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ARTICLE



Institutions, Networks and Activism Inside the State: Women's Health and Environmental Policy in Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This article examines institutional activism between 2011 and 2018 in two Brazilian government programs, 'Green Grants' and the 'Stork Network'. Institutional activism is defined as collective action in the defense of contentious causes conducted within the boundaries of state institutions. The two policies were designed and implemented by bureaucrats committed to social movement causes, environmentalism and women's health, respectively. The environmentalist bureaucrats were mostly permanent public employees with few ties to movement networks, while the women's health group included mostly temporary employees with long histories of civil society activism. I argue that diverse locations in state institutions and movement networks gave these groups access to different combinations of institutional and relational resources. In dialogue with theories of situated agency and activist strategy, I show how those differences both led actors to engage in different kinds of strategies and influenced the way those strategies changed as political conditions became increasingly hostile.

KEYWORDS

Activism; policy; bureaucrats; women's health; environmentalism; social movements

Introduction

In the Women's Health Department of the Brazilian central government, a group of public employees struggled from 2011 to 2018 to defend women's empowerment. Their objective: to use their positions inside government to transform medical culture, especially related to pregnancy and childbirth, and to defend women's reproductive and sexual rights. A few buildings down, in the Ministry of Environment, another group of bureaucrats tried to transform a cash transfer program for small farmers and forest dwellers. They worked to introduce changes that would strengthen local communities and promote more environmentally sustainable practices. Both groups of government workers were deeply influenced by the ideas of social movements. Defending those ideas required a subtle contestation of government priorities. While their practices challenged formal rules and hierarchies, their purposes were quite different from the shirking, influence-peddling and clientelism we often associate with bureaucratic informality. Instead, they creatively mobilized resources located in both government institutions

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and their own social networks to advance social movement causes from inside the state. They were activists.

I define institutional activism as *collective action in the defense of contentious causes conducted within the boundaries of state institutions*. This article presents a six-year study of institutional activism in two government programs. The 'Green Grants' and 'Stork Network' programs were created in 2011 under the Dilma Rousseff Workers' Party administration. Brazil was just over the peak of its 'pink tide' and Rousseff's government was more technocratic than that of her predecessor, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva. Over the research period, conservative forces gained power in Congress, culminating in Rousseff's impeachment and replacement in 2016 by Michel Temer, who implemented radical austerity policies.

The study follows the two groups of workers over time, examining the strategies they employed to defend contentious causes under these conditions of increasing adversity. The cases are different in terms of worker relationships to both movements and the state. Most employees in the agency running the Stork Network had weak contractual ties to government and were active in social movements before working there. Most involved in Green Grants were permanent civil servants; few had personal experience with civil society movements.

Although a number of authors have explored various aspects of institutional activism (Banaszak 2010; Olsson and Hysing, 2012; Pettinicchio 2012; Santoro and McGuire 1997), to my knowledge, none have systematically compared the actions of institutional activists with and without ties to social movements. To fill this gap, I ask how bureaucrats equally committed to social movement causes but differently located in state institutions and social movement networks attempt to advance those causes. I argue that diverse locations give actors access to different combinations of what Marques (2012) calls institutional and relational resources. In dialogue with theories of situated agency (Joas 1996; Bevir and Rhodes 2010), I explore how access to different types of resources affects actors' strategic choices and how those strategies change over time.

I conducted semi-structured interviews between 2013 and 2018 in both policy areas. This involved 25 interviews with employees of the Women's Health Department in 2013, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018¹ and 33 interviews in 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016 and 2018 in the agencies involved in implementing the Green Grants program. In both cases, core informants were interviewed repeatedly to grasp their changing perceptions over time. These formal interviews were complemented by various informal contacts, such as conversations at events in Brasília, as well as documentary analysis and secondary literature reviews.

I found that the women's health workers engaged in a broader range of activist strategies and made more radical strategic shifts as political context changed. While the environmental workers primarily focused on influencing the Green Grants policy, the women's health workers also promoted their broader movement agenda and sought to strengthen the part of women's health movement to which they belonged. As the context became more hostile, the environmental activists sought alternatives within the bureaucracy, while the health activists transferred their struggle outside the state at the same time that they significantly reframed their agenda. I explain these differences in terms of the different relational and institutional locations of each group, exploring the complex relationship between the resources and constraints provided by organizations and

networks. I argue not only that those locations led the actors to pursue different goals, but also that the experience of using the resources at their disposal affected how they reinterpreted their purposes over time.

Conceptualizing activist strategies inside the state

Scholars have proposed a variety of theories to explain how public employees act. Much of this work explores how they use their discretionary powers: to cope with stressful working conditions (Lipsky, 1980) or to seek individual gain or avoid work (Lane 2005); to apply social and racial prejudices (Meier 1975; Kennedy 2014) or practical moral judgments (Maynard-Moody and Musheno 2003). Studies of the policy process have shown, however, that some public servants are guided not just by self-interest, prejudice or personal morality, but also by programmatic commitments to policy ideals shared by specific policy networks or communities (Haas 1992; Sabatier 1988; Kingdon 1995).

