planning, healthcare provision, and federative governance in the organization of the Unified Health System[4].

The decree includes provisions on regional government health planning in the Federative Republic of Brazil, with guidelines for joint action between the federation's political and administrative units (i.e., Federal government, States, and Municipalities) at the regional level. Such guidelines assume changes in the public policymaking process and the underlying logic in the health system's operation, with repercussions on the mechanisms and arrangements in health governance in the country.

These guidelines feature a new instrument for formal agreements on collaboration among the federative units, to be signed at the regional level, to establish (or reestablish) the necessary healthcare networks for integration of actions in each health region, including responsibilities, health indicators and targets, performance assessment criteria, and budget resources. The instrument is known as the Organizational Contract for Public Action (*Contrato Organizativo da Ação Pública*), hereinafter referred to as the COAP.

The COAP is a multilateral agreement signed jointly by the Mayors and Municipal Secretaries of Health, State Governor and State Secretary of Health, and Minister of Health. The official signing of negotiated commitments by means of this legal device meet the expectations for legal backing in enforcing the public health obligations of these different levels of government.

In our view, such formal agreement among the federative bodies in the region through the COAP requires new relations between the Federal, State, and Municipal governments in establishing joint planning in responses with an inter-municipal scope, including the identification of health problems and their causes and necessary interventions and linkage of actions that extend beyond the health sector itself, since this legal instrument expands the political content of intergovernmental relations in the region[5].

We thus contend that the COAP will prove to be an innovative policy in planning and management of the Unified Health System, to the extent that it succeeds in promoting dialogue between different cultures and municipal stakeholders in the State, inter-sector approaches for regional problem-solving, and cooperative intergovernmental actions in establishing a new mode of regional governance in the Federative Republic of Brazil.

Starting from these premises, the essay gathers recent contributions from the literature on political geography and the social sciences on the concepts of governance, territorial governance, and regional governance, with a view towards supporting future analyses on health regionalization in Brazil, with its limits and possibilities for contributing to new forms of governance in the country.

The studies identified in the review, although not explored exhaustively in this article, examine the theme of governance through analyses of the processes and proposals in government decentralization and regionalization, local development and the integration of "economy and soci-

ety" in public policymaking, innovations in government action, the formation of public policy networks in complex societies, and in the health sphere, the organization of services and systems.

The studies also contribute to updating regional issues in the context of globalization, identifying and conceptualizing trends in de-territorialization and reterritorialization and problematizing the proliferation of regionalisms, regional identities, and new/old inequalities at the global and intra-national levels.

The essay's theoretical and conceptual approach aimed to gather elements for the analysis of health sector regionalization in Brazil's States in the wake of Decree no. 7.508, to identify the reorientation introduced by its provisions, especially COAP, in terms of its limits and potentials to spawn changes in the country's regional governance structure.

The article is organized in four topics. The first three address the concepts of governance, territorial governance, and regional governance. The fourth presents the implications of incorporating these concepts into the analysis of governance in the SUS in the context of implementing the COAP.

The political origins of the governance concept

The concept of governance spread worldwide following publication of the World Bank document *Governance and Development*, in 1992[6], in the context of international institutional analyses of the state's role in development, in the search for more effective public policies.

Governance is defined in this context as governments' capacity to exercise authority, control, and power in the administration of a country's social and economic resources through policy planning, formulation, and implementation and enforcing development roles[7].

In elaborating on the theme of governance, studies have focused on government procedures and practices in achieving these targets, with increasing emphasis on the institutional decision-making format, public-private policymaking linkage, and participation by different stakeholders or from different spheres of power[7].

Since then, the international agenda for cooperation in development has addressed the governance concept and its implications for government actions, even setting good governance standards that have been included among the conditions for international donor aid and loans. According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP)[8], the ideal good governance standards include the following: participatory, consensus-oriented, accountable, transparent, responsive, effective and efficient, equitable and inclusive, and follows the rule of law.

Governance has also occupied a central place in the European debate since the 2000s, when the Commission of the European Communities defined European governance reform as one of its four strategic objectives, and in 2001 it published a book with proposals for opening the policy-making process[9]. In this debate, the concept of governance refers to the set of rules, processes, and practices involving quality in the exercise of power at the European level with responsibility, transparency, coherence, efficiency, and efficacy. The concept emphasizes the incorporation of more persons and organizations in its conceptualization and realization and promotion of greater accountability by all the stakeholders.

