

Climate Change, Organizational Culture, and Symbolic Embeddedness in the Brazilian Amazon

ABSTRACT This article contributes to the literature on institutions, organizations, and climate change by discerning how symbolic embeddedness mediates the external conditions and internal practices of organizations in a legal aid office in Brazil's Amazon. This concept illuminates how legal, political, and social actors use symbolic resources, such as the framing of the law, to mobilize resources and articulate their interests. Field interviews and observations reveal that interactions during climate change negotiations can either facilitate or constrain actions to address social-ecological concerns. This study casts new light on how actors and organizations in the Global South can catalyze climate action and maintain social order in situations marked by ecological, institutional, and organizational instability. **KEYWORDS** Climate change, Symbolic embeddedness, Institutions, Organizations, Amazon

In the 2010s, floods impacted over 300 million people around the globe (Edmonds et al. 2020). Aggravated by climate change, this situation will worsen in the Global North and South alike (Elliott 2021). This will pose governance challenges for coastal cities everywhere, which account for 90% of the world's urban areas (Acuto et al. 2018). Like Polanyi's (2001) concern with the institutional instability wrought by the Industrial Revolution, climate change can arguably be considered the "great transformation" of this century. Development programs have been designed to address these issues. Ironically, they have accentuated social-ecological problems, particularly in the Global South (Nagendra et al. 2018). Conflicts stemming from development interventions in Brazil's Amazon exemplify such issues (Dias et al. 2021).

Indeed, climate change has already been identified as a cause of institutional instability (Delaroche, Dias, and Massoca 2023; Kotzé and Kim 2019). While many rules and norms predate today's climate crisis, social actors have turned to political and legal institutions to address social-ecological conflicts more recently, especially since 2015 (Peel and Osofsky 2020; Setzer and Higham 2022). For example, Brazil's constitution dates from 1988, but flood-related lawsuits in parts of Brazil's Amazon, arguing that property destruction caused by flooding violated citizens' constitutional right to housing, were filed only in 2008 and then in 2018 (Delaroche, Dias, and Massoca 2023; Dias et al. 2021).

As the law has been key to governing the economy and society since the Industrial Revolution (Polanyi 2001:3; Weber 1978), today it can be seen as the foundation for

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stabilizing institutions disrupted by environmental change. Scholars have documented how extralegal factors shape the meaning of laws that organizations and the actors who inhabit them should observe (Edelman 1992; Suchman and Edelman 1996; Talesh 2009). Here, I contribute to the growing work on institutions and organizations in the environmental social sciences (e.g., Falzon 2021; Kaup 2015; Scoville 2022) by arguing that climate change is an extralegal force associated with institutional and organizational ambiguities (Edelman 1992), destabilizing social relations and disputes in organizations and society at large. The Brazilian Amazon is a typical case of these broader issues,¹ offering an ideal context to ask: How do legal actors mediate climate-related conflicts, influence organizational dynamics, and shape institutional meanings?

In the current climate crisis (Klinenberg, Araos, and Koslov 2020), understanding the power relations in how social actors generally handle social-ecological disputes illuminates how to maintain social order. Legal actors, in particular, have historically held the symbolic power to resolve conflicts by defining what is lawful within organizations, the fields in which they operate, and the social system more broadly (Bourdieu 1987:819). However, the process through which people, including lawyers, use both symbolic capital and power in their interactions when mediating conflicts, within and outside organizations, is less clear.

Taking a processual approach, I analyze how climate change is a macrolevel force that destabilizes both the structural conditions and the internal practices of organizations. In short, ecological risks are accentuating disputes within and between organizations, raising a contemporary version of Granovetter's (1985) "problem of embeddedness." It is in this context that I conceptualize a social process of *symbolic embeddedness*. Elaborating on embeddedness and institutional theories (Edelman 1992; Hallett and Hawbaker 2021; Krippner 2001; Li 2016; Michelson 2007), symbolic embeddedness refers to how social actors use symbolic resources, such as the symbolic force of the law, to mobilize the symbolic structures of organizations when mediating conflicts. In examining social-ecological disputes, this concept helps unpack how climate action is embedded in social relations.

Symbolic embeddedness also advances our understanding of Kaup's (2015:288) concept of "socio-natural embeddedness," whereby societies are embedded not only in an institutional framework but also in an ecological one. After all, "nature [is] inextricably interwoven with man's institutions" (Polanyi 2001:187). In developing embeddedness theories, I explore the links between microlevel and macrolevel processes within an organization that seeks to stabilize institutional conditions by mediating conflicts worsened by climate change.

Specifically, I look at legal, political, and social actors' interactions in a state-funded organization with a seemingly clear goal defined by law: the Brazilian Public Defender's Office (PDO). Per the official translation of Article 134 of Brazil's constitution, the PDO is "responsible primarily . . . for the judicial guidance, the promotion of human rights, and the full and free-of-charge defense, in all levels, both judicially and extrajudicially, of individual and collective rights of the needy." However, as a lawyer at the PDO (Felipe) told me in an interview, how the PDO has behaved recently reflects a deeper

issue of how social actors perceive the goal of this organization: “Are we simply a big law firm for the poor? Or are we agents of social transformation?”

This article is organized in the following manner. The next section surveys the literature on which I build. Next, I outline the methodology used to unravel the PDO’s organizational routine. I then present the findings from the interviews and observations with lawyers and disputants at the PDO, collected during 15 months of fieldwork. Afterward, I discuss the tensions that occur when some lawyers’ practices push this organization away from its constitutional mission, while others try to pursue its original goal. I conclude by reflecting on the role of social relations in managing instability wrought by global environmental change.