Institutional activism can be understood as the sub-set of this kind of programmatic action by public workers in which the policy ideal in question is a contentious cause. A contentious cause is a collection of ideas that propose some kind of social, political or cultural transformation or that questions perceived undesirable transformations (Abers, 2019). Causes are not necessarily progressive: they can also involve resistance to change. An idea becomes a cause when people believe that something fundamental about society or power relations is under threat or needs to change.

The study of institutional activism fits into ongoing debates on the relationship between social movements and the state. Traditional approaches, such as Tilly's (1978) made clear distinctions between insiders and outsiders (or members of the polity and challengers, as Tilly called them). Scholars often presumed that the transformation of movement demands into public policy would result in deradicalization and demobilization (Piven and Cloward 1977; Tarrow 1994). More recently, authors have questioned these presumptions. For Goldstone (2003) and Jasper (2012) for example, movements and the state are intertwined, often by way of political parties. These authors, along with others, explore how movements advance contentious causes through both contentious and conventional politics (Guigni and Passy 1998; Rossi 2017).

Debates on institutional activism further break with the state/movement divide by proposing that even people holding government jobs can engage in activism. Scholars such as Santoro and McGuire (1997) and Olson and Hysing (2012, 248) define an 'institutional' or 'inside' activist as someone who is 'engaged in civil society networks and organizations, who holds a formal position within public administration.' Banaszak's (2010) study of feminists inside the U.S government, however, challenges the presumption that activists must have ties to movements, showing that many of the bureaucrats she interviewed became feminists only after joining government. The possibility that bureaucrats might defend social movement causes, even without being connected to movements themselves is also present in Pettinichio's (2012) definition of institutional activists as government insiders who 'proactively take up causes that overlap with those of grassroots challengers.' Neither he, nor Banaszak, however, systematically compare the strategies of activists with and without movement ties.

There are at least three questions we could ask about institutional activism: Why do some bureaucrats become activists? What is the effect of their activism on policy? And

why do they choose some strategies over others in their efforts to contest or change policy processes? This last question is the focus of this article. Jasper (2004), one of the few social movement scholars to theorize strategy, calls for analyzing micro-processes of decision-making in a way that ‘takes cultural and institutional contexts more seriously than game theory, which has long dominated the study of strategy’ (Jasper 2004, 1). But, as Rossi (2017) notes, Jasper does not explore in depth how strategic choices are affected by contexts.²

The study of institutional activism can be thought of as an extreme case (Flyvbjerg 2011) for exploring the relationship between structure and agency in the formation of activist strategies. We tend to think of institutions as constraints on action. Activism, on the other hand, evokes the idea of contention or rebellion. How can contentious action be possible in a realm dominated by rules and hierarchies? Theories of situated agency can help us wrap our heads around this apparent paradox. Authors such as Bevir and Rhodes (2006; 2010), Berk and Galvan (2009) and Joas (1996) argue that it is a mistake to think of agency as an absence of structure. On the contrary, the possibility of creative action arises not from freeing oneself from context, but rather from finding ways to use the resources that contexts provide. Giddens’s (1984) insight that structures are simultaneously ‘rules’ and ‘resources’ is helpful here: situated agency implies that agency is only possible when we use resources found in structures.

Strategy involves the mobilization of available resources toward desired goals. Joas’s (1996) pragmatist concept of creative action helps us think more clearly about the relationship between resources and goals. Joas challenges the ‘means-ends’ dichotomy dominant in most action theory. Rational-choice presumes that individuals first define goals (ends) and then seek out the best ways to use their resources (means) to achieve them. Many normative approaches see individual preferences as determined by cultural structures, but still presume that action is ‘teleological’: goals are defined first, and then actors look for means to reach them. Joas argues that people do not come to situations with fully defined goals. Instead, they define their ends through the experience of using the means at their disposal toward partially-conceived, initial purposes. Strategy thus cannot be understood as a simple allocation of resources toward a desired end, but rather involves the everyday decision-making process through which means and ends are mutually constituted.

A diversity of resources can be found in the overlapping structures in which we live. Cultural frames help actors understand problems and solutions, while repertoires provide models for how to act. Institutional rules help make action possible, especially for those attributed authority by them. Social networks both limit our connections and provide access to people who can help us. Economic structures distribute the money that people have at their disposal. In general, when structures reproduce inequalities, those at the losing end have fewer resources than those at the top, but the resources that they *do* have come from those very structures.

Two sets of contextually defined resources are particularly relevant for understanding action inside bureaucracies. Marques (2012, 31) argues that state actors have two types of ‘power resources’: organizational relations and network relations. The first grow out of ‘institutional positions’ that attribute formal authority (Ibid., p. 47). Institutional positions give people access to decision-making power, budgets to implement decisions,

among other resources. The second are found in interpersonal networks and can be used to mobilize people for collective action, or to gain access to funding or jobs.

