



PARADIGMS, INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES AND POLICY DISMANTLING IN THE MERCOSUR SPECIALIZED MEETING OF FAMILY FARMING

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Introduction

The creation of the Specialized Meeting on Family Farming (Reaf) in 2004 marked a significant change in the way the Southern Common Market (the Mercosur trade bloc) regarded family farming, a social and economic category hitherto ignored by most governments as they generally disregard the agriculture and diversity of rural groups (Ramos, 2019; Niederle, 2015; Ramos et al., 2014). Such a posture legitimized public policies that were created almost exclusively for large-scale, technologically intensive farms that are fundamentally oriented towards international commodity trading (Pont, 2018, p. 57). Reaf's political

recognition of family farming compelled the trade bloc's member countries to create institutions, including ministries, secretariats, departments, and a broad variety of public policy instruments, to serve this sector.

As most of the national family farming policies, Reaf institutionalization benefited of the opportunity window opened by the Pink Tide in Latin America, as it was called the rise to power of left or center-left coalitions (Panizza, 2006). Mostly governed by center-right governments in the previous quarter century, countries began to follow new policy paradigms that, although divergent in terms of their methods and the extent of their reforms, brought the state back into power. Progressives, post-neoliberals, developmental neoliberals, and social developmentalists represented some of the attempts to define these policy paradigms (Saad-Filho, 2019; Balestro and Monteiro, 2019; Silva, 2018; Wolford and French, 2016; Bresser- Pereira and Theuer, 2012). However, following the recent conservative and liberal turn in Mercosur' countries, since 2016 Reaf has been undergoing several political and institutional changes that have clearly reduced its contribution to the formulation and improvement of public policies, directly impacting the social reproduction of family farmers in the region.

Considering this scenario, this paper has two interconnect objectives. First, it seeks to analyze the recent Reaf's dismantling, addressing the elements that interfere in this process and their repercussions for Reaf's political and institutional dynamics. Second, it intends to add other elements as explanatory variables into the policy dismantling approach (Jordan, Bauer and Green-Pedersen, 2013; Bauer and Knill, 2012). In accordance with the historical institutionalism, this approach emphasizes institutions and political interests as explanatory elements for a particular type of institutional change: the dismantling of public policies. Despite their contributions, this article argues about the

need to include policy paradigms as explanatory variables, considering their importance in defining the role of the State both in the economy and in the society. To meet this second objective – which will contribute to the realization of the first –, our article proposes a dialogue between historical institutionalism (Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol, 1985; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010), the approach of policy dismantling (Jordan, Bauer and Green-Pedersen, 2013; Bauer and Knill, 2012), and public policy paradigms (Hogan and Howlett, 2015; Hall, 1993; 2013; Carson, Burns and Calvo, 2009; Béland, 2007).

For this analysis, we relied on our research of documents, notes from Reaf's regional and national meetings since 2014, and interviews with government and family farming organizations conducted between 2014 and May 2020. After this introduction, the article is organized into four more sections. The next presents the theoretical and conceptual elements that guide the analysis. The third briefly recounts the building and strengthening of Reaf, and the fourth examines the elements that shaped the dismantling phase. The final section resumes the approaches to sum up the changes to Reaf.

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Institutional changes and dismantling public policies

One of the prevailing interpretations of institutional change in the 1990s and early 2000s emphasized the role of critical moments that are usually caused by events external to the policy dynamics, such as catastrophes, elections, and economic crises, and that are followed by periods of institutional reproduction (Capoccia, 2015; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Mahoney, 2001; Pierson, 2000). From this perspective, political choices made at critical moments lead to the formation of institutions that tend to persist and cannot be easily transformed due to path dependence. Several factors contribute to self-reinforcing public policies, such

as the opportunities missed after critical moments have passed and decision making is concluded; how expectations are managed after critical moments; the benefits that arise from learning and coordination; the presence of powerful or influential actors that benefit from the *status quo*; and the economic and political costs of changing institutional trajectory, which are irrevocable in certain cases (Mahoney, 2001; Pierson, 2000). Such elements contribute to positive feedback that entrenches public policy, or as Pierson (2000) put it, “the probability of more steps in the same direction increases with each step taken”.

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However, this interpretation that emphasizes path dependence and critical moments of rupture can obscure the gradual changes along the way, the origins of which may be endogenous to the dynamics of public policies and have cumulative effects, sometimes quite different from those initially expected (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010; Streeck and Thelen, 2005). Mahoney and Thelen (2010) suggest that the dynamics of stability and self-reinforcement are not inevitable and the recurrence of gradual changes depends on: i) the tensions caused by institutions in their uneven distribution of resources; and ii) ambiguous and subjective interpretations and implementation of the rules. Regarding the first, the authors point out that the actors, each with their unique endowment of resources, are motivated to defend established institutions, to bring about changes in them, or even to pursue the creation of new institutions and public policies. In this game, it is important to consider the veto power certain players hold over emerging conditions, whether by institutional or extra-institutional means. The broader institutional context also offers veto opportunities, together with events either endogenous or exogenous to public policy that affect the distribution of power and the influence of coalitions and pressure groups. Regarding the second point, Mahoney and Thelen (2010) suggest

that actors with divergent interests use their creativity and agency to exploit institutional ambiguities and discretion. Depending on how these changes are interpreted and implemented, they can affect resource allocation and expected outcomes. Therefore, according to Mahoney and Thelen (2010), institutional ambiguities, political context (power relations and veto opportunities) and actors' capacity for agency, can contribute to the creation of new institutions just as much as reinforcing the existing rules.