BACKGROUND

Laws and Organizations

Organizations have long been understood to be structured by and designed to respond to laws, policies, and norms without disrupting a social order protected by an institutional arrangement perceived as legitimate (Weber 1978). Institutions, in short, are sets of formal and informal rules that constrain, facilitate, and structure social action (Michelson 2007). As the law can be associated with distinct patterns of social action, it has been conceptualized as a macrolevel source of legal ambiguity for organizations (Edelman 1992:1538).

In response to such ambiguity, organizations devise formal and informal structures to govern their everyday activities (Edelman 1992:1542), comply with the law, and mediate conflicts. Both institutional and organizational structures influence the behavior of individuals who occupy positions and roles as they work to accomplish certain goals (Edelman 1992; Sutton et al. 1994). For this reason, as Figure 1 depicts, organizations have been described as embedded in and loosely coupled to their institutional environments, with a gap between macrolevel structures and microlevel activities (Meyer and Rowan 1977:341).

In sum, organizations are embedded in a legal environment marked by ambiguity (Edelman 2016:236). In this environment, the goals established by the law function as both a symbolic resource and a powerful myth that is materialized through ceremonial procedures in symbolic structures within organizations (Edelman 2016; Meyer and Rowan 1977). Once organizational structures are established to comply with the law, this institutional framework likely becomes path dependent, making it hard to change organizational culture and practices (Edelman 1992; Sutton et al. 1994).

Yet, other macrolevel factors associated with institutional ambiguity remain overlooked. For instance, climate change also destabilizes institutions (Kotzé and Kim 2019:3). According to a global database on climate change litigation, approximately 25% of climate-related cases were filed between 2020 and 2022 (Setzer and Higham 2022:1). Several of these disputes sought to change how powerful corporations comply with laws and policies that predate today’s climate crisis, such as whether and how Royal Dutch Shell’s carbon emissions violated Dutch tort law or the Paris Agreement

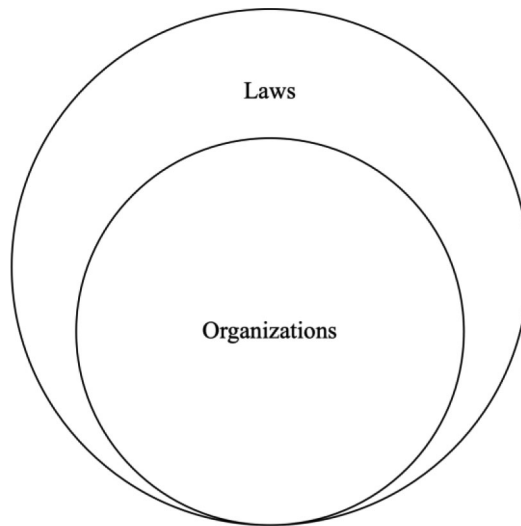


FIGURE 1. Organizations embedded in a legal, institutional environment.

(Setzer and Higham 2022:33). Still, less attention has been paid to how organizations respond, internally, to climate-induced instability and thus shape the meaning of law. These internal dynamics include how actors embedded in organizations devise symbolic mechanisms to define whether and how the law can be used to mediate climate-related conflicts.

Actors and Organizations

Social actors can produce institutional and organizational change. Their practices might evolve into everyday patterns that have the power to decouple organizations from their original goals (Selznick 1943:50). Goal ambiguity can even lead to goal displacement (Meyer and Rowan 1977:348). Historically, organizations have changed their missions and values in response to both structural forces and internal routines (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Selznick 1943).

Such changes can occur through processes happening between and within organizations (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Although formal and informal institutions may engender organizational change, the organizational culture in which actors work and interact influences how an organization functions (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). That is, in addition to being embedded in a legal, institutional framework, organizations are part of a cultural environment (Kaup 2015; Krippner 2001). The actors within organizations are also embedded in these broader legal and cultural frameworks (Figure 2), responding to various institutional logics (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012).

Thus, social actors' values and practices are useful in recoupling cultural characteristics, highlighted in early institutional studies (Selznick 1943), and structural forces, emphasized by institutionalism more recently (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Edelman 1992). In

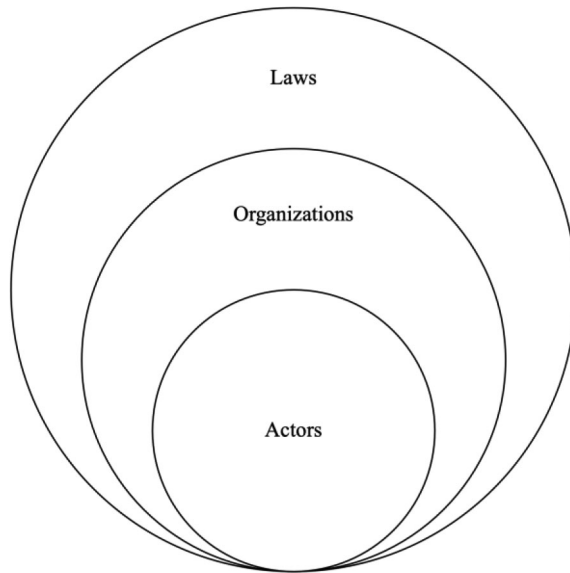


FIGURE 2. Actors embedded in legal and organizational environments.

addition to macrolevel sources of ambiguity, such as legal ambiguity, organizational culture and professional values determine the microlevel power relations in how actors interact within organizations, which are themselves broader fields of power (Bourdieu 1987; Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). In short, the law and actors' practices are, respectively, macro- and microlevel forces, which are associated with the legal and goal ambiguity of organizations. As climate change worsens and induces instability, this multilevel, processual approach illuminates how organizations and actors behave while being embedded in both institutional and socionatural contexts.