Joas's pragmatism would suggest that both kinds of resources are constantly under construction. Authors such as Mische (2009) and Emirbayer (1997) argue that the available distribution of network resources simultaneously constrain action and can be transformed through interactive processes. This way of thinking about networks has affinities with constructivist theories of organizations, such as Weick's (1992) argument that 'sensemaking' is a non-linear process and Lawrence, Suddaby and Leca's (2009) notion of 'institutional work', the everyday agency of those who inhabit organizations. From these perspectives, the kinds of resources described by Marques (2012) are not simply 'there' for actors to use according to their wishes, but rather are constantly created at the same time that actors make sense of what they should be used for.

This emphasis on relational and institutional construction does not mean that we should forget Giddens's insight that structures not only supply resources, but also influence preferences. Organizations and networks are important sources of identities and commitments. Bureaucrats, like all other individuals, are situated in interpersonal networks that can be the source of values and expectations (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994; Melucci 1996). Studies of public servants have shown that their beliefs and commitments are influenced both by life experiences and networks formed prior to joining public service and by their agencies' organizational cultures (Dilulio 1994; Kaufman, 1960; Oberfield 2014). Fillieule (2010) similarly proposes that 'militant engagement' evolves from a combination of personal life trajectories (networks), socialization in the organizations to which activists belong (institutions), and broader-based social values in society.

The pragmatist approach suggested by Joas would propose that despite the influence that organizations and networks have over how people define their 'ends', these structures do not simply determine them. Resources make some practices more likely than others and rules make some identities more powerful, but we constantly reinterpret our purposes through the very use of the resources we have at our disposal. In the pages that follow, I hone in on how actors simultaneously use resources situated in institutions and networks and define and redefine their goals. Those goals proved to be influenced both by the constraints of institutions and networks in which actors were situated and by the experience of using the resources located in those very institutions and networks.

Causes and controversies: the green grants and stork network programs

The two policy areas under study have long histories of institutional activism. Environmentalists have worked from within bureaucracies for decades (Hochstetler and Keck 2007). In the late 1980s, a particular conception of the environmentalist cause gained force in Brazil, known as 'socio-environmentalism'. Strongly influenced by the struggles of rubber tappers, socio-environmentalists called for protecting forests by protecting the livelihoods of traditional populations living in them (Viola and Viera, 1992; Keck 1995). Socio-environmentalism was particularly influential within the ministry's Department of Extractivism, responsible for promoting the productive activities of traditional forest communities engaged in such sustainable practices. Its chronically underfunded sustainable development approach was in tension with more

conservationist views that called for creating protected areas where human populations would be prohibited and with ‘command and control’ approaches to combatting deforestation and illegal logging (E1, 2013³).

Brazil’s Health Ministry has also been an arena for institutional activism since the 1970s (Menicucci 2007; Fallei 2010; Dowbor 2012). The *sanitarista* (public health) movement of medical professionals, academics and government bureaucrats joined forces with a grassroots health movement to call for the creation of a universal, decentralized and participatory public health system that would prioritize preventative care. The National Program for Integrated Women’s Health Care (PAISM) of 1984, one of the first *sanitarista* victories, was guided by feminist principles. The key word here was ‘integrated’. Rather than focusing on reproductive health alone, PAISM established the principle that women’s health involved their entire bodies (H6, 2013; Costa 1992; Correa 1993).

A variety of groups organized in the 1980s and 1990s to defend the integrated women’s health vision (Carvalho 2019). Tensions existed between two particular ones. The National Feminist Network for Reproductive and Sexual Rights emphasized reproductive and abortion rights, sexuality and violence against women. The Humanization of Childbirth Network (ReHuNa – *Rede pela Humanização do Parto e Nascimento*), was formed by health professionals concerned with the medicalization of childbirth and, especially, the expansion of unnecessary cesarian sections. Although for some critics, ReHuNa’s emphasis on childbirth contradicted the integrated approach and the feminist concern with abortion rights, my interviews with ReHuNa members hired by the Women’s Health Department suggested otherwise. I repeatedly heard the affirmation that working with pregnancy and childbirth necessarily involved dealing with reproductive and abortion rights.

When Lula came to office in 2003, activists took on jobs in both the Women’s Health Department in the Ministry of Health (henceforth MS for *Ministério de Saúde*) and the Department of Extractivism in the Ministry of Environment (MMA, for *Ministério de Meio Ambiente*) (Oliveira 2016; Dowbor 2012; Abers and Oliveira, 2015; Abers and Tatagiba, 2015). Lula’s first environment minister was Marina Silva – a senator from the Amazon, of rubber tapper origins. Dozens of environmentalists followed her into MMA jobs. Five years later, however, Silva left the government. Soon after, she left the PT and ran for president in 2010 against Dilma Rousseff, who won.

Interviewees described Rousseff’s environment minister, Isabela Teixeira, as a technocrat with few connections to civil society. Her tenure coincided with a transformation in the professional profile of the ministry. If in the 1990s, most employees worked on temporary contracts, civil service exams in the mid-2000s replaced them with permanent hires. Most employees were now relatively young, permanent bureaucrats, often hired straight out of school. They had far fewer ties to environmental movements than the earlier cohort (Abers and Oliveira, 2015; Abers 2019).