The authors cite four types of institutional change that can be observed here: Displacement, Conversion, Layering, and Drift. Displacement refers to changes that lead to the replacement of existing rules with new ones. These reformed institutions (usually promoted by actors in the process of gaining power) begin competing with the older institutions and, if they cannot resist, they newer will prevail. In the processes of Conversion, the institutions remain, but interpreted in a new way or oriented in a new direction. Here, the actors strategically maintain the institutions, exploit their ambiguities and their discretionary power and reorient them for new and different purposes and objectives. Layering regards the addition of new rules that gradually change the way the existing rules had structured institutional procedures. Finally, Drift occurs when the rules remain intact, but their effects and impacts are altered due to changes in external conditions. Here, actors exploit their discretion, strategically choosing to not act or to adjust institutions and policies in the face of changing contexts.

These four types of institutional change can lead either to the strengthening (Falleti, 2010) or to the dismantling of public policies (Onoma, 2010). This means some types of gradual change can be triggered in opposite directions, and, due to this ambiguity, Bauer and Knill (2012) propose analytical insights into a specific type of institutional change: dismantling. For the authors, this process refers to

“a change of a direct, indirect, hidden or symbolic nature that either diminishes the number of policies in a particular area, reduces the number of policy instruments used and/or reduces their intensity,” (Bauer and Knill, 2012, p. 35).

According to Bauer and Knill (2012), four ideal types of dismantling strategies can be set in motion depending on the interests of policymakers, the interests and resources of other actors (most notably those who oppose the process), and institutional opportunities and constraints: (1) in Dismantling by Default, in the face of high political costs and/or strong institutional constraints, policymakers deliberately omit or reduce public policy opportunities without signaling their elimination or suspension; (2) in Dismantling by Arena-Shifting, policymakers move discussions to other spaces or transfer public policy responsibility to another sector or echelon to weaken it or decrease its intensity, without causing visibility or high political costs; (3) in Dismantling by Symbolic Action, policymakers publicly declare their intention to dismantle, but no action is observed due to institutional constraints or uncertainties regarding the possible benefits of such action; (4) and, finally, in Active Dismantling, policymakers act plainly and vigorously to dismantle public policy responding or aiming at expanding its political support, in the absence of institutional constraints (Bauer and Knill, 2012).

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To analyze dismantling, Bauer and Knill (2012) focus on the interests and strategic actions of policymakers, which take advantage of institutional and political opportunities and constraints to reposition themselves in the political field. They also emphasize the crucial role of external shocks such as abrupt economic crisis and technological changes, or unexpected events that can modify the way actors operate in national systems. Accordingly, in every situation, whether it affords an opportunity to dismantle or

to constrain dismantling, the presence of strategic political actors is essential for developing institutional changes.

However, this focus on how policymakers calculate costs and benefits generated by their political decisions seems to be insufficient to explain institutional change. This is the reason why we propose a dialogue with the cognitive approach on public policy and, particularly, with the concept of “policy paradigm” (Hogan and Howlett, 2015; Hall, 1993, 2013; Carson, Burns and Calvo, 2009). For Hall (1993), policymakers operate based on ideas and norms that guide their interpretations about the nature and configuration of public problems, and thus influencing the definition of goals together with the types of public policy instruments that will be used to achieve them. In the words of Carson, Burns and Calvo (2009, p. 17),

policy paradigm conditions choices and frames potential opportunities by shaping the conceptual parameters – the boundaries of what is thinkable, possible, or acceptable, and it endows certain courses of action with meaning. [...] A policy paradigm enables actors to interpret events and their causes, invests certain actors with credibility and authority, suggests what the various rights and responsibilities of actors should be, and guides action.

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The paradigm becomes the prism through which policymakers regard the state and the market, and it determines their action in these areas and interaction with others actors. For instance, varied interpretations of the roles of the state in regulating economic relations configure a variety of policy paradigms, which are often identified with terms such as Keynesian, neo-liberal, neo-developmental, etc. Paradigms based on defending the state’s purview, on preserving rights, and on strengthening the welfare state tend to reinforce or create policies along these lines, whereas liberal paradigms

tend to minimize or reduce the scope of public policies. Once established in political and institutional spaces, the paradigm maintains legitimate influence as it manages to preserve power relations in its favor and act to solve public problems (Surel, 1995). In anomalous conditions and shifts in power relations, the existing paradigm is replaced with new interpretations and political orientations (Surel, 1995). Thus, “a paradigm shift or changes in economic and social assumptions can help explain the nature and direction of change in public policy,” (Béland, 2007, p. 23).

