

The Superintendency for the Development of the North-East (SUDENE) and the training of a generation of development planners in Brazil's north-east

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Abstract

This article examines the training of development planners in north-eastern Brazil by the Superintendency for the Development of the North-East (SUDENE) in the 1960s and 1970s. Supported by the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), SUDENE held courses on development and economic and social planning and trained generations of specialists with a view to tackling inequalities and underdevelopment in the region. It was one of the main channels for the dissemination of ECLA ideas in Brazil, acting as a producer of knowledge about the regional situation, a laboratory for institutional reforms to modernize the bureaucratic machinery and a standard-bearer for the ideology of national developmentalism. Institutional documents, press coverage and testimonials from former members of SUDENE are used to reconstruct the activities involved in training specialist staff and the processes that led to the constitution, expansion and disbanding of the SUDENE technical team.

Keywords

Economic development, regional development, development planning, technical cooperation, training programmes, ECLA, administrative agencies, public sector, history, regional economics, Brazil

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I. Introduction¹

The Superintendency for the Development of the North-East (SUDENE) was created in 1959 with the aim of restructuring the economy of north-eastern Brazil by attracting industrial investment, modernizing the region's political and administrative structure and investing to train staff in economic and social development planning techniques. With the creation of SUDENE, the developmentalist government of Juscelino Kubitschek (1956–1961) sought to reduce the development asymmetries between the regions of the centre-south, which industrialized rapidly thanks to the exchange-rate and tariff policies adopted by Brazil after the Second World War, and the north-east, which was then in ruins, with an economy based on agricultural production, dependent on the export of capital and skilled labour to the centre-south region and harmed by the official exchange-rate policy.

SUDENE was also a response by the Kubitschek government to the pre-revolutionary political situation in the north-east, where the struggle for land and the demands of *campesinos* for better living conditions had come to threaten the stability of the country and the government itself (Cohn, 1976; Oliveira, 2013).

One of the challenges in implementing the SUDENE development programme was the shortage of qualified personnel in the north-east. The report “Uma política para o desenvolvimento econômico do Nordeste” (“A policy for the economic development of the north-east”) prepared by the Working Group for the Development of the North-East (GTDN), which was linked to the federal government, and SUDENE Master Plans I (1961–1963), II (1963–1965), III (1966–1968) and IV (1969–1973) pointed out that training professionals was an indispensable condition for the development of the region.

Regional imbalances were reflected in the concentration of skilled labour in the centre-south of the country. The small contingent of university-trained professionals in the north-east would migrate to the centre-south, exacerbating the region's underdevelopment. To reverse the situation, SUDENE prioritized investment in staff training, with the support of the Economic Commission for Latin America (ECLA), and expanded job opportunities for regional development specialists, thus boosting the labour market for professionals with higher education. This *autarquia*² developed a new narrative about the north-east, presenting it as a region with natural riches and industrial potential, and arguing that a large technical corps working within SUDENE itself, at universities and in the public and private sectors was needed to understand and exploit these.

This article also contributes to the field of studies on the history of economics and economic thought in Brazil and Latin America by showing the links between the ECLA school of planning and the developmentalist ideology prevailing in Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, of which the creation of SUDENE was the most emblematic result. Despite the important role played by the agency in training hundreds of technical staff committed to development planning in the second half of the twentieth century, its history, structure, functioning and disbandment have been little studied. This is due partly to the hostility of the civilian-military regime established in 1964 towards SUDENE, then a symbol of the struggle for structural change in the poorest and most unequal region of the country, and partly to a lack of interest among the intellectual elites of the south-east in political and administrative innovations and new knowledge production in that peripheral region.

¹ The author wishes to thank the former SUDENE staff interviewed, whose passion and commitment to regional development are undimmed. He is also grateful to the anonymous reader at *CEPAL Review* whose thorough, capable and critical reading helped make the article more accurate and complete.

² In Brazil, an *autarquia* is an agency established by law to manage specific public services. Although overseen by the State, it has administrative and financial autonomy and its own assets and acts in a decentralized manner.

Against this background, the present article contributes to the specialized literature by analysing SUDENE with an emphasis on its personnel training efforts. As will be shown, SUDENE was in many ways an advance guard for the ECLA structuralist school in north-east Brazil.

In its theoretical and methodological approach, this article systematically investigates, from the perspective of the sociology of intellectuals, what was a paradigmatic case in the north-east: the reconfiguration of the hierarchy for the division of technical work among the bureaucracies operating within the Brazilian State in the mid-twentieth century and the emergence of a new State elite, namely economists, endowed with scientific legitimacy and using the new knowledge from their discipline to influence the economic strategies of government elites at a critical political juncture. The article also contributes to the study of the circulation of agents, ideas and practices among the countries of the Latin American periphery.

This article draws on the *SUDENE Informa* newsletter, contemporary news reports and interviews with former SUDENE officials to reconstruct the development agency's initiatives in training generations of economic development planners in the 1960s and 1970s, the period when it was at its peak, after which its influence waned.

The article is organized into six sections after this introduction. The second section reconstructs the cooperation between ECLA and the Brazilian Government in planning policies for structural change and organizing the Training Course on Problems of Economic Development (CTPDE). The third section analyses the transfer of this course to Recife and the cooperation between ECLA and SUDENE on the training of personnel. The fourth section deals with the structuring of the Human Resources Department (DRH) and of the Economic Development Technician (TDE) course. The fifth section examines SUDENE activities in the area of education, highlighting the creation of the Education Division and the Educational Planning Technician (TPE) course. The sixth section describes the investments made in the training of SUDENE technical staff, with courses held in the north-east, the south-east and abroad. The seventh section focuses on the development institution's offering of intensive courses in sectoral planning and on the training of hundreds of specialists in numerous fields with the aim of restructuring local bureaucracies and universities in the region. Lastly, the eighth section offers some concluding remarks.