In 2011, her first year in office, Rousseff announced a government-wide effort to address extreme poverty. The Green Grants program was the MMA’s contribution. The program provided cash transfers to impoverished rural families whose economic activities helped protect forests. Beneficiaries had to be in ‘extreme poverty’ and live in government managed territories that could be monitored for deforestation. The program was jointly coordinated by teams at the Department of Extractivism and at the Ministry

of Social Development (MDS), responsible for the country's much larger cash transfer program, Bolsa Família. It was implemented by three agencies: ICMBio (The Chico Mendes Biodiversity Institute, responsible for national protection areas), INCRA (The Institute for Colonization and Land Reform, responsible for land reform settlements) and SPU (The Secretariat for National Patrimony, responsible for flood lands in the Amazon occupied by traditional fishing communities). Running the program thus involved a complex network of government bureaucrats from various agencies.

The response to the program within the Department of Extractivism was mixed. It was the first large-scale program targeting traditional forest communities: the initial goal was to put 75,000 families on the rolls in two years. However, the cash-transfer approach clashed with socio-environmentalism in two ways. Several interviewees noted that including only the extreme poor was a disincentive to successful sustainable economic practices. By transferring funds directly to individual families, the program also broke with socio-environmentalism's community focus. In sum, although employees were happy that for the first time their department had substantial funding, the individualized cash transfer approach diverged from their historic efforts to support community-based sustainable productive practices.

The Stork Network program involved a more complicated controversy. The program's goal was to promote natural childbirth and combat obstetric violence during pre-natal care and childbirth, as well as to invest in maternity wards throughout the country. The Women's Health Department running the program was also responsible for promoting all aspects of women's health policy and included a variety of sub-thematic areas including violence against women, reproductive and sexual planning, menopause, vulnerable groups, maternal mortality, and other issues. The Stork Network injected major funding into the policy area, not just paying for the construction of maternity wards, but also allowing government workers to travel throughout the country promoting alternative practices related to women's health issues in general. At its height, 30 professionals worked in the Brasília office and the same number in the field. The program was a clear win for the Humanization of Childbirth Agenda, especially since Esther Vilela, a respected leader of ReHuNa, was nominated to head up the department.

Members of the Feminist Health Network were initially outraged that the Stork Network would be Rousseff's government main women's health initiative. Its childish name and focus on maternal health contradicted the historic effort to promote an integrated approach. During the prior two Workers' Party administrations (2003–2010), interviewees declared, members of the Feminist Health Network had led the Women's Health Department, leading to the passage of a national women's health policy that addressed sexual, cultural and racial diversity as well as economic inequality. For many of those who supported these efforts, the program was a step backwards.

As shown in greater detail elsewhere (Abers and Tatagiba, 2015), one of the main struggles of the ReHuNa members now running the Department was to prove to the other network that their work would contribute to the broader integrated health agenda, including delicate issues such as abortion rights. They also faced resistance from other fronts. While religious movements criticized them for defending family planning, doctor's organizations blasted the humanization approach as a challenge to medical authority. This kind of contentious attack from multiple directions did not occur in the

environmental case, where negotiations occurred largely within the confines of the bureaucracy.

Activism to transform policies

From 2011 on, activist bureaucrats pressured to make Green Grants and the Stork Network more coherent with the socio-environmentalist and feminist health causes. The actors involved had different relationships to state and movements. Only two interviewees in the Green Grants team were temporary employees; the rest were permanent civil servants. The majority had no experience in civil society, although a few had worked in NGOs or participated in movements before taking government jobs. The opposite was true in the Women's Health Department. At the height of the program, 30 employees worked in the central office and as many in the field. When this study began, in 2013, only one was a permanent public employee, although after 2014, three additional permanent workers joined. This lack of permanent civil servants was typical of the Ministry of Health, which did not undergo the kind of bureaucratic reform that occurred in the MMA. Most department workers that I interviewed had long histories of activism in a diversity of health and feminist movements. Most came from ReHuNa, but several had participated in other organizations such as feminist student movements and NGOs or HIV/Aids groups.

Government staff involved in both programs expressed strong commitments to contentious causes. Despite weaker ties with social movements, in the case of the Green Grants, the workers at the MMA and two of the implementing agencies, ICMBio and INCRA, all identified with socio-environmentalist ideals and especially the promotion of the sustainable production practices of traditional communities. Those interviewed at the MDS – the agency largely responsible for social policy – gave more priority to poverty alleviation than to such environmental concerns. All of those interviewed at the Women's Health Department defended women's empowerment, combatting violence against women and reproductive rights, including abortion. Over the years, these two groups of bureaucrats sought ways to promote those causes by influencing policy design and implementation. For lack of space, I cannot explore the multiple controversies that this involved (especially in Women's Health, where activists came from a greater diversity of movement backgrounds). In the following sections, I focus on efforts to make the Green Grants program more compatible with the promotion of sustainable production practices in traditional communities and to advance the humanization of childbirth approach through the Stork Network program while also defending reproductive, sexual, and especially abortion rights.