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Although virtually ignored by historical institutionalism and by the literature on political dismantling, ideas and paradigms are important variables in the dynamics of public policies (Baumgartner, 2014). According to Béland (2007), political interests are constructed by ideational processes related to paradigms and, while these are influenced by political institutions, they also draw on institutional changes. Based on this idea, we constructed an analytical framework that associates interests and strategies with political ideas and paradigms in a specific political context. To some extent, this arrangement dialogues with the proposition of Palier and Surel (2005) in comprehending the plurality of dimensions and the diversity of causal factors. Institutions, ideas, and interests, along with the actors that created them, have been privileged figures in the political and social sciences and in public policy analysis for several decades (Palier and Surel, 2005). Instead of emphasizing the weight of these elements separately (as each approach had been proposing), we analyzed their interrelationships to understand the policy dismantling.

The critical moment, new paradigms and a new institutional trajectory for family farming in Mercosur

In Mercosur countries, several political changes began with the election of presidents Luis Inácio Lula da Silva in

Brazil in 2002, Néstor Carlos Kirchner in Argentina in 2003, Tabaré Vázquez in Uruguay in 2004, and Fernando Lugo in Paraguay in 2008. These elections shifted power relations among existing national coalitions and began new trajectories based on new political ideas and paradigms, which put their states back on paths towards development. In contrast to the Washington Consensus, some authors identify this turn of the Brazilian leadership as the Brasília Consensus, whose bases were the promotion of macroeconomic stability, raising the minimum wage, income transfer programs and social inclusion policies.

In this new political context and with new policy paradigm, the Mercosur itself was reconsidered (Faria, 2012; Mello, 2011). As Marin (2011, p. 8) points out, the Mercosur was created in an “era marked by the Washington Consensus, during which the governments of the region sought to enter the international market by the elimination of trade barriers and the liberalization of investment flows.” However, after the political changes in the 2000s, it became, “a space for broad-spectrum political and economic articulation, with the objective of building channels of cooperation between South American countries.” Vázquez (2018) notes that for a decade the bloc was regarded as a space for governance as it sought to create developmental policies, strengthen democracies, and expand rights and public participation. “The bloc incorporated new public policy agendas and confronted social issues that had until then been excluded” (Vázquez, 2018, p. 126).

In this context, political decisions to strengthen family farming were made, which was one of the sectors, along with large-scale agriculture to a lesser degree, most affected by the creation of Mercosur (1991). The integration and liberalization of markets exposed family farmers to discriminatory conditions by putting them in competition with larger producers that benefited from economies of scale,

access to technology, lower production costs and ease of market access (Niederle, 2016; Romano, 1996). Seeking a response, family farming coalitions started acting to gain visibility and access to political and institutional spaces (Grisa, Schneider and 2015; Lattuada, Nogueira and Urcola, 2015; Vassallo, 2010; Riquelme, 2003). At the regional level, this found expression primarily in the creation of the Mercosur Confederation of Family Farmer Organizations (Coprofam), in 1994. This managed to bring together unions from several countries around a common objective: the recognition that, despite their differences in agricultural production, scale and other aspects, they could demand better treatment from their governments by working together under the family farming identity.

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Despite being only a marginal actor in Mercosur, within Working Subgroup 8 (SGT 8) Coprofam managed to draw attention to the influence the regional integration had had on family farming. However, the trade bloc predominantly served the interests of large agribusiness and, despite increasing vulnerability and economic hardships in rural areas, governments paid little attention to family farmers. This is the reason why, in 2003, Coprofam drafted a letter that was presented by the Brazilian government to the Common Market Council demanding the creation of a special group (Coprofam, 2003). Taking advantage of institutional loopholes regarding this issue in SGT 8 and the existence of specialized meetings, Coprofam began to advocate for institutional change. In this political moment, when governments were adopting new paradigms, these demands produced change by way of Layering (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010) that resulted in the creation of a specialized meeting.¹

¹ Mercosur has 11 Specialized Meetings in its institutional structure, one of which is Family Agriculture. These meetings are specific forums articulated around a theme such as science and technology, cooperativism, communication, etc., and they seek to draft recommendations and proposals for the Common Market Group.

Reaf gained acceptance from the SGT 8 and from agribusiness organizations with the understanding that its creation would not interfere with discussions related to commercial issues. At that time, growth in demand and increase in commodity prices in international markets, combined with public investments in both large- and small-scale agriculture, generated a sort of win-win dynamic. Indeed, the recognition and growing support for family farming was accompanied by an equally vigorous growth in agribusiness, which, whenever appropriate, also sought to integrate the more capitalized and specialized family establishments into their productive sectors.