II. The dissemination of ECLA thinking in Brazil

A substantial part of the modern economic bureaucracy of the Brazilian State was created between the 1930s and the 1960s in response to the transformations brought about by the industrialization process and the new demands being put on the central State, which began to expand its sphere of action within the country and to specialize its functions. This was the background to the creation of the Public Service Administrative Department (DASP) (1938), the Superintendency of Currency and Credit (SUMOC) (1945), the National Bank for Economic Development (BNDE) (1952), the Banco do Nordeste do Brasil (1952), the Superintendency of Economic Recovery Plan of the Amazon (SPVEA) (1952) and the Development Council of the Presidency of the Republic (1956), which was responsible for drafting the Targets Plan of the Juscelino Kubitschek administration.

In addition, the proliferation of economic organizations and the creation of State-owned companies tasked with expanding economic infrastructure, such as the National Steel Company (CSN), Petrobras and what was then called the Vale do Rio Doce Company, led to the emergence of specialists in economics and public administration. These professionals proliferated between the 1950s and 1960s and took on the planning and execution of State-coordinated development policies.

Amid growing demand for qualified professionals to work in the State bureaucracy, and given the rising complexity of economic problems, which required increasingly specialized knowledge, schools of economics and public administration were established in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo. With the proliferation of initiatives in the field of economic studies, the need for professional development courses soon arose, and this was met by institutions such as the National Economic Council (CNE) (1949–1967), the Professional Development Centre for Economists (CAE) (1960–1966) and BNDE, in cooperation with ECLA (1956–1967), these initiatives being based in Rio de Janeiro (Biderman et al., 1996; Mantega and Rego, 1999; Klüger, 2017).

With rapid economic growth and the advance of the industrialist and State interventionist agenda in the 1950s, notwithstanding the brief anti-Statist and anti-industrialist interregnum of the João Café Filho government (1954–1955), ECLA ideas found their way into new niches of the Brazilian economic bureaucracy, providing ammunition and a justifying ideology of a scientific hue for the government's industrialist schools (Bielschowsky, 1988; Oliveira, 2003).

Distinguished by its acceptance of the unorthodox thinking of economist Raúl Prebisch (1901–1986), which sparked a Copernican revolution in the way the industrialization process and the role of the State as a coordinator of economic development in Latin America were understood, exerting a strong influence in Brazil (Bielschowsky, 1988; Oliveira, 2003; Klüger, 2017; Barbosa, 2021), ECLA sponsored several editions of the Training Course on Problems of Economic Development (CTPDE), in partnership with BNDE, and disseminated economic planning techniques among the upper echelons of the Brazilian civil service.

In the 1950s, ECLA expanded its activities in Brazil and introduced Portuguese as one of its working languages. It participated actively in the Brazilian economic debate, which was marked by polarization between orthodox and heterodox economists, and held its fifth session in Rio de Janeiro in 1953, when a cooperation agreement with BNDE (1953–1955) was signed with the aim of producing a diagnosis of the economic situation and a development plan for Brazil (Bielschowsky, 1988; Klüger, 2017; Barbosa, 2021; Sola, 2023).³

The convergence between the second Getúlio Vargas administration (1950–1954) and the so-called “golden age” of ECLA thinking (1949–1956) (Dosman, 2011, p. 380) also helped make Brazil a priority for ECLA, as did the creation in the country of financial institutions for economic development such as BNDE and the Banco do Nordeste do Brasil, the predominance of developmentalist thinking in the Brazilian economic bureaucracy and the work of Celso Furtado on the pioneering ECLA team.

Celso Furtado (1920–2004) was from Paraíba and completed a Law degree at the University of Brazil (now the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro) (1940–1944) before working as a specialist at the Public Service Administrative Department (DASP) (1944–1946), obtaining a doctorate in Economics from the University of Paris (1948) and joining ECLA in 1948. He quickly became Director of the Economic Development Division (1950–1955), which was considered the centre of thought on development theory and planning within the organization (Dosman, 2011, p. 320). Furtado led a multinational team of economists and headed technical assistance missions in Chile (1950–1952), Brazil (1953–1955), Mexico (1955–1957) and Venezuela (1957). He also participated in studies on the economies of Argentina, Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador (Furtado, 2014).

³ The Latin American organization was primarily responsible for the movement of agents and ideas between Chile and Brazil, and played a central role in structuring the field of economics in the latter. As Klüger et al. (2022, p. 129) put it, “The movement of people and ideas between Brazil and Chile was two-way. On the one hand, the Centre received [ECLA] officials from other Latin American countries, and they acquired new perspectives on the continent by deepening their knowledge of Brazil, which helped them review and refine [ECLA] analyses. On the other hand, [ECLA] participated in the intellectual and professional training of many Brazilians, both through its operations in Brazil and by welcoming to Santiago many intellectuals exiled from Brazil after the advent of the military dictatorship in 1964.”

Following disagreements with Prebisch over the direction of ECLA and its relations with Latin American governments (Dosman, 2011, pp. 377–378) and a period of study at Cambridge (United Kingdom), Furtado created his own institution focused on economic development planning in Brazil. He launched himself as a reformer of the public administration and recruited a small army of planners, who recognized his intellectual authority and spread his structuralist ideas within the State apparatus.

As can be seen, Furtado's nearly 10 years' experience at ECLA (1948–1958) were vital to the creation of SUDENE, an autonomous development agency set up with the aim of spreading the benefits of industrial progress throughout the north-east and doing away with entrenched rural socioeconomic and political structures.

Furtado took ECLA programme guidelines for personnel training with him to the north-east. In the 1950s, he taught the ECLA Training Course on Problems of Economic Development (CTPDE) in Santiago (Chile), training generations of State specialists and accumulating a solid stock-in-trade of theoretical and practical knowledge about development problems in Latin America. Created in 1952, CTPDE contributed to the continent-wide spread of ECLA thought (Furtado, 2014, p. 126).

"Promising young economists from governments right across the region would be given 24 weeks of basic training [at ECLA] in economic analysis, social accounting, sociology, economic development theory and project planning. This basic training was followed by a further 16 weeks of work in small groups, focusing on specific topics such as public sector administration, budget planning and human resource development. Besides its annual "basic course", Ahumada's Division⁴ ran intensive courses and special seminars throughout the region at the request of governments and in collaboration with universities and institutes (Dosman, 2011, p. 320)."