Greening the green grants program

The main obstacle for Green Grants workers who wanted to defend socio-environmentalism was finding time to do so. From the start, the Minister of Environment pressured the team to reach the goal of signing up 75,000 families in record time. Brasília-based workers spent most of their time negotiating with field workers and processing piles of documentation.

Amidst the torrent of paperwork, staff sought to find ways to move the policy in a more socio-environmentalist direction by creatively combining the network and institutional resources at their disposal. The interinstitutional design of the program facilitated the construction of networks among agencies. For example, the ICMBIO official responsible for the program negotiated with his counterpart at the MDS to get the latter to fund a study on the economic practices of extractivist families. Personal networks outside the state also helped officials promote changes in policy design. For example, an ex-colleague of the program's coordinators now worked at the British Embassy. The two convinced the embassy to fund a training program to support beneficiary communities (Abers, 2015). Both efforts involved getting additional funding to move the policy beyond poverty alleviation, and toward promoting sustainable productive practices.

Workers also used their institutional resources to promote policy change (not always successfully). Over the years, experience with program operations and with beneficiary communities led them to devise a series of proposals that would push the program in the direction of supporting the productive practices of communities. One idea was to eliminate the restriction that only families in extreme poverty could participate. To push for this change, they used their authority to produce official documents. Taking advantage of a transition moment, at the end of Rousseff's first term, they submitted a carefully written Technical Note directed at the incoming administration that, among other ideas, proposed expanding the program to include entire communities. (E23, 2014; E24, 2015).

In 2015, at the beginning of Rousseff's second term, the technocratic minister stayed on, but a new Green Grants coordinator was hired with experience working with rubber tappers' organizations (E24 – E26, 2015). Those networks helped him get the National Council of Rubber Tappers involved for the first time in informal discussions about how to change the program design. By then, Brazil was undergoing a severe economic crisis and plans to increase the beneficiary base were canceled. Ironically, the new coordinator told me, the slow-down gave the team time to work on their socio-environmentalist proposals and to talk about them with civil society actors. The main goal continued to be the effort to use the Green Grants program to fund not only cash transfers but also training programs and technical assistance to support the productive activities of beneficiary families.

The context changed dramatically in 2016, however, when Rousseff was replaced by Michel Temer, her vice-president, in a highly disputed, legally fragile impeachment process condemned by most progressive social movements. Surprisingly, Temer named José Sarney Filho, of the Green Party, to be Minister of Environment, a job he had occupied years before. Sarney's return to the ministry was hailed by the environmentalist movement, extremely critical of Rousseff's technocratic, pro-infrastructure approach. (E28, E29, 2016).

At first, things looked good. A Ministry employee with strong ties to environmental NGOs was put in charge of the Department of Extractivism. The coordinator stayed on and with the support of his new superior continued discussing design changes with rubber tappers' organizations. No new beneficiaries were included in 2016, but the new minister declared that Green Grants was still a priority. Relations with civil society

groups improved and there was a general belief that the budget situation would soon change (E28, E29, 2016).

Changing conditions pushed the staff to come up with new strategies. In early 2017, due to Temer's radical austerity initiatives, expanding coverage beyond families in extreme poverty would require funding from outside the federal budget. In early 2017, they proposed applying for a grant from the Amazonia Fund. Created as part of Brazil's efforts to combat global warming, the fund was financed largely by donations from Norway and Germany. The minister seemed to support the idea. But as staff began work on the proposal, the entire program came under attack. Beneficiary payments were delayed by six months in the second half of 2017. Then, in December, the staff learned that the 2018 federal budget no longer listed the program (E30-32, 2018). The most important state resource had been pulled out from under them: revenues.

This was when the Green Grants team demonstrated particular creativity. Although the program no longer existed, Department of Extractivism staff continued to work on the Amazonia Fund proposal, now greatly expanded. This involved intense negotiations with other state and non-state actors inside the Fund and Brazil's Development Bank (BNDES). The new strategy would be to migrate about 40,000 beneficiary families to an entirely new program managed by the ministry team but formally run by the United Nations Development Program, a trick to keep the funds out of the federal budget, frozen by austerity measures. In order to keep a government program in place, they essentially proposed creating a non-governmental program, something they would never have imagined when they first joined the Green Grants staff years before.

In an interview in late 2018, weeks before extreme right-winger, Jair Bolsonaro, would take office as president, a few staff members had moved onto other jobs, but most, permanent employees, stayed on, doing what they could. One interviewee described the situation like this: 'You know the metaphor of the band on the Titanic? ... The boat is sinking and the band is playing, right?' By then, negotiations to restart Green Grants through the Amazon Fund were almost complete. The staff hoped to leave the next government a proposal too solid to ignore, but given the politics of the incoming administration, they (correctly) doubted their efforts would be compensated. To protect program memory, they also made copies of documentation and data produced over the years to leave with non-governmental institutions. They would use their networks outside government to protect information, another classic resource of the state. Even as they prepared for the worst, they continued acting like activists (E33, 2018).