Climate Change, Laws, Actors, and Organizations

Conflicts are part of social life, whether they happen within, between, or outside of organizations (Granovetter 1985:501).² Yet Granovetter (1985:501) admittedly “neglect[ed] the role of [actors’] relations in the conduct of conflict.” Other limitations of classical embeddedness theories concerning socialization have been addressed (Krippner 2001)—highlighting, for example, how market societies influence nature and vice versa (Kaup 2015). Still, disputes in the course of collective action to improve climate adaptation and mitigation initiatives have recently received specific attention (Dias et al. 2021:2). Thus, conceptual clarification is needed of the relational processes through which the law and conflict resolution strategies are not only used but also embedded in sustainability efforts.

As social actors develop ties and relationships among themselves, social capital is often a resource used to resolve disputes (Bourdieu 1987), including social-ecological struggles. For example, social capital has helped generate trust and cooperation among stakeholders with conflicting interests in Brazil’s Amazon, improving environmental governance there

(Brondizio, Ostrom, and Young 2009:255). And research on institutions embedded in social-ecological systems has documented how, under certain institutional and environmental conditions, social capital facilitates collective action to address climate-related problems (Ostrom 2005, 2011).

Sociologists studying institutions and organizations have taken a different (but not incompatible) approach to analyzing how conflict management between and within organizations is embedded in social relations. Focusing on interactions within Chinese firms, Li (2016:921–22) details how lawyers rely on ongoing relationships to build trust with disputants when mediating conflicts, in a process of relational embeddedness. Similarly, Michelson (2007b:355) finds that lawyers operationalize their ties within the Chinese bureaucracy to succeed in the cases they represent, which span political and legal organizations, in a process of political embeddedness. This literature, in short, underscores that multiple institutional logics influence *both* symbolic macrolevel structures and microlevel interactions within and between organizational contexts (Hallett and Hawbaker 2021; Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury 2012).

It is on this point that I expand here. That is, climate change destabilizes such logics, affecting the systems of rules, norms, and rights across levels of organizations and the people who inhabit them. In connecting institutional and organizational theories to Kaup's (2015) socionatural embeddedness, I call attention to the fact that laws, organizations, and actors are not only embedded in a symbolic institutional environment. They are also embedded in a social-ecological system (Figure 3), in which climate change functions as a macrolevel, extralegal force that impacts institutions, organizations, and individuals. In today's climate crisis, social actors need to negotiate to maintain order,

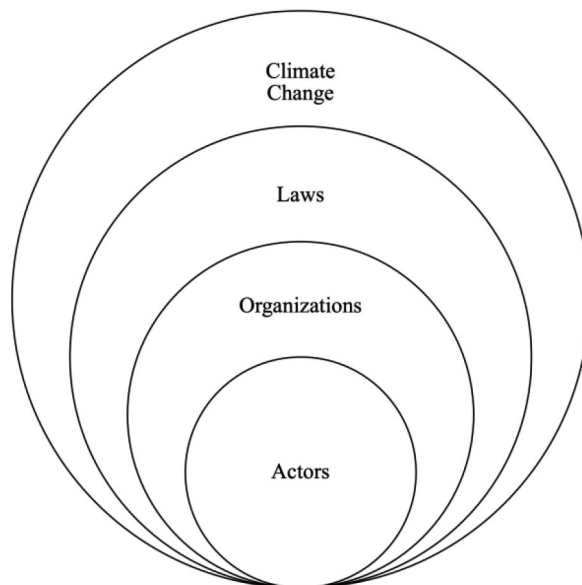


FIGURE 3. Laws, organizations, and actors embedded in a climate change environment.

create trust, and mediate disputes within, between, and beyond organizations while navigating institutional and organizational ambiguities compounded by ecological factors.

In sum, my contribution to socionatural embeddedness and institutionalism is two-fold. First, I concentrate on the role of social relations in resolving climate-related disputes within and between organizations. This speaks to a still-overlooked point on conflicts in embeddedness theories (Granovetter 1985; Kaup 2015; Krippner 2001), unpacking how climate action and dispute resolution are embedded in social relations. Second, and relatedly, I develop the concept of *symbolic embeddedness* as a relational social process through which social actors turn to formal and informal institutions to negotiate conflicts. Put simply, symbolic embeddedness is a social process by which social actors use their symbolic power to mediate conflicts within and between organizations while mobilizing the symbolic structures of such organizations to manage institutional instability and advance their interests.³

As an empirical application, I focus on lawyers and their relations with disputants, policymakers, and the state when negotiating climate-related conflicts within and between organizations. Organizations, after all, devise symbolic structures to manage institutional ambiguity (Edelman 1992). And lawyers, as inhabitants of organizations responsible for resolving disputes in the social system, offer an ideal initial case to study how they use their symbolic power as a social capital tool to treat rules and norms—which are themselves institutions—as “symbolic weapons” to win cases (Bourdieu 1987:827).