From 1955, in response to growing demand for ECLA courses in the Latin American countries, where there was a shortage of planners with a modern outlook, it became necessary to run them intensively in the countries themselves, sending teaching staff out for limited periods and calling on local specialists to teach certain subjects (Furtado, 2014, p. 126).

In 1956, BNDE and ECLA held the first CTPDE in Brazil. This intensive two-month full-time course trained civil servants in modern techniques for preparing and analysing economic development projects and provided tools for formulating and coordinating the economic policies required for development and for presenting a coordinated overview of their countries' long-run economic problems and development prospects (Klüger, 2017, p. 65).⁵

CTPDE, which operated between 1956 and 1967, with 21 editions in 12 Brazilian cities (Klüger et al., 2022, p. 136), stimulated the circulation of ideas, professionals and practices between Chile and Brazil (Klüger, 2017), contributed to knowledge of planning techniques in Brazil, trained generations of civil servants and intellectuals and was embraced by a variety of governmental bodies and academic institutions (Klüger et al., 2022, p. 132).⁶ These courses also treated the issue of regional development as a structuring axis.

⁴ Jorge Ahumada (1917–1965), who was a member of the ECLA team of economists (1950–1961) and served as Director of the Economic Development Division.

⁵ Those travelling to Rio de Janeiro on this occasion were Jorge Ahumada of Chile, who taught Economic Development Programming; three Argentines, namely Manuel Balboa, who taught Social Accounting, Julio Melnick, head of Project Preparation and Evaluation, and Carlos Oyarzún, who taught Economic Development Financing; and Furtado himself, who taught Problems of Brazilian Development and Economic Development Perspectives (Klüger, 2017). These ECLA members were received as major stars of economic development and planning in Latin America (García, 1992, p. 94).

⁶ Over the various editions of CTPDE, courses covered a wide range of topics, including foreign trade and industrial issues, fiscal and monetary arrangements and the balance of payments, transport, energy, natural resources and minerals, agriculture, regional development, statistics and national indicators, demography, human resources training, education, and public health (Klüger et al., 2022, p. 133).

III. The arrival of ECLA in north-east Brazil

With the prestige he had built up at ECLA and BNDE, Furtado moved CTPDE from Rio de Janeiro to Recife and brought an elite team from the Latin American organization to the north-east, with the mission of recruiting and training the first generations of economic planners for SUDENE, thereby inoculating the region with the “ECLA virus” (Limeira and Alves, 1992, p. 74).

The course was taught in Recife between 1959 and 1965 with the support of ECLA, BNDE, the Pernambuco Development Commission (CODEPE), the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES), the state governments of the North-East region and, from 1963, the Latin American and Caribbean Institute for Economic and Social Planning (ILPES), which produced supporting material to train specialists in social and economic problems.

In the second half of 1959, Jorge Ahumada, a Chilean who had studied at postgraduate level at Harvard University, worked as an International Monetary Fund (IMF) official and an economic advisor to Central American countries (Puerto Rico and Guatemala) and founded and served as the first Director of the Economic Development Division of ECLA, went to Recife to train the first cohort of SUDENE specialists. This journey symbolized ECLA support for the federal government’s new policy for the Brazilian north-east.

During this initial phase of SUDENE, Chilean economist Osvaldo Sunkel (born in 1929) also taught in Recife. With a specialization from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Sunkel took over from Jorge Ahumada in 1955 as the coordinator of the ECLA Economic Development Division in Santiago. He was a member of the so-called “red division” of more radical economists at ECLA and participated in the team led by Celso Furtado which prepared a report on the Mexican economy (1955–1957) (Dosman, 2011, p. 320). He was also the organizer and first Director of the ECLA office in Rio de Janeiro (1960–1961).

In 1959, with the support of Piauí economist Cláudio Correa Lima, Osvaldo Sunkel coordinated the selection process for the ECLA CTPDE in Recife. Sunkel noted that it had been very interesting to hear what people from different states and, later, Furtado had to say (Sunkel, 2020, p. 296). He was also one of the course lecturers, teaching Economic Development Analysis and Programming and promoting the ECLA structuralist method.

Another Chilean, Aníbal Pinto Santa Cruz (1919–1996), a Law graduate and economist who had studied at postgraduate level at LSE, also taught the CTPDE Development Finance course in Recife. On Sunkel’s return to Santiago to coordinate the new ILPES training programme, Pinto took over the running of the ECLA office in Rio de Janeiro (1962–1965), becoming a teacher to generations of ECLA staff in Brazil and Latin America (Oliveira, 2013, p. 150) and an “intellectual mentor” to Brazilian economists starting out in their careers (Klüger et al., 2022, p. 139).

Other participants in the earliest training courses for SUDENE technical staff included Argentine engineer Julio Melnick, an advisor to the ECLA Technical Assistance Programme and author of the *Manual de proyectos de desarrollo económico* (“Economic Development Projects Handbook”) (1958), used on ECLA and SUDENE courses; Venezuelan Braulio Jatar, author of *Planificación del desarrollo: sus aspectos institucionales* (“Development Planning: Its Institutional Aspects”) (1958); and Argentine economist Alberto Fracchia, a pioneer in the field of national accounts in Latin America.

These ECLA members exported their organization’s tradition of thought to Brazil through its courses, expanding the country’s development prospects. In return, they gained a greater awareness of Brazilian and north-eastern problems, enriched the Commission’s work with new points of view and used the detailed knowledge of specific regional realities thus acquired to refine their theories (Klüger et al., 2022, p. 138).

As with the editions of CTPDE held in Rio de Janeiro, students attending the first ECLA-BNDE courses in Recife took classes in Introduction to Economics, Social Accounting, Statistics, Capital Formation, Theory, Economic Development Programming and Financing, Problems of Brazilian Development and Project Analysis and Administration (Diário de Pernambuco, 1959).