Empowering women through health policy

While Green Grants was largely designed behind closed doors, the Women's Health Department worked with civil society groups from the very start to discuss the Stork Network, especially, but not exclusively those connected to ReHuNa. Debates about program design occurred through institutionalized participatory arenas (far more developed in the health sector), through public debates and through personal and professional network connections. Government and civil society actors had the chance to weigh in at meetings of the National Health Council and the National Women's Rights Council. The program's coordinating team sought to get the National Feminist Network on board, assuring it that despite its silly name and focus on maternity, the program would follow

the integrated women's health approach (H1-H4, 2013). Vilela, the coordinator, brought in people from her own networks, especially from the ReHuNa network for the humanization of childbirth. She also hired some more traditional feminists, which helped ease the tensions.

Compared to the Green Grants team, the health group engaged in a much broader diversity of initiatives, both mobilizing civil society networks and wielding the institutional power to regulate health care implementation. They used these resources to advance activist agendas on two fronts. First, they promoted the humanization of childbirth. The adversary here was inside the health care community: the culture that attributes all authority to doctors, disempowering other health professionals and patients themselves. The public works component of the program was an important carrot. Hospital managers and government officials would have to follow Stork Network guidelines (for example guaranteeing space for family members to accompany women in labor) to get funding for maternity ward construction (H10, 2015). The Stork Network policy model also promoted cultural change through persuasion. A team of 'supporters' in the field organized forums that brought together government officials, service providers and civil society to discuss policy and monitor care according to the new model. Meanwhile, employees in Brasília worked on protocols and regulations, collected data and supported research that provided scientific evidence for the model. They also disseminated their ideas in seminars, conferences and events and promoted training initiatives for health care professionals.

Second, Women's Health staff saw the Stork Network as an opportunity to influence not just childbirth practices, but also reproductive rights, including abortion. In Brazil, women have the legal right to abortion in three circumstances: rape, when the woman's life is in danger, and for anencephalic fetuses. Few medical providers, however, will conduct abortions even when legally prescribed. Women also have difficulties getting medical care for complications caused by abortions conducted outside the medical establishment. The Women's Health Department was under constant scrutiny by members of the 'Religious Caucus' in the National Congress, concerned that it was promoting the practice. They made this clear by filing official inquiries about department activities on an almost daily basis (H1, 2013). In 2012, a national newspaper published an (unsubstantiated) claim by a feminist group that it had been hired by the government to write a pamphlet on how to have a safe abortion (Folha de São Paulo 2012). In response to the ensuing scandal, interviewees noted, officials were prohibited from using the word 'abortion' in public, even though in Portuguese it also refers to miscarriage.

Despite these prohibitions, Women's Health staff worked on various fronts to defend legal abortion rights, albeit discreetly. As they learned how to work inside government, they gained experience with the strategic use of institutional resources. One illustrative example was their effort to regulate the use of instant pregnancy tests, made available in the public system in 2013. Department officials devised protocols that subtly attempted to influence how health professionals would confront situations of unwanted pregnancy, should a test come out positive. One draft of the document explicitly told providers to inform women that if they had a complication after a (presumably illegal) abortion they should seek out medical care. This was cut from the final version approved by superiors (Abers and Tatagiba, 2015). But the staff still figured out a way to indirectly refer to abortion rights and to the obligation to treat women for abortion complications. The

clever solution was to cite international conventions signed by Brazil that denounce forced pregnancy and guarantee women's right to access to abortion services 'foreseen by national law.' In the section on how to deal with a case of unwanted pregnancy, the final version of the document instructs care providers to inform patients about the legal right to abortion in the case of rape, and that they should return immediately to health services if suffering from a list of health issues often associated with unsafe abortions (Brazil, 2014).

This kind of work became more difficult in late 2015, when, under pressure to broaden her political coalition, Rousseff replaced the health minister associated with the *sanitarista* movement with a conservative politician. A new Secretary of Basic Care (to whom Women's Health was subordinated) decided to keep Vilela on board, but under tight controls and a more limited budget. It was no longer possible to propose new norms and protocols, but the team could still work with universities and hospitals holding ongoing contracts.

When Temer took office in 2016, he nominated a new minister associated with the private health care insurance lobby – exactly the antithesis of everything the *sanitarista* movement was about. Vilela and several members of her original team decided to hang on because they now envisioned a new strategy for promoting humanized childbirth. Their experience in government had taught them the limits of the 'supporter' approach and led them to rethink their goals. Resistance to their cause was so strong, they now believed, because of ingrained beliefs learned in medical and nursing school. The solution was to attempt to influence professional training. Vilela and her team needed just a little more time inside the government to transform this idea into a new project. The first step, already underway, was the creation of a Master's program in women's health. Its first students were staff from the Women's Health Department, along with others in their networks, who, once qualified, could move on to teaching. Meanwhile, Vilela used her intra-state networks to negotiate funding for the creation of a large-scale training program that would promote an alternative vision of childbirth and neonatal care.

In early 2018, Vilela left the Women's Health Department to become the national coordinator of this new training program, headquartered at the Federal University of Minas Gerais and operating initially in more than 70 teaching hospitals nationwide. Obviously, making this happen required perseverance and willingness to work within a government condemned by most progressive political groups. This persistence allowed Vilela to create a new space for activism, now outside the government.