To develop this concept empirically, I build on relational sociology (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008; Liu and Emirbayer 2016) while looking at a legal aid organization in Brazil’s Amazon—a region central to climate change. This relational approach consists of examining issues of power, culture, and agency in terms of how climate action and disputes are embedded in social relations within the Brazilian PDO as lawyers and disputants interact in this region.

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

Drawing from relational sociology (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008:6), I treat legal settings as fields of power in which negotiations occur between stakeholders holding different levels and various forms of capital. The average petitioner lacks economic capital that could be converted into cultural, social, or symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1987). In contrast, lawyers have above-average salaries, formal education, and social ties to the highest strata of society—an elite characteristic of the legal profession around the world, including Brazil (Dezalay and Garth 2002).

This difference in accumulated capital between lawyers and disputants shapes their interactions outside and within legal organizations. Consequently, it shapes the *habitus* of ordinary people seeking legal services on the one hand, and of lawyers providing those services on the other hand. The use of symbolic power occurs as citizens look for and interact with lawyers and as the latter decide whether to offer legal representation to the

former. Symbolic power, in this context, is part of a social process of symbolic embeddedness in terms of how legal, political, and social actors construct meanings and negotiate order when mediating conflicts. Now that I have offered these general analytical definitions, I can describe how they intersect at the Brazilian PDO in particular.

Research Design and Sample Characteristics

Per the Brazilian constitution, the PDO is a government-funded legal aid organization. I conducted my fieldwork at the state-level branches of the PDO in the Amazonian state of Pará, primarily in the capital city of Belém and secondarily in the rural municipality of Paragominas. The Belém Metropolitan Region is the most heavily populated area of the Amazon River Delta. Floods in Belém cause housing destruction and displacement, exposing over half a million people to social-ecological risks (Mansur et al. 2016). The victims of climate injustice continue to suffer hardships, and lawyers at the Belém branch of the PDO have filed two lawsuits on this matter. By contrast, since an extreme flood in 2018 impacted 40% of the urban area of Paragominas and killed four people, public defenders in Paragominas have represented more than a thousand petitioners in court (Silva Rodrigues et al. 2020).

This stark difference in reactions relates to Felipe's question in the introduction: Is the PDO a mere state-funded law firm for the poor, or an instrument of social change? To explore this from an ethnographic standpoint, the main actors I observed and interviewed are *assistidos*—petitioners assisted by the PDO—and *defensores públicos*—Brazil's public defenders.⁴ The observations cast light on the interactions between *assistidos* and *defensores* at the PDO and in other legal and political settings.

Regarding their forms of capital, *defensores* are state employees who have among the highest salaries in the nation and may receive tenure after three years of service (de Sá e Silva 2017; Dos Santos Cunha 2020). In objective terms, the *assistidos* who qualify for legal aid are people whose total personal and family income do not exceed three and five times Brazil's minimum wage, respectively. Subjectively, though, the *assistidos* are also understood as possibly vulnerable, depending on the socioeconomic situation in which they arrive at the PDO, as broadly assessed by the *defensores*. While specific guidelines exist as to whom *defensores* shall serve, they have the autonomy to screen ambiguous cases whenever necessary. This is a two-way, asymmetrical relationship. On the one hand, people who seek help from the PDO believe they have the right to seek political and legal remedies for their grievances. On the other hand, *defensores* assess their cases and decide whether or not they may legitimately pursue legal action in court and administrative agencies.

My positionality played a crucial role in accessing the PDO, capturing these encounters, and conversing with interviewees. I was born and educated in Belém, where I graduated from a prestigious law school. Thus, I have contacts with *defensores* who helped me immerse myself in the PDO's routine, including a family member at the PDO in Belém. Snowball and reference sampling techniques thus guided the data collection (Biernacki and Waldorf 1981).⁵

I spent 12 weeks conducting participant observation and in-depth, semi-structured interviews in the summer months of 2017 and 2018, with a follow-up ethnographic

study between July 2019 and April 2020. I had 39 interviews with 35 *defensores*. (I recorded and transcribed 30 conversations, and I took notes during the other nine.) The full questionnaire can be found as an appendix. I also typed up more than 20,000 words of field notes from my observations at the PDO branches in Belém and Paragominas. In addition to capturing the interactions between *assistidos* and *defensores*, I shadowed *defensores* by sitting in their offices, visiting their houses, and having meals with them when they interacted with their peers.

The sample of 35 *defensores* is based on a population of 141 lawyers working in Belém—excluding other cities in the metropolitan region—and two out of six in Paragominas. I spoke with 21 *defensoras* (female lawyers) and 14 *defensores* (male lawyers) handling civil law cases. The overrepresentation of women in civil affairs stems, in part, from gendered differences in legal services. Men, in turn, are overrepresented in criminal defense.

FINDINGS

The PDO's Organizational Structure and Culture

The PDO has a hierarchical structure in which *defensores* with more years of service tend to occupy administrative positions (Jatene 2006). Senior officials often decide where lawyers with less experience work, and make most budget allocation decisions. The youngest professionals are more likely to interact with *assistidos* on a daily basis.⁶

Samuel is the most senior *defensor* I interviewed. “Some of these youngsters are very motivated and qualified,” he said. At the same time, some elite lawyers who recently became public defenders have left the PDO after facing the challenges of working in one of the poorest parts of Brazil. Samuel commented, “There are *defensores* who do not like to work with the poor.” Some *defensores*, who are elites themselves, strive to promote organizational and institutional changes while advancing their careers. Others prioritize their careers at the expense of contributing to the goals of the organization and might divert the PDO from its original mission.