IV. The Economic Development Technician course and the training of SUDENE staff

With the expansion of available resources and the creation in 1961 of the Department of Technical Assistance and Personnel Training (DATFP), later renamed the Human Resources Department (DRH), SUDENE began offering its own Economic Development Technician (TDE) course. Like CTPDE, this was modelled on the course run by ECLA in Santiago. The most substantive difference lay in the emphasis placed on the subject of regional development, which was already present in the CTPDE editions in Rio de Janeiro and in lectures given by Furtado at the Higher Institute of Brazilian Studies (ISEB) and to the Armed Forces General Staff (EMFA) (Furtado, 2014).

Besides the ECLA contingent, the Economic Development Technician courses also involved young economists trained at the orthodox National Faculty of Economic Sciences (FNCE) of the University of Brazil (Mantega and Rego, 1999), who were associated with the ECLA-BNDE Economic Development Centre in Rio de Janeiro. Among them were Carlos Lessa (1936–2020), then Deputy Director of the ECLA-BNDE office, Antonio Barros de Castro (1938–2011) and Portuguese mathematician Maria da Conceição Tavares (1930–2024). Lessa and Castro co-authored *Introdução à economia: uma abordagem estruturalista* (“Introduction to Economics: a Structuralist Approach”), the manual used on the ECLA-BNDE courses. Something the trio shared was a close connection to Aníbal Pinto (Klüger, 2017).

Furtado mobilized his contacts in Brazil and brought in leading experts from the State bureaucracy and the Brazilian intelligentsia as lecturers on the Economic Development Technician courses. They shared a common set of issues, methods and solutions that were part of that generation’s repertoire (Barbosa, 2021, p. 103). Most of them were nationalist developmentalists from the public sector (Bielschowsky, 1988, p. 127), committed to transforming the country’s underdeveloped structures through State planning. Leading names among those who went to Recife include Gerson Augusto da Silva and Casemiro Ribeiro (both from the Customs Policy Council of the Ministry of Finance), Inácio Tosta Filho (then chair of the Bahia Economic Planning Commission) and Rômulo Almeida, former head of Vargas’s economic advisory team (1951 and 1953), former President of the Banco do Nordeste do Brasil (1953–1954), federal deputy (1954–1955 and 1957) and Secretary of Finance of Bahia (1955–1957).

Other figures who participated as lecturers in Recife included Isaac Kerstenetzky, a young economist from Rio de Janeiro who had studied abroad and would go on to preside over the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) between 1970 and 1979, and Eduardo Sobral, a nationalist-leaning economist who was head of Petrobras’s Economic Department in the early 1960s and was imprisoned, dismissed from the State-owned company and stripped of his political rights after the 1964 coup. Also present were Raul Barbosa, a former federal deputy (1946–1951), former governor of Ceará (1951–1954) and President of the Banco do Nordeste do Brasil (1956–1967), and Jesús Soares Pereira, who served in various federal government bodies, such as the National Department of Mineral Production (DNPM), the Federal Foreign Trade Council and the National

Pine Institute between the 1930s and 1940s, as well as having been an economic advisor to Getúlio Vargas and the Ministry of Transport and Public Works in the 1950s (Contemporary Brazilian History Research and Documentation Centre [CPDOC], 2009a).

Sociologist Gilberto Freyre, President of the Joaquim Nabuco Institute (IJN), Director of the Recife Regional Centre for Educational Research (CRPER) and representative of the Ministry of Education and Culture on the SUDENE Deliberative Council, also lectured in his Economic Development Technician courses. He was an obvious choice to participate because of his standing in Brazil and abroad, his political role as spokesman for the interests of the north-east in negotiations with the central government (Mesquita, 2018) and the control he exerted over important bodies (IJN and CRPER) in the region's balance of power. Another important factor was the scientific legitimacy accrued by sociology and its practitioners in the 1950s and 1960s as interpreters of the nation's problems and as an influence on government policy (Botelho et al., 2008). Furtado usually gave the closing lecture at the end of the Economic Development Technician courses.

With a high-level technical staff in the mid-1950s and considerable influence in the civilian government (Benevides, 1976), the armed forces were an important ally in the political struggle to create SUDENE. They also lent some of their best personnel, people with nationalist and developmentalist profiles, as lecturers on Economic Development Technician courses. Among them were Admiral Lúcio Meira, Deputy Chief of the Military Cabinet in the second Getúlio Vargas government, champion of the automotive and shipbuilding industries in Brazil and Minister of Transport and Public Works between 1956 and 1959 (CPDOC, 2009b), and General Carlos Berenhauer Junior, President of the San Francisco Hydroelectric Company (CHESF), who was admired by Furtado for having shielded the company from political influence (Hirschman, 2009, p. 186).

Some military specialists participated in the Economic Development Technician courses in Recife, joined the SUDENE technical staff and helped conduct the early studies and organize the departments of the regional agency. These military personnel who cooperated with Furtado in the struggle against underdevelopment in the north-east were later dismissed from their positions at SUDENE, expelled from the corporation or forced into retirement by the *entreguistas* in the armed forces (those willing to "give up" strategic sectors and industries to foreign ownership and control) after their faction was victorious in the 1964 coup (Barboza, 2023).

The Economic Development Technician courses attracted candidates from all the north-eastern states, including Bahia and Maranhão, which were integrated into the new configuration of the north-east redesigned by SUDENE. In 1959, of 100 candidates who enrolled for CTPDE in Recife, 50 were selected. The following year, 1960, there were 120 candidates for the ECLA-BNDE CTPDE in Recife, of whom 84 were selected and 52 approved (Limeira and Alves, 1992, p. 46). In 1962, 280 people registered, of whom 80 were approved and only 25 completed the course, subsequently being recruited by SUDENE (A. A. Silva, personal communication, 2021). On the 1963 Economic Development Technician course, 40 of the 80 students selected were approved and joined the agency's staff (L. Alves Filho, personal communication, 2021).

Students on the Economic Development Technician courses, most of whom were from the north-east and had graduated from universities in the region, were trained in accordance with the new developmentalist outlook that had originated at ECLA. Through its Human Resources Department, SUDENE structured its own intensive full-time economic development course, lasting six months. After passing a written exam, candidates were interviewed by Department directors. Those who passed the essay and oral stages were taken to Recife by SUDENE itself to attend the Economic Development Technician course on scholarships, following the model already adopted for the ECLA courses in Santiago and CTPDE in Rio de Janeiro.