The creation of Reaf also reflected a change in Mercosur's governance, especially regarding the increased participation of social movements. According to Pont (2018, p. 57), Reaf has become "one of the most dynamic spaces in Mercosur, and a model in terms of its work methodology and scope of public participation." Within a multilateral forum marked by numerous rules and formalities, Reaf has managed to establish itself as an innovative space for political dialogue between government and civil society representatives. This innovation is primarily attributed to the dynamics of the regional sessions that guaranteed meetings would be held between representatives of family farming and peasants' organizations just before the official opening of the regional plenary sessions. At these meetings, positions and demands are drafted that then guide dialogues with governments in the creation of normative and policies.

As a consultative body, Reaf proposes recommendations and resolutions to the Common Market Group, which deliberates policies for the economic bloc. Among the proposals received over the years are a resolution for identifying and registering family farms; guidelines for gender equality in public policy; recommendations for the promotion of rural education policy; the creation of Family Farming Official

Seals; the promotion of policies for rural youth; and increasing support for technical assistance and rural extension programs (Reaf, 2014). The role of Reaf in effecting public policies and regulations directly in the member countries is also noteworthy, including changes to public procurement legislation for the purchase of family farming products, national regulations for land use by foreigners, and programs focused on rural women and youth (Grisa and Niederle, 2018; 2019; Niederle, 2015; Reaf, 2014).

Several studies have examined the various cycles and phases of Reaf's endeavors (Niederle, 2015; Ramos et al., 2014). They demonstrate that, in the first cycle² (2004-2006) the efforts were focused on identifying issues and building trust between state and non-state actors that were not used to work together. Based on this, in the second and third cycles (2006-2010), guidelines for national policy were produced and the first recommendations for Mercosur were made. Then, between the third and fourth cycles, progress was made on Reaf's own organizational structure, which led to the formation of the Technical Secretariat and the creation of the Family Agriculture Fund (FAF). The fourth and fifth cycles (2010-2014) saw advances in the formulation of public policies such as family farming registries and public procurement tools. In the assessment of an interviewee, "The third phase began, when we were able, with FAF, to have an even greater capacity for autonomy and when, in fact, this political dialogue started to show results in the member countries. Reaf, the issue of family farming and the creation of policies for family farming, has become permanent," (Interview 6, 2015). The creation of FAF marked an important moment for Reaf, ensuring that it would become

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² A cycle is defined as the period necessary to complete the presidential terms of all Mercosur member countries.

institutionally more stable, establish a technical staff, and include broad social movements in political debates.

In its first years, before receiving funding from Mercosur, Reaf relied on the financial support of the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD/Mercosur) to carry out its plans, guarantee the participation of family farming organizations in regional meetings and to set up a Technical Secretariat. This organization played an important role in mediating dialogues between governments and social organizations; enforcing compliance with the calendar of regional meetings, national sessions and special sessions; preparing technical documents and drafting regulations and decisions adopted by the Common Market Group; and disseminating proposals, demands and situation reports regarding family farming in the region (Ramos et al., 2014). As one interviewee said, “The Reaf Technical Secretariat plays a key role because it coordinates all the different *pro tempore* presidencies, and manages to set a continuous tone for Reaf,” (Interview 10, 2015).

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However, it soon became evident that, without specific resources, Reaf’s public participation and operating dynamics could be compromised. After negotiating with the bloc’s governments, in 2008 the Common Market Council created FAF with the, “objective of financing programs and projects to encourage Mercosur family farming and facilitating the broad participation of social actors in activities related to the issue” (Mercosur, 2008). After being debated and approved in member country legislatures, FAF was implemented in 2013 for a period of five years based on fixed contributions: 70% from Brazil, 27% from Argentina, 2% from Uruguay, and 1% from Paraguay. As stipulated in Resolution No. 06/2009, “after this deadline, the member states will evaluate the alternatives for its continuity” (Brasil, 2012, own translation).

Seizing the opportunity created by the International Year of Family Farming in 2014, Reaf embarked the next year on a new phase, according to interviewees. As one said, “2014 to 2016, I think it was a moment of maturity, of seeing what to do with what had been built, of taking the next steps, of striving to be more, of having more practical results,” (Interview 21, April 2020). In addition to expanding its activities in the creation of regional policies and intra-bloc trade instruments that support family farming, plans were being laid for actions on a broader scale such as, for example, the close cooperation that Reaf was establishing with the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to examine land governance guidelines and public procurement (França and Marques, 2017). As one interviewee cited, “This is already an environment where Reaf is almost a global platform, because, from Reaf, we articulate and organize an intervention among multilateral organizations,” (Interview 6, 2015). Reaf was no longer being treated as just a public forum, but also as a platform for joint political action supporting family farming. However, what happened next was a new and critical moment that changed the organization’s path again, but towards dismantlement.