Reminiscent of the “fight for environmental justice” within the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency described by Harrison (2019), Samuel summarized this intraorganizational dualism by saying that “the Public Defender’s Office is facing a vocational problem.” This problem relates to the professionalization of the PDO, which has attracted lawyers seeking economic and professional rewards rather than having values aligned with its organizational mission (Dos Santos Cunha 2020). However, such goals are not mutually exclusive. As *defensora* Silvia told me, they can overlap.

I was a practicing attorney for a while. Later, I joined [a state-owned bank] as a lawyer, and I stayed there for three years before starting here at the PDO in 2007. Look, surprisingly, I never envisaged the PDO. It was a career that, in reality, I did not even know existed. I only realized why later: because the PDO was the newest legal career compared to being a prosecutor or a judge. In the early days of the PDO . . . a structured career did not exist. When I joined [that] bank, I took several public exams, but it had been a long time since the last admittance test for the PDO [was

offered]. So I did not even know about this structured and professional body. I took the first exam for the PDO in a while [in 2006], and I saw that my values aligned with the ones of this organization. Then I applied and found it interesting. That is how I ended up here at the PDO.

Silvia remembers that she did not even know about the PDO when she considered other jobs. In the mid-2000s she was surprised to discover this “structured” profession which meshed with her values and her understanding of the law. While *defensores* agree on the improvements in the PDO’s organizational structure, they differ on its culture. This issue becomes particularly salient when the subject is their professional autonomy to screen cases and pursue legal strategies.

Legal and Organizational Ambiguities within the PDO

In addition to the structural issues just mentioned, *defensores* mention their relationships with colleagues as a source of cultural tensions. The same applies to their interactions with *assistidos*, which I will address later. Larissa, for instance, talks about the difference between “being a *defensora* and a [regular] attorney.”

I do not choose to whom I provide services. If I cannot serve the *assistida*, I am required by law to find someone [here at the PDO] to do it. [Yet,] when we realize that an *assistida* does not have the right to file a lawsuit, she does not want to hear that. Our opinion needs to be based on [the law and precedents] to show that her situation cannot be resolved in court.

Per the Brazilian constitution, *defensores* are legally obliged to accept any case brought to them unless the case has no legal basis. The private lawyer has no such obligation. Not all *defensores* think and act like Larissa, however.

In 2017, the PDO passed an internal resolution to address the unjustified dismissal of claims by *defensores* who privilege their professional autonomy rather than the *assistidos*’ interests. Resolution 185 says that *defensores públicos* must use the laws, precedents, and doctrines “that best suit the interests of the *assistido* [whom the *defensor*] shall defend.” Thus, *defensores* are legally required to justify any refusal and to find another *defensor* to assess their complaints before they are dismissed.

In managing this intrafirm conflict Resolution 185 serves as an interesting application of Sutton et al.’s (1994) “legalization of the workplace” within a government organization in a country other than the United States, albeit with a twist. This resolution was implemented only in 2017, almost 30 years after the Brazilian constitution was enacted in 1988. Thus, although the legal ambiguity had long existed, Resolution 185 originated primarily from normative pressures to manage the increasing goal ambiguity of the PDO.

The everyday behavior of *defensores* in the microlevel operations of the PDO directly shaped this organization’s macrolevel symbolic structures designed to comply with Brazilian constitutional law in providing legal aid for the needy. In so doing, *defensores* mobilized their various forms of capital to influence and operationalize the symbolic structures of the PDO. They also advanced their interests to better structure their careers

and differentiate themselves from private attorneys while managing instability to mediate conflicts inherent in how they render services.

An interfirm conflict emerges, however. As David insightfully notes, “the PDO is a state organization that fights against the very same state” that employs him and his colleagues. This issue highlights another important aspect raised by Larissa: the relationship between *defensores* and *assistidos*, in terms of how *defensores* mediate conflicts, has ramifications that go beyond the PDO, including climate-related disputes.

Legal and Organizational Ambiguities in Defensores’ Practice of Law

The focus on housing rights helps unveil how climate change accentuates legal and organizational ambiguities, along with conflicts that emerge, simultaneously, *within* the PDO and *between* it and other state agencies. An important aspect of legal practice on housing is that, in Brazil, lawsuits can be filed against government entities. Housing is a constitutional right per Article 6 of the Brazilian constitution. And per Article 37, §6°, state agencies, along with their contractors, are liable for damages caused by their action or inaction if, for example, flood-related damage to people’s houses violates their right to housing.

When *defensores* represent the needy in complicated housing matters, this process has the potential to put a strain on their ongoing relationships with *assistidos* within the PDO. *Assistidos* can become increasingly dissatisfied with delays in the process, judicial requests for additional documents, and other issues that go beyond what *defensores* can do. A similar problem concerns *defensores*’ ties to legal and political actors outside the PDO. For instance, in bringing matters of housing against the municipal government in Belém, *defensora* Laura says, “We are dealing with an extremely conservative judiciary in terms of housing rights. I prepare my legal arguments to be ready to appeal, because I know I am going to lose.”