These scions of the north-eastern middle classes, with their outdated university education, updated their knowledge on the Economic Development Technician courses, where they learned to organize bibliographic surveys, plan studies, analyse budgets and programmes, prepare reports and make projections. In the process, they absorbed both the new structuralist thinking and technical knowledge imparted by their teachers and by ECLA manuals.

“Those ECLA orientation courses were decisive in ensuring that the staff recruited to the ranks of our institution were of a high technical calibre” (Limeira and Alves, 1992, p. 20).

“SUDENE was a second university for me” (T. Bacelar, personal communication, 2021).

“It was almost like doing another degree. [...] We wanted to complete our training [...] and do a good, substantive course” (J. L. R. Albuquerque, personal communication, 2021).

“There [at SUDENE] I learned more than I did at the universities, study centres and research institutes I attended” (Brazileiro, 2001, p. 95).

After this period of study focused on development issues in peripheral countries, with an emphasis on the Brazilian and north-eastern experience, graduates were hired by SUDENE as economic development technicians. According to one respondent, this was more or less equivalent to a civil service exam (J. L. R. Albuquerque, personal communication, 2021). The professional category they entered was deemed “flexible” and was not listed by the Public Service Administrative Department (DASP), and its standing was as unstable as the Brazilian public administration itself (Limeira and Alves, 1992, p. 59). The new specialists were assigned to one of the departments of the agency in accordance with their skills and university education and with institutional needs (Limeira and Alves, 1992, p. 65).

Building on the administrative revolution in Brazilian public management that had been led by institutions such as DASP, BNDE, the Superintendency of Currency and Credit (SUMOC) and the Banco do Nordeste do Brasil, all part of the modern public service that Furtado knew well, SUDENE innovated in the area of staff training and recruitment, establishing a selective system based on merit and competence and demanding wholehearted and exclusive commitment from its technicians.

As can be seen, SUDENE drove the development of what had been a very limited labour market for university-educated professionals in the north-east (T. Bacelar, personal communication, 2021), and this made it the most sought-after of the autonomous federal agencies among youth graduating from universities in the region who were looking for good employment opportunities. As one respondent put it, SUDENE was a focal point, an aspiration; every student wanted to work at SUDENE (S. Weber, personal communication, 2021).

The regional organization also attracted young university students from the north-east by becoming an emblem of the struggle against political traditionalism and a symbol of the effort to raise moral standards in the Brazilian public administration, giving it the added attraction of idealism. As a former SUDENE technician summed it up in an interview with the author, SUDENE captured the imagination of these young students (Z. M. D. Oliveira, personal communication, 2022). To fortify the missionary spirit in the organization, Furtado often highlighted the exceptional effort and extraordinary faith in the future of the north-east shown by SUDENE technicians (Diário de Pernambuco, 1963a), who, as he put it, had accepted the call and the challenge of transforming the region (Diário de Pernambuco, 1963b).

SUDENE offered competitive pay rates both to graduates in traditional professions such as engineering, law and medicine and, most particularly, those in the new disciplines of economics,

veterinary science, chemistry, physics, mathematics, biology, geology, agronomy, geography, sociology, social work and education. These professionals, little considered until then, fought to obtain legal recognition for their activities and positions in the civil service.

“SUDENE technicians will be remunerated in accordance with prevailing labour market conditions. Recognizing that SUDENE is not a traditional State service provider, but rather an agency of the modern developmentalist State, when faced with the choice between poor remuneration with accumulated benefits or adequate remuneration without privileges, the legislature opted for the latter. And in so doing, it paved the way for genuine reform in our public service. SUDENE is ready to compete in the labour market with private organizations and will have more than a hundred graduate technicians on its staff by the end of this year [1960]” (Furtado, 2009, p. 168).

The transformation of the graduate labour market in the north-east by this autonomous development agency —SUDENE was the largest source of employment in the region, outstripping even local private sector companies (Alcântara, 1963)— is one of the factors explaining the strong identification of these youth with Furtado and SUDENE, which provided them with careers, social standing, good salaries and opportunities for ongoing training, both on the courses of SUDENE itself and at institutions in the country’s south-east and abroad.

In addition to these advantages, the regional development agency offered them the feeling of being part of a political project to transform Brazilian and north-eastern socioeconomic structures, under the auspices what was deemed to be a “technical” body.

“We thought it was the work of the century, the most daunting and arduous of all the tasks that had to be achieved to build a harmonious nation, without the glaring disparities we saw around us. My generation threw itself wholeheartedly into that endeavour, and we tried to turn our weakness into strength: unprepared for such a great undertaking, we made up for the scientific knowledge we lacked with energy and enthusiasm” (Oliveira, 2009, p. 194).

From just five graduate technicians at the beginning of 1959, the SUDENE technical staff grew rapidly: by the end of that same year, it already had 32 professionals, including 5 from the United Nations and 1 from the French Government (Correio da Manhã, 1959). The number rose to around 100 in 1960, to 250 in 1961, including technicians from other public bodies and those who passed the Economic Development Technician course that year (Correio da Manhã, 1961), and to 400 by the end of 1962. By mid-1964, the federal agency had 626 graduate technicians, forming the largest and most homogeneous team of professionals in Latin America (Diário de Pernambuco, 1964), in addition to 1,487 mid-level and administrative staff (Souza, 1979, p. 164).

In 1966, the total number of SUDENE employees reached 2,912, of whom 1,632 were graduates (Souza, 1979, p. 164). In 1968, there were 2,939 employees, including 965 university graduates and 1,974 administrative staff (Souza, 1979, p. 164). This reduction in the number of professionals with higher education was due to the departure of hundreds of technicians for political and ideological reasons and to the consolidation of a more competitive labour market for them, both in the public and private sectors and in the region’s universities.