When the trajectory changes direction: institutional dismantling

In the second decade of the 21st century, Latin America’s political context changed. Several factors contributed to this process, such as the fall of international commodity prices; the reduction of foreign direct investment; the reduction in state interventions and the adoption of more orthodox economic measures (Ramos, 2019; Silva, 2018). Moreover, conservative groups reorganized themselves and gained more of a voice in the politics, the judiciary, the media, and religion, leading to similar changes in the presidencies of Paraguay (2012), Argentina (2015), Brazil (2016) and

Uruguay (2019). Although characterized in a variety of ways such as neoliberal, conservative neoliberal, extreme right populism, authoritarian populism, among others (Couto, 2020; Balestro and Monteiro, 2019; Andrade, 2019; Tavares dos Santos and Barreira, 2018), these policy paradigms guided fiscal adjustment policies to reassure and support powerful economic actors; they defended the resumption of economic growth and business competitiveness by the way of the state acting to maintain economic stability; they made labor standards and regulations more flexible in favor of competition; they repositioned the market in place of the state as the engine of development; and they reinforced conservative values.

The new policy paradigms also changed how sectors of society (and particularly certain social groups) would be interpreted (Muller, 2015), and changed the power relations. If, in the first decade of the 2000s, there were advances in the political and institutional recognition of rural diversity in Mercosur and the need for specific policies for family farming, these changes reverted to a monolithic view of the rural and, with this, forced the dismantling of public policies that had been elaborated to support diverse social groups. These policy paradigms changed the interpretation of the role and contribution of family farming to national food production and development (Ramos, 2019; Patrouilleau, Taraborrelli and Alonso, 2018; Grisa, 2018). In the words of one interviewee, “we had the Argentine government, which had many significant changes [referring to the Kirchner governments], then with Macri the history of family farming took another path. Moreover, at the same time, political changes in Brazil. Therefore, these two countries were fundamental... [for family farming and for Reaf]” (Interview 20, March 2020).

To illustrate these changes, we cite the cases of Brazil and Argentina, the main contributors to FAF. In 2016,

The Brazilian Ministry of Agrarian Development (MDA) was discontinued. This organ had been the main advocate for small-scale agriculture, and it was replaced by the Special Secretariat for Family Agriculture and Agrarian Development (SEAD). Initially, this was linked to the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic (2016) which maintained this dual aspect, albeit in significantly reduced symbolic and political terms. SEAD and its functions were ultimately incorporated into the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, and Supply (Mapa) under the title Secretariat of Family Agriculture and Cooperatives (2019). Besides the reduction of institutional support for family farming, various budgetary and normative instruments, together with spaces for social participation, were dismantled (Sabourin, Craviotti and Milhorange, 2020; Niederle et al. 2019; Grisa, 2018). Given this scenario, there was also an effort to restore the image of a single agriculture. Launching the 2019-2020 Agricultural and Livestock Plan, the first unified plan since 2003, when two Plans were introduced, which accounted for the duality of the Brazilian countryside, Mapa's Minister stressed that, "This is the first time, after a long time, that we have launched a single Agricultural and Livestock Plan. This fact deserves to be shown: we finally have just one quality agricultural system supplying Brazil and the world" (Com, 2019). Besides the repercussions in Brazil, such changes affected Mercosur. The message was quite clear: the country that had led the charge for the political and institutional recognition for family farming and the dissemination of associated public policies in the region was moving in another direction (Sabourin; Grisa, 2018).

At the beginning of Macri's liberal government in 2015, Argentina's Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Food was transformed into the Ministry of Agroindustry, and, consequently, family farming became the responsibility of the Secretariat for Family Agriculture

and Territorial Development. For Sabourin, Craviotti and Milhorce (2020), Jara et al., (2019), and Vigil (2019), such changes reduced the political heft of agriculture and, more specifically, family farming, which, in turn, halted actions, reduced human and financial resources, and disrupted spaces for social participation. Argentina had established Law No. 27.118/2014 while still influenced by the previous policy paradigm, declaring, “family, peasant and indigenous agriculture to be in the public interest for its contribution to the food security and sovereignty of the people, for practicing and promoting life and production systems that preserve biodiversity and sustainable processes of productive transformation,” (Argentina, 2015). However, this law was not regulated, and normative instruments and budgets for its implementation were never established (Vigil, 2019).

The paradigmatic changes concerning the treatment of family farming in the countries have affected Reaf itself. According to interviewees, until 2014-2015, there had been an intense involvement on the part of authorities such as Ministers, Vice-Ministers, and policymakers. “Technical staff were really involved, and the coordinators, servers, and manager, always valued Reaf. The space was considered super-relevant, always a priority for everyone,” (Interview 21, April 2020). However, from 2015-2016 onwards, the official delegations had their ability to represent their interests diminished, and, therefore, their capacity to commit to and influence political decisions (Ramos, 2019). “In recent years, some countries have ceased to include top-level authorities in their official delegations, what happened until 2014-2015. Ministers and Vice-Ministers do not participate frequently, and this is an element that limits the possibilities for Reaf to work in each country,” (Interview 25, April 2020). Moreover, another interviewee commented that,

In 2018, we began to lose the ability to maintain technical staff that we had had before and to lose the involvement of the most active managers. Then, I think we started a cycle, in which Reaf began to lose traction, and this extended to other countries ... you already had more difficulties in naming a focal point, let alone working, building, and showing up at Reaf with something built. (Interview 21, April 2020)