This comment reveals a structural understanding of the law as embedded within a broader social context. If Laura were to follow legal precedents strictly, it is likely that she would refuse representation to most *assistidos* with housing grievances, since the local courts normally rule against such claims. Asked how the *assistidos* perceived this situation, Laura said that most appreciated her efforts. She could simply dismiss their claims; and in Laura’s words, “I don’t know if I would have much to do if I denied all the housing cases brought to me”—she would have a mere handful of cases on her desk.

Collective action has ensued from these efforts. In 2016, Laura and some of her colleagues mobilized the symbolic structures of the PDO to create a task force on housing. This group consisted of *defensores* specializing in administrative, civil, and human rights law, which were mainly represented by Laura, Abel, and Melissa, respectively. The task force aimed to offer holistic legal services in housing matters, insofar as human rights violations occur when housing rights are disrespected in both public and private property.

This task force also helped these *defensores* advance in their careers. With 2020’s internal Resolution 252, the task force was formalized as the *Núcleo de Defesa da Moradia* (literally Nucleus in Defense of Housing). Abel, Laura, and Melissa took leading roles in

this process, building on their social and symbolic capital as leaders of the civil, administrative, and human rights law units within the PDO. Formally speaking, the PDO became better equipped to address housing concerns, while these three *defensores* assumed prominent positions in their workplace.

Tensions regarding case screening and legal strategies in housing disputes persist, however. This is partly because climate change is accentuating the legal and organizational ambiguities, such as when flooding causes property damage. And others hold a more formalistic view of the law, in contrast to Laura's structural understanding. As the combination of interview and ethnographic data shows, how *defensores* approach their relationships with *assistidos* and state officials can either facilitate or prevent climate action.

Climate Change as a Source of Legal and Organizational Ambiguities

To be sure, some *defensores* acknowledge that petitioners struggle to comply with formal rules that do not capture these individuals' realities, but even they can be biased against some individuals' actions when they disrespect laws and policies. *Defensora* Clara, for example, mentioned the distribution of housing checks in Pará. The state government offers compensation for people who have suffered losses due to certain damages, with strict requirements for how recipients can use the funds. But the policy disregards local facts, such as that half of the residents of Belém do not have formal title to their land; multiple families may occupy a single lot; and other challenges stemming from unplanned urban growth (Soares and Cruz 2019).

Intrigued by this situation, I asked Clara what happens when the law is ambiguous, such as when recurrent flooding repeatedly results in housing damages. The constitution dates back to 1988, and flooding has worsened since then as a consequence of climate change. When social-ecological hazards intertwine with socioeconomic rights violations, people have turned to political and legal institutions. Clara told me, "Some disputants consult with me about the housing checks, but they disrespect the contract [which says that the money must be spent on certain types of reconstruction]. Thus, I reject [these] case[s]."

I prompted Clara for more details. She said she had not asked about them. Ironically, although she was tasked with defending housing rights, her formal approach to the law impeded her fight for this cause. My observational data shed additional light on the distinct experiences *assistidos* can have when interacting with various *defensores*.

I had the chance to capture such encounters at the PDO and at other state agencies. For instance, on September 5, 2019, I shadowed two grassroots activists, Denis and Arthur, during a visit to the PDO.⁷ These men had long denounced the rights violations aggravated by floods in Belém, including to *defensores* in charge of the PDO's human rights division (before Melissa took over). After several meetings, including public hearings, with various *defensores*, Denis and Arthur successfully convinced the PDO to join a class action lawsuit concerning flood governance that had been filed by prosecutors in 2008—and which is still pending. Through their activism, they learned how to navigate the PDO's bureaucratic structure.

Denis and Arthur cleverly scheduled two separate meetings that same day, one with Abel and one with Melissa and Esther, who is the PDO's ombudsperson. The consultation with Melissa and Esther was intended to provide an update on both *assistidos*' claims and the status of the lawsuit mentioned earlier. Yet neither Melissa nor Esther showed up for the appointment, leaving Esther's clerk to manage the situation and Denis and Arthur to figure out how to convey the information they had planned to present, and obtain information in return.

These activists had hoped to use this opportunity to explain that floods and concomitant rights violations persisted. Also, the state government recently levied new fees for sanitation services, but such services were never offered in their respective neighborhoods. Consequently, Arthur said this fee was unlawful and abusive: "If the state had the right to charge for this [service], we would not have sewage invading our homes every time it rains." Denis complained that repeated floods contributed to "sinking [his] house" and damaging it, despite measures he had devised to elevate it.

In both situations, the increase in flooding, as a consequence of climate change, was the primary source of legal concern, not the ambiguity of the constitutional text that (arguably) protects Arthur and Denis' housing rights. Given a chance to talk to Melissa and Esther directly, they thought they might strategize on how to move forward with the class action and discuss other avenues of legal and political mobilization against floods. Since that had not happened, an atmosphere of frustration dominated the room. Esther's clerk said she was writing down the complaints to share with Melissa and Esther in order to schedule another meeting. She also said she would send them a copy of the suit. Indeed, later that same morning, she attached a copy of the lawsuit to a laconic email (which I have in my personal files): "Dear All, Here is the lawsuit for you to follow it." But the consultation with Melissa and Esther never happened. Ironically, as we left the PDO, Dennis and Arthur asked for *my* thoughts on the status of the lawsuit filed back in 2008.