A review of recent literature on the theme shows that the concept was quickly grasped by governments and further elaborated by academia. The concept of governance has been updated and further qualified through different interpretations and analyses of practices designated by the concept in studies from different fields. For example, in the field of public administration, governance is associated with processes of policy negotiation in the identification of needs and definition of objectives and/or policies, with effective implementation and the guarantee of legitimate stakeholders' influence and knowledge of the results as basic conditions[10].

In the social sciences, the concept of governance appears in approaches that analyze the legitimacy of a public space as a work in progress, power-sharing between the governors and the governed, processes of stakeholder negotiation, and decentralization of authority and roles in the act of governing[11].

According to Ferrão[12], the concept of governance reflects structural changes in the modern and rationalist state, related to administrative reforms, reformulation of the state's role, and reconfigurations of society in recent history, as the basis for: regulatory and strategic interventions consistent with diversified relations among diverse stakeholders, increasingly organized as networks, recourse to unique partnerships and contracts, improved efficiency in public action through closer proximity to citizens, recognition of the respective agendas in the context of multi-

plication of nongovernmental organizations, and deepening of democracy and government and social accountability.

The dissemination and incorporation of the governance concept reflects the growing need for social and intergovernmental policy negotiation. At the national and international levels, the concept reinforces the idea and practices of multilevel action, cooperation in the infra- and supranational coordination of public policies, and territorial policy coordination. Rodrigues[13] emphasizes the decentralization of responsibilities to local agents and municipalities first, citizens' participation, and the use of networks and partnerships to achieve common objectives.

The literature further analyzes the emergence of a new founding social governance with arrangements based on inter-sector collaboration, cooperation, and joint, negotiated action between public and private stakeholders involving the first, second, and third sectors of society, with governments, the market, and community in drafting, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating policies, programs, and political projects[10].

More recently, increasing emphasis has been placed on the concept of territorial governance, defined as "the capacity of a territorially organized society to manage the public affairs based on joint and cooperative involvement of social, economic, and institutional stakeholders"[14].

In summary, the emergence, dissemination, and use of the governance concept result from important changes in recent decades in contemporary democracies in national states, international relations, the market, and society that have been reconstituting the space of public interventions, especially by governments, at the different scales of territories politically revalued from the development perspective.

Such changes are present in the Brazilian state's public policy scenario, renewed in its Federal form by the 1988 Constitution, pressuring for new interactions in the formulation and implementation policies and government strategies. Thus, the understanding of political processes that inform and characterize current health policy can benefit from a reading of the sector approach to governing, based on the concept of governance, besides contributing to new analyses on the changes currently under way.

In our view, the concept of territorial governance emerges from the first literature review dealing with the theme of governance, as the one that summarizes the set of approaches examined in the studies. In addition, the territorial dimen-

sion of governance assumes particular relevance in the guidelines on linkage of action between levels of government in the elaboration, formalization, and implementation of the Organizational Contract for Public Action in the States' health regions. This frame of reference is therefore relevant to our approach to health sector regionalization.

Territorial governance and regionalization

The definition of territorial governance used in this essay is based on the concepts of territory and territoriality. Territory is seen as the content, means, and process of social relations, based on which social dimensions are linked in unity with each other and to nature (external to man), the historical process, and the multi-scalar dimension of territorial dynamics. Territoriality is a social construction of territorial reality in a specifically demarcated and partitioned space.

Critical geography offers interesting definitions of territory for an approach to the territorial dimensions of processes of public policy regionalization. A widely adopted definition is that of "used territory" elaborated by Milton Santos[15,16].

According to Santos, the territory is not territory in itself, but used territory, and in this sense it is ground + identity. It constitutes a dynamic totality, the product of multiple summations to which the process of history is submitted at every instant. Thus, the geographic space, understood as used territory, takes on a new functioning in the contemporary globalized world as the result of vertical and horizontal dimensions that occur simultaneously as networks and as the space of all, as rationalities derived from what he calls world (world market and world governments) and from ordinary space (the domain of contiguity, neighboring places united by a territorial continuity), in their different divisions and scales.

Along the same line, Rückert[17], in his analysis of contemporary territorial policies, highlights the importance of examining the new uses of territory in this context of global rescaling, inscribed by the power exercised by diverse actors in the production of space by means of the practice of powers, policies, and strategic programs, for understanding any current public policy.