Another change concerns Reaf's financial sustainability. As mentioned, FAF was implemented in 2013 for five years. After this period, its operation was provisionally extended until the end of 2018 due to the availability of remaining resources (Mercosur, 2017). In 2017 and 2018, the renewal of FAF was on the agenda at regular Reaf's meetings, since this was a demand made by family farming organizations:

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Reaf is going to conduct 15 years of shared work. As a result of this work, we have a set of recommendations that today are specific public policies assisting in the lives and work of thousands of family farmers. Therefore, we ask governments to renew their commitment to this space for dialogue by extending and providing the necessary resources to FAF for a new period, giving continuity to the work of Reaf, strengthening the regional sessions, the national sessions, allowing the organizations to provide qualified proposals for shared, equitable, and transparent work, and ensuring the effective presence of young people and women. We have made a lot of progress, but we have a lot to do. Therefore, we urge the governments not to compromise policies for the development of peasant and indigenous family agriculture and the reduction of poverty in the countryside in this moment of reducing public spending. (Reaf, 2018)

However, these requests encountered a political context hindered their return to the public agenda (Kingdon, 1984). As one interviewee reported,

I think it was already late when [the notion occurred to us], ‘well, FAF is going to end, we need to change, we need to see legislation,’ and there was no longer any chance of any changes. It was the end of the Temer government, the end of Argentina’s term, and there was no possibility of having any movement to approve it, there was no space for approving this in parliaments, in countries’ congresses. [...] When the FAF extension ended, it was a difficult, delicate situation ... the Temer government was very difficult because the only organization in Brazil that could do this [request the continuance of Reaf] was SEAD, which was in the Casa Civil (State Department), and which no longer had the power that it previously did ... so family farming affairs were no longer consolidated as they had been in previous governments. So, it was difficult for this reason, the political changes. (Interview 20, March 2020).

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While the political context for family farming had changed, family farming organizations were also weakening and their need for reorganization was limiting their political and institutional resistance (Sabourin, Cravioti and Milhorce, 2020; Niederle et al., 2019). Besides, issues related to the turnover of civil society members at Reaf (Zimmermann, 2019), difficulties in understanding public management in the Common Market, asymmetries in access to information and knowledge (Ferreira, 2019), and options for “no dialogue” with opposing governments³ weakened their capacity for advocacy and resistance.

³ Disagreeing with the way in which some governments were established without democratic elections and equally with their political paradigms, several family farming organizations assumed repertoires of non-dialogue and confrontation, which, according evaluation of few interviewees, added weaknesses to Reaf.

Based on these testimonies, and with the approach of historical institutionalism, we could say that FAF's own institutional weaknesses contributed to its dismantling. By establishing a five-year term, making its continuity a condition of re-approval by the CMC and each country's parliament, the coalitions that built FAF in the first decade of the century left it vulnerable to changes in the political field. This illustrates its enormous weakness:

When FAF was created, we never thought about continuity. We just executed it, and we left the discussion of a renewal for the end of FAF and to other governments. This was an enormous weakness, even though FAF's charter said that once it was finished, its renewal could be discussed. We managed to extend it because we had the funds, but we were unable to renew it. I think this was the responsibility of the governments that had created it. It was a very short project, five years. By law, FAF should have lasted 10 years. It is very difficult for us to solidify policies under the changing governments of [South America's Southern Cone]. If you intended to change something... you would need more time. (Interview 22, April 2020)

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Thus, despite the requests to continue FAF, most actors found it difficult to locate political support in Mercosur and among its member countries. As one interviewee said, "so, even though we heard the guy there, who was the coordinator from [country], saying: 'no, we want [to continue FAF], we think it's important', he never made any effort to move forward with this," (Interview 20, March 2020). In short, after the end of FAF, the hegemonic political actors chose not to renew it, producing gradual Drift-type changes (Mahoney and Thelen, 2010) or Dismantling by Default (Bauer and Knill, 2012), that is, they opted to avoid action

or to not make the institutional changes necessary to continue Reaf's work.

FAF's discontinuation had at least two other repercussions. One of them concerned the Technical Secretariat, which was also discontinued and thus compromised the registration and continuity of referrals, institutional memory, articulation between governments and social organizations, and continuing activities among of *pro tempore* presidencies that occurred every six months. In the words of an interviewee,

I think this [Technical Secretariat] is important because institutional memory and the memory of our work passes on. It makes life easier for governments and movements alike. In addition to the task of collecting, classifying, passing on information, maintaining the agenda, it is an almost pedagogical task, to explain, to call upon the leader, to speak, to fight against the leader, to resist the governmental agencies ... it is important to have a secretary to organize the government's agenda, and also the agenda that movements demand while trying to help arrange the timing for these issues to occur in. (Interview 22, April 2020)

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Another aspect concerns the participation of the actors in Reaf's national and regional plenary sessions. Whereas the average number of participants in the regional plenaries remained between 160 and 190 from 2015 to 2018 (Zimmermann, 2018), the average decreased to around 110 in 2019, with the XXXI regional plenary having only 86 participants, the most represented governments. As mentioned, a part of FAF's resources was used to make the meetings feasible, mainly for the participation of civil society organizations. With the end of the financial support, the broader participation of organizations and actors that have difficulty

with self-financing was compromised. As an interviewee said, “when we don’t have FAF, we move to a much leaner format [in the regional sessions], resulting in an imbalance, because you cannot treat unequal people equally. After FAF disappearance, only those with money or political lobbies participate” (Interview 22, April 2020).