A contrasting situation had occurred around 8 AM that same day, when Denis and three other flood victims, all women (Leila, Katharina, and Patricia), arrived for their appointment with Abel. In contrast to Denis, who has lived in the same house for three decades, the women had been relocated to another area of Belém in the 1990s. Their families' houses were destroyed and replaced by a drainage canal designed to mitigate floods. At that time, these individuals were given lots in a low-income neighborhood and a petty sum of money by the state and municipal governments for them to rebuild their lives. Titles to the lots were never issued, which violated their housing rights; hence, they sought Abel's services at the PDO.

While Abel was at first very welcoming toward these *assistidos*, the meeting started in a tense mood. One of Abel's first remarks was, "We need to analyze whether these families are eligible [to be served by the PDO], because this is a central region of Belém." In the 2000s, that low-income, flood-prone neighborhood had indeed become a wealthy district, even though flooding continues to happen only one street away from where those families currently reside. Leila then told Abel, "We were relocated from a flood-prone area when we were most vulnerable to floods and to rights violations." Katharina

also noted that at the time they had “received two, three thousand reais to build improvised houses and shacks within fifteen days,” per government orders.⁸

Leila’s and Katharina’s arguments converged on the point that the state and municipal governments had suddenly demanded that their families leave their homes and build new ones elsewhere. Abel was convinced for the moment and noted he would assess the vulnerability aspect later. The conversation then took a friendly turn toward specifying plans.

Abel proposed to work in cooperation with the municipal and state-level entities responsible for supporting the *assistidos*’ right to housing, but without entering into a confrontation that might lead to a lawsuit—an innovative strategy in Brazilian legal practice. “Let me call the director of the municipal agency,” Abel said, and did so in front of everyone. This move highlighted two important attributes. First, Abel had a direct connection with the leadership of government entities that he regularly sued, being politically embedded in a key part of the bureaucracy that could help advance not only his interests but also his causes. Second, he was willing to help *assistidos* even before finalizing his evaluation of whether they could be served by the PDO, building trust with this community.

Abel finally took the case and brokered a meeting, which occurred at a state-level agency on January 27, 2020, with all the interested stakeholders, and I had the chance to observe. In contrast to the PDO, where all the *assistidos* were allowed inside Abel’s office, only two residents of the area under dispute were permitted to participate in this session. Pursuing the strategy mentioned earlier, Abel told both the state officials and the *assistidos*, “The discussion [over their properties] has already been resolved with the legal counsel department [of the government entities].” A lawyer representing the state agency nodded in agreement, signaling that Abel’s strategy to conduct this conflict without filing lawsuits had been accepted. As Abel noted, in “less than a year,” the lawyers representing both sides had arranged meetings and provided the legal opinion for the government entities to issue the necessary documentation for these families. The state officials then asked everyone except the lawyers to leave the room.

Afterward, Abel detailed the following situation to the families and to me (separately). He had succeeded in convincing both the municipal and state governments that those families had already been living in the area for an extended period, with enough documents to show that the lots had been granted by other officials years ago. He also convinced the *assistidos* that because an election for the state government had occurred in 2018, it was reasonable for the agencies and their representatives to take some time to assess measures taken by previous administrations.

In pursuing this course of action, Abel relied on his concrete, ongoing ties to both state officials and the claimants, showing how symbolic embeddedness takes form when the processes of political and relational embeddedness coexist within a broader socionatural framework. At the same time, he mobilized the symbolic structures of the PDO and other government entities to serve people in need. Again, it was not the introduction of new laws that led to the context of ambiguity discussed above. Rather, recurrent flooding was the driver of displacement, which destabilized the housing rights of those families, which prompted Abel to mobilize his legal and political relationships to pursue this case.

Embedding Climate Action in Social Relations

Do the differences described thus far stem from differences between Abel's and Melissa's practices and values? The answer could be yes, at least in part. But the practice of law, along with the structural and cultural characteristics of the PDO, offer a more nuanced explanation. Recall that Abel was in charge of the task force on housing when the families relocated due to floods approached him. He could strategize on how to proceed as he deemed most effective. By contrast, Melissa took over the human rights division of the PDO several years after its involvement in the lawsuit filed on behalf of Denis and Arthur back in 2008, limiting her agency.

For another perspective, let us turn to Victoria, a *defensora pública* who took another approach to flooding- and housing-related litigation in the city of Paragominas. I interviewed Victoria on September 9, 2019, and observed two meetings she had with *assistidos*, one on October 7, 2019, and a follow-up session on March 5, 2020. In our conversations, Victoria informed me that when she arrived for work on April 13, 2018, the PDO branch in Paragominas was crowded with people who had lost documents, belongings, and even entire houses to a flood that had devastated the city and killed four people just the previous day. This extraordinary workload persisted for a few weeks. In parallel, the local prosecutor used a "helicopter and everything [they had]" at the State Prosecutor's Office to assess the extent of the damage and the liability of policymakers, along with a set of landowners of farms whose dams had not held back the collected rainfall, which gushed into the city. Ultimately, this prosecutor and Victoria jointly filed class action suits against the municipality and the landowners.

Victoria took the case a step further. With about a thousand families literally knocking on the doors of the PDO, she decided to create a database of victims of the event. She prepared a form through which the citizens who had suffered losses could provide their personal information and details about their housing and other damages. These reports could serve as evidence in court.

This strategy differs from the flood-related litigation under Melissa's oversight in Belém, so I asked Victoria why she chose it. Victoria said she shared Melissa's concern with the limits of class action suits as a way to achieve justice for people at the individual level. But rather than considering only procedural justice instruments in the formal sense of the law, Victoria had a holistic, structural goal of pursuing distributive justice with all the means she had.