From this perspective, the territory on its different scales – local, regional, national, global – encompasses nature and society, objects and actions, spatial forms and power relations, environmental resources and infrastructure,

economic, socio-environmental, political, and cultural interactions, processes, continuities, and discontinuities, materiality and immateriality. The territory is simultaneously unique and multiple, singular and plural (and singular in the plural), living space, abstract and concrete[10].

According to Dasi[18], the propositions for the establishment of territorial governance are associated with the debate on sustainable development and assume an innovative form in territorial planning and management roles, based on negotiation and consensus-building among multiple actors that share objectives and know and assume their roles in achieving them. They result from a new understanding of public action and its organizational structures and require a comprehension of the way a state's territories are administered and its policies enforced.

In other words, territorial governance assumes a shared vision for the territory's future at all levels and among the stakeholders to achieve political objectives by means of coordinated, cooperative, and concerted actions, wagering on the return to politics in the state-oriented sense of the word.

Further according to the Dasi[18], in order to ensure and improve the socioeconomic and socioecological functioning of territories, territorial planning oriented towards sustainable development is performed by three functions – ordering, development, and coordination. The idea of ordering the territory refers to the redistributive function of public policies, competitiveness, endogenous development, and sustainability, also considering the existing territorial, social, and cultural values.

The development function includes multi-scalar relations, whether in endogenous development in less developed spaces, valuing the available territorial capital, or in reinforcing developed spaces, seeking to insert them in zones of world economic integration. And the function of coordination aims at comprehensive and cross-sector planning of the territory, based on multilevel relations, especially between the local and regional scales, proper to its vertical dimension, on horizontal relations between territories, and on participation by individuals and organized groups.

In short, territorial governance can be defined as the promotion of greater policy coordination and stakeholder cooperation based on a shared territorial vision. It implies spatial development strategies, expanded processes of participation, and reinforcement of territorial identity.

It can be viewed from two angles: simply as the application of good governance principles to territorial urban policies, or as a process of planning and management of territorial dynamics from an innovative, shared, and collaborative perspective[12,18], the focus of this study.

This approach suggests considering investments in areas of potential growth, the development of synergies and complementary roles in community policies, flexible mobilization of additional resources according to regional specificities, and improvement of governance with a territorial focus.

The region as the prime field for public policy intervention can thus be read as a scale in a territory that shapes itself as a political and social terrain, full of asymmetries, contradictions, and power clashes, with converging needs for intergovernmental political agreement, typical of multilevel governance, the products of dialogue between governments, society, and market, typical of social governance, and those identified through a shared vision of the territory, typical of territorial governance.

This perspective is interesting for contextualizing and analyzing processes of sectorial regionalization. The health region can be defined as a field of practices, internal and external norms, and values (social, market, cultural, and political), sown by contradictions between the vertical vectors of global and national institutional processes that impact it and the horizontal relations between the individuals and social actors that live, circulate, and interact there.

In other words, health region is not constituted as a mere administrative entity, limited to the multi-sector and multilevel government actions that unfold there, but as the product of a territory with distinct and often conflicting economic, social, political, institutional, and individual expectations, where power relations permeate the territory's different uses.

The vertical vectors that impact health regions in Brazil feature the rules and guidelines stemming from the country's federative system, and with regard to the local social actors that circulate in the health sector, the fact that the population that lives or circulates in the region includes users, health professionals, service providers, government actors, and nongovernmental actors that integrate the decision-making arrangement for public health management.

Political regionalization processes in general and those in health in particular would benefit from at least a partial grasp of the complexity of

the territories to which they belong and the governance arrangements for their implementation.

Thus, we thus see a promising task in addressing the process of health regionalization under way in Brazil and analyzing the public sector's participation in this context, adding value to the ordering of a political territory more vast than health and including local specificities and interactions between actors and sectors that promote integrated government planning oriented to local and regional development.

The literature that has gathered elements for the analysis of regional governance from the territorial perspective points to possibilities and limitations that should be considered, based on analyses of actual experiences, as we will discuss next.

Regional governance and political action

According to Haesbaert da Costa[19], at its origin, the concept of region is tied to power relations and contains in its root - *regere* – the intent to command, to rule. Currently, region can be defined as a space for the recreation of difference in a globalized world, with the return to singularities and to the specific, the reconstruction of heterogeneity, and stimulus for a focus on territorial diversity.