To reduce the effect of diminished participation, family farming organizations sought to strengthen their participation by the regional representation organization, Coprofam. Considering the weakened position of family farming and their space for dialogue, Coprofam sought to use its capacity for political influence to ensure the participation of representatives from its member organizations with its own resources and international partner organizations. As one interviewee reports,

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In 2017, [Coprofam] regained a strong role. We tried to re-engage some leaders who were always very active and who had committed to remain and to take a strong position for the organizations in this dialogue space. We felt that it was under threat and that we needed to act vigorously ... We tried to focus on Reaf which was being threatened by Macri in Argentina, by Temer in Brazil and by changes in Paraguay. We tried in 2017, 2018, 2019. Coprofam tried to make an impact very cautiously and without the will it desired, without the political force, the expression, the desire it had before. Why? It wasn’t possible to approach this aggressively. You had to approach this very skillfully to negotiate with the Temer transitional government, then with Bolsonaro, with the changes in Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay. (Interview 26, May 2020)

Currently, the family farming organizations that composed Coprofam can guarantee representation in Reaf, but the diversity of actors and organizations not linked to

Coprofam has been significantly restricted since FAF ended. For an interviewee, the participation of women, young, indigenous people and economically weaker organizations has been compromised.

Today we are managing with our own resources to send a representative [to Reaf] from each country, but when a representative from each country goes, you get the president of Muceth, from Chile, but you don't get a representative from the young people, no representation for women, no leader in charge of issues such as cooperativism ... Reaf restricted itself because before you had a plurality. There were organizations for women, young people, indigenous people, small vendors ... this was [the norm] with Argentina, which not only had the Agrarian Federation Coprofam, they had Fonaf, and there were several other organizations; there was a movement of several small organizations that also attended; Uruguay expanded [its involvement]; so too Paraguay; there were other movements that were attending, and with these [financial difficulties at Reaf], now they're gone. (Interview 26, May 2020).

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When family farming advocates reduced their participation, new actors saw a window of opportunity to reposition themselves within Reaf. International organizations became even more present and important because they offer financial and technical support. Besides the IFAD-Mercosur Program, which expanded support for Coprofam's activities, Reaf intensified its partnerships with the FAO and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA). Indeed, only after negotiations with the FAO and the Brazilian Government that the former head of the Technical Secretariat of Reaf was hired as a private consultant to assist the *pro tempore* presidencies that take turns in organizing the regional plenaries. However, this no longer

allowed the same type of systematic work of mediating political dialogues between governments, and between governments and social movements.

Given the return to a single, monolithic view of agriculture, Reaf also began to rely on sector representatives from Brazilian agribusiness. They were brought into this space under the direction of Mapa, which understood that family farming policies should focus on cooperation strategies between small, medium, and large producers. Reflecting this posture, representatives from the National Confederation of Agriculture (CNA) and the Organization of Brazilian Cooperatives (OCB) were present at the XXXI regional plenary, and were notably interested in the debate over the new European Union-Mercosur Agreement, which had recently been added to the Reaf's agenda. The consequences of the participation of these new actors are still to be seen. Therefore, to the viability of this agenda, considering that in April 2020, for example, the new Argentine government (guided by a policy paradigm different from that of the Macri Government) signaled its exit from negotiations on Mercosur trade agreements. Even so, the presence of Brazilian agribusiness organizations puts pressure on power relations and political dialogues in Reaf and in participating countries. According to one interviewee, "the entry of CNA and OCB alters Reaf's community, bringing in those who have never participated. These [new actors] alone change the dynamics ... the movement truly meant to expand that community, to focus on cooperativism, and [instead] the family farming image is getting weaker," (Interview 21, April 2020).

These examples illustrate Reaf's political and institutional weakening and the weakening of public participation and political dialogue between governments and civil society. Besides, Ramos (2019) points out other elements that had been "weakening" Reaf in recent years and more

intensely in 2019: (1) the weakening of the pertinence, political importance and quality of the agenda for dialogue; (2) the loss of focus and the dilution of actions in a set of activities, which resulted in eroding financial resources, wearing down leaders and losing the attention of the governmental interlocutor; (3) the decrease in the quality of proposals from official delegations and family farming organizations; (4) the strain on the capacities of managers due to work overload.