The agency’s permanent staff exceeded 4,000 in mid-1969 (Bariou, 1969, p. 20), but had fallen back to around 2,000 by the end of the 1970s, of whom 1,120 were graduate professionals and the rest administrative staff (Souza, 1979, p. 164). This reflected the progressive dismantling of the institution by the military regime.

V. The Educational Planning Technician course and the training of public sector officials

In the period following the Second World War, a time of rapid political and economic change, education became a central issue on the Brazilian political agenda. This shift was due both to pressure from political groupings interested in bringing the working and urban middle classes into the electoral process and to the modernizing influence of multilateral institutions, including ECLA, ILPES and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and of United States agencies such as the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Alliance for Progress, which were active in the so-called “Third World” (Beisiegel, 2004) and sought to calm the social unrest in north-eastern Brazil.

At the national level, the centrality of the issue of education was linked to mass mobilizations around the fundamental reforms proposed by the government of João Goulart (1961–1964), including university reform and, in particular, the demands of secondary and university students for the expansion and democratization of access to higher education. In the north-east, in an atmosphere of growing political dissatisfaction and social unrest around the agrarian question, the adult literacy campaign mounted in both rural and urban areas by reformist intellectuals from the Popular Culture Movement (MCP) and by the team of Pernambuco educator Paulo Freire, head of the Cultural Extension Service of what was then the University of Recife (now the Federal University of Pernambuco) (Coelho, 2012), came to represent a threat to the *pax agraria* in the region, owing to the potential increase in the number of citizens eligible to vote (illiterate people were banned from voting until 1985) and the bringing of the masses into the political process.

With an economic approach to personnel training (V. M. V. Cavalcanti, personal communication, 2022), SUDENE sought to restructure education in the region in line with its developmentalist paradigm. The institution proposed the development of a new outlook suited to development needs, encouragement for a process of cultural change capable of overcoming resistance to change, and an accelerated modernization process. Its goals included coordinating state and municipal education bodies in the north-east, meeting the demand for labour in the production system and training professionals to provide educational services at all levels in order to improve the qualifications of existing staff and increase the number of education professionals in the region (Superintendency for the Development of the North-East [SUDENE], 1971, pp. 5–6).

With these aims, and supported by the Recife Regional Centre for Educational Research (CRPER),⁷ which was a regional standard-setter for educational training at the time, the SUDENE Human Resources Department ran its first Educational Planning Technician (TPE) course between January and March 1963. With a workload of 200 hours, the course served as the basis for selecting technicians responsible for structuring the agency’s Education Division.

The first Educational Planning Technician course trained Philosophy, Literature, Sociology and Education graduates from all the states in the north-east, whose career prospects had been largely confined to teaching at primary or secondary level. The course taught subjects such as Statistics and Economic Development, School Administration, General Theory of Education and Educational Planning (Maciel, 1973, p. 7). According to one former participant, the aim was to open students’ minds to the idea of an education geared towards the training of economic development personnel (V. M. V. Cavalcanti, personal communication, 2022).

⁷ Directed by Gilberto Freyre, CRPER was linked to the Anísio Teixeira National Institute of Educational Studies and Research (INEP). It conducted educational and social research in the north-east and sponsored teacher training courses, exerting a significant influence on the education debate at the time (Meucci, 2015). Some of the technicians working at the SUDENE Education Division attended CRPER courses.

Not long before this, between September and December 1962, ILPES held its 13 week, 185 hour Training Course in Education Planning in Santiago (Maciel, 1973, p. 5).

The students, most of them women, received scholarships from SUDENE while on the course. Of the 25 participants, 13 were approved and recruited as educational planning technicians, whereupon they were distributed among the five sectors of the Education Division, which was created in 1961 and structured in 1963: Primary Education, Basic Education, Agricultural Education, Industrial Education and Higher Education and Basic Sciences.

“I was finishing university when they opened applications for a selection process to create an education group at SUDENE. I applied and passed the selection process, which was very tough. There was a training course with several people on it. It was very different from what we had learned at university, from normal pedagogy. It was broader. There was politics, regional sociology, economics [...]. Educational Planning Technician course students took part in courses, lectures, debates [...]. You worked with the students in the classroom, pedagogy and psychology [...] and suddenly you were in an economics class about what the north-east was [...]. What on earth was the north-east? I'd never given it a thought! So you gradually discovered these things in your training. [The Educational Planning Technician course] didn't teach statistics the way you learned it at university [...], with the little formulas. But it taught the situation in the north-east in statistical terms, those kinds of statistics: how many people there were, how many were literate, how many weren't. Education in the political sense. We didn't get that at university. University confined itself to education from the educator's point of view, the teacher and the student in the classroom, nothing beyond. Not education from a macro point of view. That didn't come into it. The Department of Education [of the State of Pernambuco] itself dealt with teaching methods, school materials, books, exercise books. But not with the issue of deficits, the educational reality of the state [...]. It was a larger structure. It wasn't just teachers in classrooms. We discovered that at SUDENE” (H. M. R. Brasileiro, personal communication, 2022).

“I had this whole [humanistic] idea about the values education should have. At SUDENE, I came into contact with a different vision of education. It was quite shocking, it seemed so outlandish [...] this whole ECLA way of thinking. I found it a rather exotic vision. It wasn't easy to take in, to understand this new concept. A very technical vision. It wasn't the vision for education I had been taught at the Faculty of Philosophy [in Recife]. We studied the situation in Brazil, principles of economics, the relationship between economics and education, statistics. When it came to the theoretical conceptualization, there was a lot I didn't understand. It was a mystery to me” (M. C. A. Mendonça, personal communication, 2022).

“I came from a quite orthodox background in philosophy, from the French school of philosophy. [...] [The SUDENE Educational Planning Technician course] was a revolution in my mind. [...] We had to take a broader view. It was another paradigm” (Z. M. D. Oliveira, personal communication, 2022).

Other technicians joined the Education Division via the second Educational Planning Technician course, which also trained civil servants from state education secretariats and universities in the north-east, as well as providing qualifications for technicians already working at SUDENE who wished to transfer to the agency's education section (M. G. C. Oliveira, personal communication, 2021).