In a final set of interviews in late 2018, just before Bolsonaro was to take office, a diminishing group of activists still worked in the Women's Health Department. They were doing what they could to prepare for the future. According to one interviewee, this involved producing an official report on the Department's activities in carefully depoliticized language, to try to convince the future leaders of the policy area's importance, independent of ideology. Another spoke of efforts to complete a plan for addressing maternal mortality that would, at least, be a guide for civil society in the future, if not the state. The team also organized a meeting bringing together partners from around the country (state governments, civil society, professional associations and universities) with the intention of strengthening the humanization of women's health network before the coming storm (H24, H25, 2018).

Resources and strategies

Comparing the Green Grants and Stork Network programs allows us to see how different institutional and relational resources affect activist strategies inside the state. [Table 1](#) summarizes the relationship between resources and strategies by showing how the use of institutional and relational resources (means) over time aligns with changing goals (ends). The table shows that both groups employed resources found in bureaucratic organizations and in interpersonal networks to advance their respective causes, but that the way those causes were defined was transformed through the experience of activism. With respect to institutional resources, both groups did things that only state actors can do: using discretion to writing documents, voicing opinions in decision-making processes, making decisions when within their authority, and finding ways to mobilize government budgets over which they had jurisdiction. Both also relied on personal networks, using contacts inside and outside government to carry out tasks ranging from negotiating collaborative initiatives to organizing events.

The two cases are different, however, with regard to the purposes for which activists used institutional and relational resources. [Table 1](#) shows that the Women's Health group used their resources for a much broader array of goals and that these goals changed more dramatically over time. The Department of Extractivism staff focused principally on pushing the specific policy to cohere better with the socioenvironmental model. As the program came under fire, they continued to focus on improving and then saving the policy, although changing contexts pushed them to rethink the operating principles of the policy.

The Women's Health activists not only worked to influence the design and implementation of the Stork Network; they also took advantage of their location inside the state to advance two other goals. First, they sought to defend a broader policy agenda. Higher-level team members appeared regularly at speaking engagements, television interviews and public events, where they defended the ideals of the humanization and reproductive rights. Rather than focusing on 'saving the policy', when the program was threatened, they engaged in a collective rethinking of their broader agenda and used network resources inside the state and in academic institutions to promote a new strategy, less focused on state action and more on training. For the Women's Health bureaucrats, the specific model of the Stork Network took back seat to the broader cause, transforming women's health care, especially related to pregnancy, abortion and childbirth. Second, the Women's Health bureaucrats used their time in government to strengthen their networks. The program employed network members and created a graduate program to train them. Events and meetings also sought to strengthen networks. A key example took place in the twilight of the Temer government, when the Department held a national seminar with partner organizations in order to strengthen their network of collaborators in preparation for the future (H24, 2018).

The environmental workers were not as intent on strengthening the broader policy agenda or social movement networks. They had permanent jobs that they would keep, even if the policy ended, while the health bureaucrats would likely lose their jobs if the government abandoned the policy. This helps explain, perhaps, why the transformation of goal definition that occurred in the environmental case was contained within



Table 1. Resources, practices and goals.

	Resources	Practices	Goals
GREEN GRANTS	Institutional Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Participating in decision-making processes ● Seeking to influence decision-makers ● Collecting data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Making the policy more compatible with socio-environmentalism
	Network Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Connecting actors and sources of funding inside and outside the state to create policy 'add-ons' ● Interacting with civil society actors. ● Using resources located in international networks to seek funding to save the policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Making the policy more compatible with socio-environmentalism
STORK NETWORK	Institutional Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Passing program information to non-government organizations ● Participating in decision-making processes ● Designing and distributing protocols ● Using positions to gain access to the media ● Finding state funding new strategies ● Organizing meetings of the policy/movement community/ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Redesigning the policy to save it from dismantlement ● Making the policy more compatible with humanization of childbirth and reproductive rights agendas ● Promoting and later transforming the humanization of childbirth and reproductive rights agenda ● Strengthening humanized childbirth networks
	Network Resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Creating and funding training courses ● Building team of experienced people chosen from women's health movement network. ● Implementing policy in partnership with organizations in the network ● Using network ties to get speaking engagements. ● Connecting to members of different feminist and health movements to build support for the humanization approach ● Employing members of the women's health network 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Making the policy more compatible with humanization of childbirth and reproductive rights agendas ● Promoting and transforming the humanization of childbirth and reproductive rights agenda ● Strengthening women's health movement networks

a reorientation of the Green Grants program, while the health workers felt free to entirely rethink their approach.

All this suggests a complex relationship between activist strategies, institutional/network locations and the process of defining and redefining goals. If commonly we think of strategies as the use of resources to advance predefined goals, the stories told here suggest that the kinds of resources available affect the kinds of goals people are likely to have. The health group's much deeper connections to social movements in civil society brought them not only a different array of resources but also possibilities for using those resources for much broader goals. Networks and institutions are not just sources of practical resources, but also of identities, cultural schemas, and ideas (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). Certainly, different expectations about their own roles in the policy process affected how actors devised strategies in each area.