Policy paradigm changes and their institutional repercussions have led to institutional dismantling. However, the size of the regional family farming community, the political heft of certain unions within Mercosur member countries, the legitimation of the space for political dialogue by multilateral organizations and the regional and international reach achieved by Reaf are not insignificant elements in the strategies of policymakers. Furthermore, the shift towards neoliberal, conservative neoliberal or authoritarian populist paradigms has not achieved the same alignment that the Pink Tide had, considering that, at least one country, Uruguay, was previously guided by a more progressive or social developmental paradigm within Mercosur, and now Argentina. Regarding this political balance and the costs of their own actions, member governments did not choose to actively dismantle these institutions, nor to gradually change the type of displacement they underwent. “Coordinating discourses” (Schmidt, 2008) foster the continuity of Reaf, such that, “The things we hear most are, keep going, you can go on, you can go on,” (Interview 21, April 2020). However, the instruments or initiatives that would guarantee this continuity are absent. “If you don’t give money, you can’t play. There is no inclination to end this space; they want to keep it, but they still haven’t discovered how to do it.” That is, policymakers pursued gradual changes by way of Drift, or dismantling by Default (Bauer and Knill, 2012; Mahoney

and Thelen, 2010), by choosing to not adjust Reaf and its instruments in the face of contextual changes. Given the political costs, actors are maintaining Reaf, but not updating its density and intensity, thus effectively producing political and institutional cooling. Although this process weakens regional family farming actions, it leaves the possibility of Reaf's reorganization dormant and dependent upon political changes in trade bloc countries.

Final considerations

A new phase began at Reaf in 2015 with the intention of dismantling it. Changes in the political context and power relations, the establishment of policy paradigms with new ideas and interests, and institutional fragility or ambiguities converged on the Reaf cycle, which was marked by political and institutional cooling, the dismantling of FAF and the technical secretariat, and a reduction in public participation together with the arrival of new actors that intend to change how family farming is thought of and how it is treated. Likewise, these changes to Reaf mirror the political changes to, and treatment of, family farming in member countries that, although keeping family farming on the agenda, weaken its political impact.

Analyzing these processes through the lens of historical institutionalism alone would lead us to emphasize the institutional opportunities and constraints, and the tension between coalitions of actors. Although this approach regards the political changes that have occurred as external events that shape the trajectories of institutions, it minimizes the mass of ideas and interpretations by bluntly treating them as elements that interfere in power relations. At the same time, the debate over the dismantling of public policies emphasizes the interests of the actors that, inserted into specific dynamics and institutional contexts, opt for various strategies based on the estimated costs and benefits

of political actions. The changes at Reaf were triggered mainly by changes to paradigms that, more than altering the power relations and the strategies of the actors, influenced the direction of change, and notably with the effect of dismantling it. With the establishment of new paradigms, the actors could dilute Reaf by invisibly taking advantage of institutional weaknesses and without assuming the costs of explicit displacement or dismantling. Therefore, interactions between ideas, institutions, and interests produced the changes at Reaf, especially by Dismantling by Default, which employs gradual changes that we recognize as Drift.

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PARADIGMS, INSTITUTIONAL CHANGES AND POLICY DISMANTLING IN THE MERCOSUR SPECIALIZED MEETING OF FAMILY FARMING

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Abstract: This article analyzes the dismantling of the Specialized Meeting on Family Farming (Reaf), a Mercosur forum responsible for proposing public policies for family farming. By means of a dialogue with the historical institutionalism, the cognitive approach, and the policy dismantling approach, the article characterizes the predominant type of dismantling and explains its driving forces. Data were collected through the analysis of official documents, observation of national and regional meetings, and interviews with ministers, policymakers, researchers and social leaders. Results indicate the prevalence of “dismantling by default” or gradual changes known as “drift”, in which, besides the interests and strategies of the political actors – the main focus of policy dismantling analysis – the emergence of new ideas and policy paradigms has played a major role.

Keywords: Family Farming; Policy Paradigm; Institutional Change; Policy Dismantling; Mercosur.

PARADIGMAS, MUDANÇAS INSTITUCIONAIS E DESMANTELAMENTO DE POLÍTICAS PÚBLICAS NA REUNIÃO ESPECIALIZADA DE AGRICULTURA FAMILIAR DO MERCOSUL

Resumo: *O artigo analisa o desmantelamento da Reunião Especializada de Agricultura Familiar (Reaf), fórum do Mercosul responsável por propor políticas públicas para a agricultura familiar. A partir do diálogo entre o neoinstitucionalismo histórico, a abordagem cognitiva e o quadro analítico de desmantelamento de políticas públicas, o artigo caracteriza o tipo predominante de*

desmantelamento e discute seus elementos explicativos. Análise envolveu pesquisa documental, observação nos encontros nacionais e regionais e entrevistas com ministros, formuladores de políticas públicas, pesquisadores e representantes dos movimentos sociais. Os resultados indicam a prevalência do desmantelamento por omissão ou mudança gradual por desvio, os quais, além dos interesses e estratégias dos atores políticos – principais elementos abordados pela literatura de desmantelamento de políticas públicas – foram influenciados por novas ideias e paradigmas de política pública.

Palavras-chave: *Agricultura Familiar; Paradigma de Política Pública; Mudança Institucional; Desmantelamento; Mercosur.*

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