The first and second Educational Planning Technician courses featured lectures by leading intellectuals, such as educator Paulo Freire (1921–1997), Swiss pedagogue Pierre Furter (1931–2020), and São Paulo sociologist Octavio Ianni (1926–2004), who addressed the tensions and emerging educational problems created by industrialization and the social and political transformations under way in the country (Ianni, 1963, p. 191).

“He [Náilton Santos, Director of the Human Resources Department between 1961 and 1964] was very concerned to put us in touch with intellectuals who were sympathetic to the SUDENE ideology. He did these seminars, lectures. Afterwards, there were debates. He made a point of seeing to it that we got to know these mentors from ECLA” (M. C. A. Mendonça, personal communication, 2022).

As can be seen, the SUDENE Educational Planning Technician courses contributed to the training of education specialists of a new type, with a modern sensibility and outlook, equipped to create the educational conditions necessary for the transformation of the region’s socioeconomic and administrative structures and to mitigate the imbalances caused by the changes under way in the north-east.

It was a time of slowing economic growth and political radicalization in Brazil. Pessimism about planning and industrialization was growing, and the core ideas of ECLA were losing their power, which led to a political and intellectual reorientation among the formulators of ECLA thought (Bielschowsky, 1988). In this context, the Educational Planning Technician courses represented a tactical change in the development agency’s approach. Accused of “economism”, SUDENE began to argue more emphatically for social reforms as an essential precondition for unblocking the industrialization process and redistributing its fruits (Barboza, 2023).

VI. The training of sectoral specialists on SUDENE professional development courses

SUDENE technicians attended a variety of professional development courses throughout their professional careers and were always discovering new things (S. V. Santos, personal communication, 2022). This ongoing training effort was made necessary by the breadth of the agency’s activities and the rotation of technicians between its different departments and divisions. According to two former technicians, this was a functional approach in which SUDENE specialists did a whole range of jobs (Limeira and Alves, 1992, p. 64), broadening their field of knowledge. In the summation of another former official, economic development technicians were all-rounders (J. A. Pereira, personal communication, 2022).

The Human Resources Department funded the ongoing training of SUDENE technical staff in the south-east of the country through agreements with the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA), the United States Census Bureau, the Pan American Training Center for Research on Natural Resources, the French Technical Cooperative, UNESCO and various universities in the South-East region (SUDENE, 1966a).

“SUDENE played a role in specialization. The ECLA courses and those [refresher] courses I taught [...] were specialization courses for graduates. Those young people then became interested in pursuing formal postgraduate studies and sometimes even left SUDENE and went to university” (T. Bacelar, personal communication, 2021).

“My postgraduate course [at the Faculty of Economics and Administration of the University of São Paulo] was funded by SUDENE. Everything that happened after graduation, the big conferences, seminars in Brazil and abroad, a postgraduate course, a course in Japan [...], SUDENE sent me on all that” (G. A. M. Brasileiro, personal communication, 2022).

Described as a very active department (J. L. R. Albuquerque, personal communication, 2021), the Human Resources Department also invested in the further training of SUDENE technicians abroad,

with the aim of helping them acquire new knowledge that could be applied to the socioeconomic and environmental conditions of the north-east. As a result of technical assistance agreements signed with other countries, many of these technicians attended specialization courses run by government agencies and universities in Germany, Chile, the United States, France, Israel, Japan and the Netherlands (Barboza, 2023).

“Not only those of us at SUDENE but an entire generation of professionals from the states in the region were also given great opportunities for intellectual and scientific development through training programmes in the most varied areas of knowledge and at all kinds of different training institutions in Brazil and abroad” (Silva and Muniz, 2005, p. 2).

Some of the agency’s technicians travelled to what at the time was the spiritual home of development ideology in Latin America, Santiago, where they attended general and sectoral planning courses run by ECLA. Those sent on these courses belonged to the Technical Advisory Section, a kind of special department reporting directly to the Superintendent that brought together the most highly qualified staff in the institution and had a more general outlook (T. Bacelar, personal communication, 2021).

SUDENE also held seminars featuring internationally renowned Brazilian and foreign intellectuals and specialists, including economists Paul Baran (1910–1964) and Everett Hagen (1906–1993), geographers Michel Rochefort (1927–2015) and David Harvey (born in 1935), and sociologist Manuel Castells (born in 1942), and dealing with issues of economic and social development. These initiatives contributed to the ongoing professional development of its team of technicians (SUDENE, 1966b, 1966c).

VII. SUDENE and the construction of a planning bureaucracy in the north-east

Many SUDENE technicians travelled the north-east from Bahia to Piauí (A. A. Silva, personal communication, 2021), working as instructors on intensive courses dealing with economic development and sectoral planning at the behest of local public bodies and universities in the region. As a former technician recalls (J. L. R. Albuquerque, personal communication, 2021), the demand for development courses was too great to meet: everyone wanted to take SUDENE courses. These itinerant courses were held in collaboration with the Brazilian Institute of Municipal Administration (IBAM), universities in the north-east, ECLA and ILPES.

In the 1960s, SUDENE created the Division of Technical Assistance to States and Municipalities, the Regional Centre for Municipal Administration (CRAM) and the North-East Training Centre (CETREINO) within the Human Resources Department to meet the growing demand for its courses and advisory services.

“We would put the courses together and then teach them. We were a young group. We were asked to give classes by doing the things they were about. There was no one to teach us how. We just went out on a limb and did things. And we gave courses in a lot of states” (J. L. R. Albuquerque, personal communication, 2021).

According to an assessment by the regional agency itself, by 1965 SUDENE had trained 2,700 technicians, held 66 courses, financed 80 internships in the south-east of the country and awarded 110 scholarships for specialists from the north-east to study abroad (SUDENE, 1966d). The Training Division estimated that 154 courses were held and around 6,300 people were trained

by the agency between 1959 and 1967 (SUDENE, 1968). During the same period, approximately 150 state officials and 373 technicians from SUDENE itself benefited from scholarships and internships in Brazil and abroad (SUDENE, 1968).