According to the author, "regional" is on the order of the day, whether through the discourse that promotes the proliferation of difference, or in social practices for or against globalizing processes that produce and value differences, which includes profound local and regional inequalities.

Böcher[20] states that revalorization of the regional scale of intervention and the political and social re-articulations that constitute governance in recent history result from the following factors: the region's growing importance as a level of political coordination, regional redesign based on a functional division of the stakeholders' dynamics and rather than on established administrative levels and/or geographic limits, the need for inter-sector cooperation in the complex restructuring processes that focus on the regions, and the need for directing regionalization through incentives, instruments, and new formats.

The region, defined as a dynamic area of co-operation between actors, is formed on the basis of the density of social and institutional relations that generate horizontal and vertical partnerships with the potential to become networks. The region represents the social context in which the

mobilization of collaborative efforts and democratic self-organization take place[20].

From this perspective, Böcher argues that in the sphere of national states, regional governance represents the modern form of regional policy, seen as capable of responding to the challenges of contemporaneity and central governments' loss of role at the regional level. Constituting networks of partnerships focused on sustainable development, regional governance complements the government, that is, the political system's representative structures, and vice-versa.

The challenges feature the positive potential of innovative organization of participation by different stakeholders and citizens, to the extent that regional governance ensures expanded participation by all stakeholders in the region in the respective networks. Regional governance also lends support to inter-sector development projects that can lead to creative solutions and an understanding by society that sustainable regional development and economic development are synergistic.

However, experience also reveals problematic aspects in these reconfigurations. The big question identified by the author relates to the new arrangements' democratic legitimacy, since they place in check the traditional political control by government agencies over the distribution of budget resources for financing innovations. Given the well-known and permanent pressure by private interests, including new stakeholders, the range of conflicts of interest can weaken established interests, who react and/or resist.

Another problematic area is the emergence of conflicts between regional self-coordination and demonstrations of hierarchical power, especially with the use of resources in contexts with fiscal problems. According to Böcher, in dramatic situations of fiscal problems between levels of government, co-financing issues remain in dispute[20].

In addition, the analysis by Böcher[20] confirms the risks identified by Ferrão[12] that at the end of initiatives with governance solutions, there can be a mismatch between the inherent effort of building partnerships and network structures, the original objectives, and the actual results.

Ferrão[12] also warns that the reach of sustainable management of governance solutions can be blocked by the persistence of sector-based and centralized institutional and organizational cultures and the involvement of actors with powers and motivations that are sometimes excessively unequal. Likewise, according to Ferrão, overly ambitious approaches can lead to difficulties in

the efficient, fair, and democratic application of policy instruments for ordering the territory.

Another important risk identified by the authors is the linear transposition of analytical concerns to the domain of policymaking and interventions. The dedifferentiation caused by systematic and crosscutting reading can result in an increase in overlapping areas of distinct policy instruments, with negative implications for sharing responsibilities, use of public funds, stakeholder mobilization, and definition of target publics.

Finally, without key institutional, organizational, and instrumental requirements, that is, without sufficiently appreciating the need to develop a framework of cooperation, wagers on the assumptions of cooperation between stakeholders and coordination or even integration of policies can prove fragile and difficult to implement.

In short, an approach to the literature on governance raises relevant issues for monitoring the implementation of innovations and analysis of the political and institutional experimentation launched in the States of Brazil with a view towards operationalization of the health sector regionalization strategy regulated by Decree no. 7.508 of June 28, 2011[4].

COAP and regional governance: final remarks

This essay has identified some elements for future analyses of health regionalization in Brazil with the configuration adopted in recent history, especially in relation to the implementation of COAP in the States and its potential influence in establishing a new mode of regional governance in Brazil's federative system.

As mentioned in the introduction, according to this recent strategy, the priority for integrating the organization, planning, and execution of health actions and services in Brazil is the health region, thus opening the way for developing a regional vision of health problems and territorialized public policies.

Redefinitions in implementation have the potential to help build a new dynamic between intergovernmental relations and social participation in the system's management and to generate dialogues between stakeholders not previously involved directly in the production of regional responses, especially by other sectors of government.

The commitment by Mayors, Governors, and the Federal government, through the Minister of Health, in establishing contracts for government action in the health region involves changes in planning practices and political, institutional, and inter-sector reconfigurations that can result in new governance.