Yet different identities and commitments did not mean that one group was somehow less 'creative' than the other. Goals were not predetermined by institutional and network locations, but rather evolved over time. In the environmental case, workers who initially saw Green Grants as an imperfect policy that needed adjustment slowly became impassioned with adapting and saving it. In the health case, differently, the experience of implementing the policy led workers to identify the limits of their ideas and work out new ones, transforming their purposes over time. Purposes were transformed through practices.

Conclusions

This study explored institutional activism in Brazil's federal government after 2011, under rising conservatism. Based on the pragmatist presumption that contexts provide not just limits, but also resources for action, I examined how bureaucrats equally committed to contentious causes but situated differently with respect to both state and civil society organizations sought to advance those causes. The main finding is that although both groups of bureaucrats mobilized formal (institutional) and informal (relational) resources to advance social movement causes inside the state, the group with stronger ties to social movement networks outside the state engaged in a broader range of strategies that underwent more radical modifications as conditions for institutional activism worsened. In particular, they sought not only to change the particular policy for which they were responsible, but also to take advantage of government positions to advance a broader social movement agenda as well as particular networks. In this sense, deeper ties to social movement networks were associated with activist strategies that surpassed state boundaries and specific government policies.

One possible concern about institutional activism is that by working inside the state, activists might lose touch with movements and moderate their goals. Banaszak (2010) has argued against this presumption, finding that many of her interviewees adopted feminist ideology only after joining the state. By linking deeper social movement network connections with a broader range of strategies, my conclusions do not necessarily undermine Banaszak's, but do perhaps add some nuances. Many of the environmentalists interviewed for this study had strong socio-environmentalist commitments, independent of prior experience in social movement networks. Their actions inside the state could be understood as 'activist' in the sense that they involved the pursuit of contentious causes.

However, without strong ties to extra-state movement networks, their activism was more *state focused* and, apparently, more constrained. The health workers engaged in a broader range of strategies both because their closer ties to movements kept them loyal to movement commitments and because the resources located in those movement networks made such strategies possible. This may mean that activism inside the state can be more effective when backed up by extra-state network resources.

In January, 2019, right-wing extremist Jair Bolsonaro arrived in presidential office based on a discourse of radical change. Among the central targets of that discourse were both environmentalism and feminism. The new Health Minister demoted the Women's Health Department to a lower bureaucratic status, with little decision-making autonomy and a severely reduced staff. Signaling new priorities, the Ministry issued new guidelines prohibiting the use of the term, 'obstetric violence'. It was a clear pushback against feminists and in favor of the medical establishment's claim that the doctor is always right (Domingues 2019). Encouraged by the new context, the Federal Medical Council issued new official guidelines for doctors limiting women's decision-making autonomy in childbirth. In mid-2020, the few holdouts that still worked in the department were fired after issuing a technical note calling for guaranteed access to abortion in the situations protected by law (Cancian 2020). The teaching program promoting humanization principles operated until mid-2020, when the contract with the Ministry of Health, signed prior to the Bolsonaro government, reached completion. In the meantime, health professionals have created the Adelaides Collective, a new movement to defend women's empowerment. ⁴

Rather than eliminating the Ministry of Environment as initially planned, Bolsonaro nominated as minister a climate-skeptic, defender of agribusiness. The Ministry lost responsibility for areas such as deforestation and climate change. The Department of Extractivism was disbanded and employees scattered through other sectors. ICMBIO, the agency responsible for managing protection areas, was taken over by senior officials from the São Paulo military police with no experience in environmental policy-making. Protection area staff were summarily moved to locations in different parts of the country, in obvious acts of political persecution. Forest policing efforts all but halted. A climate of fear took over the Ministry and its subordinated agencies as workers were threatened with administrative sanctions if they criticized the new policy directions.

Since mid-2019, however, employees at MMA, ICMBio and IBAMA have begun to organize against the dismantlement of environmental policy by creating a movement called the *Maré Socio-ambiental* (the Socio-Environmental Tide). One of their activities has been to protest the hiring of unqualified leadership in the environmental agencies. Due to the aggressiveness of the new government against employees who criticize it, I have purposely avoided conducting interviews with activists inside those agencies. But the presence of hundreds of *Maré Socio-Ambiental* tee-shirts on the streets of Brasília in the 2019 anti-deforestation protests makes me think that institutional activism is unlikely to go away very soon, though it may take entirely different forms in these very different times.

Notes

1. Two of the 2013 interviews were conducted by a coauthor of an initial phase of this case study (Abers and Tatagiba, 2015).
2. As Rossi (2017) notes, theoretical discussions of the concept of strategies are rare in the social movement literature and mostly focus on protest events or on defining the difference between tactic and strategy. Rossi's own proposal is that strategies are not so much designed from scratch, but rather adapted from historical traditions, which he calls repertoires of strategies.
3. Interviews are referred to by a code, to preserve anonymity. Those beginning with E were conducted for the Green Grants case study, while those beginning with H were conducted for the Stork Network study.
4. Informal conversation with an ex-employee.

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