In 1968, some 2,000 people received training on 36 courses run by the Training Division, either directly or in partnership with specialist agencies, in areas such as health, food, poultry farming, cattle farming, cooperatives, road paving, educational programming, nursing, sanitation, industry and agricultural marketing (SUDENE, 1969). That same year, 167 scholarships were awarded for internships in Brazil and abroad (SUDENE, 1968). Also during the period, SUDENE trained 3,563 technicians from the north-east on 101 intermediate- and higher-level technical courses (SUDENE, 1967).

Over the 1960s and 1970s, a decade on from the creation of SUDENE, 9,679 people were trained on 341 courses focusing on areas such as agriculture and livestock farming, natural resources, transport, energy, basic sanitation, telecommunications, industry, crafts, education, health, administration and community action (SUDENE, 1970a). The agency also awarded 1,362 scholarships for study abroad (mainly in the United States and France, but also in Germany, Italy, Japan and Mexico) and in southeastern Brazil to technicians from the institution itself and from various government agencies operating in the north-east (SUDENE, 1970a). As Maciel (1969) summarized, SUDENE was, among other things, a school of administration and a centre of study, research and training for the brightest and best.

Civil servants trained by SUDENE in planning techniques returned to their home areas and, with scholarships funded by SUDENE itself, helped to create sectoral planning centres in areas such as education, health, sanitation and industry and to disseminate the knowledge they had acquired at the development institution to local bureaucracies. The SUDENE Human Resources Department was, in the words of a former technician, an agency for training staff and developing technical infrastructure for the region (T. Bacelar, personal communication, 2021). During this period, SUDENE trained approximately 1,000 state, municipal and federal officials throughout the region (SUDENE, 1970b).

From 1964, the new political and economic approach and successive administrative reforms introduced by the military governments paradoxically made the assistance provided by SUDENE to states and municipalities in the north-east even more necessary, just when the agency's powers were being undermined by those same reforms, which stripped it of the power to initiate activities in various fields and transferred this to ministries and other federal bodies (Carvalho, 1979; Colombo, 2015).

VIII. Final considerations

The witch hunt instigated at SUDENE from 1964 onward by the military regime saw the development agency, accused by reactionary forces of being a "communist machine" (O Jornal, 1964), progressively hollowed out, disfigured and weakened (Carvalho, 1979; Colombo, 2015).

Created to stem the brain drain and build a technical elite earning competitive salaries, SUDENE ended up experiencing the progressive disintegration and exodus of its team of specialists, known for a level of technical expertise that was both a hallmark and a strategic asset of the development agency. Over 1,300 civil servants are estimated to have left in 1969 (Limeira and Alves, 1992, p. 74), many of them moving to the private sector in search of better salaries in a labour market that had been dynamized largely by the actions of SUDENE itself in the region.

The appearance of new public bodies, of private sector consultancies specializing in industry and of universities capable of producing information and analysis to support decision-making in

the region, a task that had been carried out almost exclusively by SUDENE until the mid-1960s, also contributed to the loss of technical expertise and the departure of staff whom the institution had trained to a high standard (Oliveira, 2009, p. 195).

The exodus worsened over the following decades as the agency was shut out of projects devised by the central government for the region and began to suffer from a shortage of resources and qualified professionals, gradually succumbing to bureaucratization (Colombo, 2015). Persecuted, imprisoned, tortured, stripped of political rights, exiled, returned to their original departments,⁸ disparaged and disillusioned about the future of the institution, which had become one of the main targets of the authoritarian regime, SUDENE technicians, possessing technical and scientific capital that was highly valued in the regional academic and business market, left the agency in search of new career prospects.

From 1964, the new management of SUDENE discontinued its Economic Development Technician courses, and technicians in this field, who had been given the same status as other senior specialists in the federal public administration by Law No. 4089 of 1962, were demoted to a mid-level professional category in the federal bureaucracy's hierarchy of positions. They lost their status as a separate category and were incorporated into the civil service by the SUDENE Post Classification Plan (Law No. 5645 of 1970). With the enactment of Law No. 6257 of 1975, these professionals were placed on an equal footing with the technicians of the Ministry of Planning and Budget (Limeira and Alves, 1992, pp. 59–60), becoming a general category (J. L. R. Albuquerque, personal communication, 2021). In 1995, the 50 or so economic development technicians still at SUDENE were redistributed and assigned to the Ministry of Planning and Budget.⁹

For its part, the Education Division underwent various restructurings between the 1960s and 1980s, shrinking as SUDENE was progressively dismantled by the military governments. These governments did away with the reformist and democratic orientation of the agency and imposed a technocratic planning model (Oliveira, 1991, p. 104), accompanied by an economistic perspective on education, which was conceived as human resource training (Barboza, 2023).

Viewed from a long-term perspective, SUDENE was responsible for a critical reappraisal of the causes of underdevelopment in the north-east, the introduction of new methods for the design and effective implementation of public policies and the training of hundreds of technicians committed to transforming the country's most underdeveloped and stigmatized region. The generations of technicians trained on its courses spread new ideas and knowledge at the various levels of the State bureaucracy, challenging old practices of patronage rooted in the region's administrative structures. This knowledge and these practices were not confined to the State sphere or to disputed areas of economics, but engendered a broader conception of underdevelopment in the north-east, which came to be understood not only as an economic phenomenon, but also as a problem that required structural changes in society and education. This new vision won over broad sectors of Brazilian society, enthused by the window of opportunity that was opening up for the development of the country's most economically depressed region, and spread to the universities of the north-east, which SUDENE itself helped to expand, thus fertilizing the scientific output of the region.

⁸ During the administration of General Castelo Branco (1964–1967), a federal government decree ordered SUDENE to reincorporate civil servants assigned to other departments and stripped the agency of its authority to offer them pay top-ups. This measure contributed to the depletion and weakening of its technical staff.

⁹ This information is taken from correspondence dated April 1996 between SUDENE and the Human Resources Coordination Department of the Ministry of Planning and Budget, retrieved from the personal archives of Janiza Lima Ribeiro de Albuquerque.

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