The Organizational Contract for Public Action (COAP) defines the formal responsibilities, health indicators and targets, performance assessment criteria, necessary budget resources, control and oversight of its enforcement, and other necessary elements for the integrated implementation of health actions and services in the health region.

Based on the literature consulted in this study, we conclude that the COAP can be an opportunity to include (in the follow-up of consolidation of health regions in Brazil and the changes in regional health sector planning based on the implementation of Decree 7.508/2011) observations on its repercussions for the establishment of governance solutions in the organization of public actions and the evaluation of their results.

First, approaches to the concepts of governance, territorial governance, and regional governance based on the concepts of territory and region from political geography policy and political science can contribute to i) updating the public space and government interventions in contemporary national territories; ii) understanding and demarcating the social and political terrain for regional actions and interventions; and iii) systematization of reflections in favor of efficient, fair, and democratic governance, as suggested by Ferrão[12].

Such approaches can also help identify the underlying reason, objectives, expected results, and potential added value from regional governance solutions compared to alternatives, especially in the presence of interests and resources that are the state's responsibility to safeguard and guarantee, as the same author contends[12].

The fact that a major part of the literature on the theme participates in the debates on sustainable development and political processes associated with structural changes in the modern state, administrative reforms, and social reconfigurations also makes relevant contributions to characterizing the context of implementation of government strategies for decentralization/regionalization of public management.

Considering that the motivation for this study was to identify contributions by sectorial regionalization to the planning and management of processes in innovative, shared, and collaborative territorial dynamics, in sync with contempo-

rary policy issues, we conclude that the article has systematized some key aspects that we feel constitute fields for follow-up of the implementation of COAP in Brazil's States, and whose analysis can spawn reflections in this direction.

The first important issue in the Contract's elaboration is whether the methodology contributes to a critical reading of the way the territories with this form of state participation are administered and the policies enforced. That is, whether the approach to the region favors joint, cooperative involvement by the social, economic, and institutional stakeholders in framing health policies with a regional development project that contemplates the territorial dynamics of each of the participating Municipalities and their local needs.

Shared responsibilities, use of public funds, and mobilization of stakeholders to build or rebuild the healthcare network are all part of an integrated and cross-sector government plan, backed by policy coordination and spatial development strategies based on the reinforcement of territorial identities.

It is equally important to verify whether the mechanisms of agreement between governmental and nongovernmental actors express the logic of governance, enhancing the exercise of power at the regional level and introducing policy negotiation processes capable of expanding social participation in the identification of needs, the definition of common objectives, and the establishment of convergent regional and local policies that are consistent with the various Municipal realities.

The health indicators and targets should reflect the purposes of strengthening synergies, complementary roles in community policies, and inter-sector arrangements.

Finally, the financial analysis of the agreements formally established in the COAP can contribute to an understanding of the mobilization of resources and their allocation in the region, mechanisms established to deal with inter-municipal asymmetries, and the necessary intra-governmental, intergovernmental, and inter-sector negotiation for their implementation from the perspective of development of the available territorial capital, empowering the less developed spaces and reinforcing the more developed ones.

In short, we highlight the need to analyze the processes of political negotiations for the identification of needs and establishment of objectives and/or policies, effective decentralization of authority and roles in the act of governing, commitments as formulated and their fulfillment by the various federative entities and levels of government, new modalities in the coordination of intra- and inter-sector policies and programs, the capacity to convene and maintain participation by other social actors involved in the territorial dynamic, recourse to unprecedented networks, partnerships, and contractual agreements to achieve common objectives for the region, processes, mechanisms, and instruments for stakeholder follow-up and control of the commitments made to regional governance, and local and regional political and financial autonomy for the implementation of public policies that respect the differences and specificities of the region's health conditions.

Above all, it is necessary to assess whether this new basis for public management will favor Brazil's citizenry and effective responses to the health problems affecting the population, thereby contributing to the achievement of the universal right to health and the reduction of inequalities and greater social and territorial justice.

Collaborations

PT Ribeiro, OY Tanaka, and JL Denis: study conception and design, analysis and interpretation of the results, critical revision of the intellectual content, and writing of the article. All three authors approved the final version of the manuscript and take full responsibility for all aspects of the work, guaranteeing its accuracy and integrity.

Acknowledgments

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