However, she faced some hurdles in trying to mobilize the PDO's structure toward her goal. For example, the *defensores* and staff sent to Paragominas by the PDO's main office in Belém were dedicated solely to issuing new personal documents, such as driver's licenses, for the victims of floods. Some *defensores* from Belém even criticized Victoria's database initiative. Common remarks she heard included, "You do not even know if these efforts will result in anything."

This criticism was based on two aspects of how floods, once again, destabilized the use of the law within the PDO, rather than legal or organizational ambiguities. First, in the state of Pará, there are no legal precedents concerning whether people who have incurred

losses due to climate hazards are entitled to financial reparation. Second, and relatedly, it is a complicated legal matter to establish causation—that is, whether the municipality and the farmers mentioned above could be held accountable for such losses. That is why the *defensores* who had a more formal view of the law than Victoria considered it “a waste of time” to put significant efforts into building a database of victims of the flood and filing lawsuits on their behalf. Victoria persisted nonetheless.

Victoria and the local prosecutors convinced the local judge to schedule a hearing for less than a year after the cosigned class action suits had been filed. That is fast for Brazil, indicating that this joint strategy resulted in a different outcome than in Belém. Coordinating their activities and arguments, legal actors in Paragominas persuaded the judge that flooding and housing damages were interconnected beyond a reasonable doubt and thus set an important precedent. The judge issued a preliminary injunction, which required the municipal government to implement preventive measures to mitigate future floods under judicial and civil society oversight.

Going beyond the strategies pursued in court, Victoria helped community activists who lived in the flooded areas organize politically. She started a meeting with them by offering an interesting remark: “I want to empower you to take the lead and conduct both the lawsuit and this [mobilization] process democratically. If you depend solely on me, it is possible that we will not get anywhere.” She recommended that they create a formal association of victims of the 2018 flood. Renato, an *assistido*, was selected as the victims’ representative in this session.

Seven residents—three men and four women—then deliberated over the objectives of the association. Victoria cleverly found ways to strengthen her ties to and build trust with this community by admitting, “I need to be honest, I have never prepared the bylaws of a civil society organization. Thus, you need to have it very clear who will be the directors by holding meetings within your communities.” Her concern was more with someone challenging the structure of this association than with the formal aspects of the bylaws. This shows that she felt capable of managing legal ambiguity while worrying about issues raised by disrupting social norms among the people she intended to help.

Toward the end of my data collection, in March 2020, I met with Renato, Lucia (another association leader), and Victoria separately. Renato and Lucia confirmed that the bylaws had been formally filed with the notary’s office, and the association was “up and running.” Victoria was working on the class action and individual lawsuits, as well as meeting with the association members regularly—her intern joked, “They are always here [at the PDO].”

Interestingly, Victoria left the oversight of the municipality’s efforts to handle floods to her colleague, David. David then took a more active role in the political contours of this case, while he gratefully noted that the reports, lawsuits, and “all that, we owe to Victoria.” Both Victoria and David have used their networks within the PDO to build trust with *assistidos* and between the PDO and municipal agencies to advance their professional interests while mediating climate-related conflicts, presenting elements of political, relational, and socionatural embeddedness. Thus this situation shows another interesting feature of symbolic embeddedness, by which climate action resulted from

relations between social and legal actors, insofar as these *defensores* have mobilized the symbolic structures of the PDO and used the symbolic force of the law to change the status quo of climate injustice on behalf of *assistidos*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Using Brazil's Amazon as a case of mobilization for better climate governance and sustainable development in the Global South, this study explores issues of agency and power by unraveling how social actors rely on social capital when negotiating conflicts compounded by climate change. The relations between *defensores* and *assistidos*, through which symbolic embeddedness takes form, either constrain or facilitate climate action. *Defensores* were embedded in a context of structural inequalities, which limited their—and the PDO's—power to change governance practices. Still, *defensoras* like Victoria effectively exercised agency and mobilized institutional and organizational structures in their relations with political and social actors to mediate climate-related disputes, defend *assistidos'* rights, and articulate their interests. As inequities between the Global North and Global South persist in international climate policymaking (Falzon 2021; Jorgenson 2016; Roberts and Parks 2009), these institutional and organizational dynamics in Brazil highlight how power, culture, and agency are embedded in relational efforts to foster good governance and sustainable development practices.

This relational approach advances the understanding that the implementation of statutes and regulations can be either helped or hampered by how state officials behave within a single organizational setting in the Global North (Harrison 2019). Focusing on how housing issues intertwine with ecological risks in the Amazon shows that, despite laws and norms dating back to the 1980s, the climate crisis has triggered not only climate-related disputes but also increased institutional and organizational ambiguities in the Global South. Consequently, legal, political, and social actors have sought to resolve such disputes within and between organizations while interacting with one another within broader institutional and sociocultural frameworks, speaking to a growing embeddedness literature on conflicts (Kaup 2015; Li 2016; Michelson 2007).

In this part of the world, climate change, as an extralegal force, influenced the distinct legal approaches pursued in Belém versus Paragominas. Ecological and organizational dynamics became interwoven in how various actors made organizations use the law to navigate a context of institutional instability, contributing to the literature on institutions and organizations in the environmental social sciences (Falzon 2021; Harrison 2019; Kaup 2015; Scoville 2022). In constructing the meaning of law in society, the ways *defensores* approach the law and their relationships with *assistidos*, their colleagues, and other state officials highlight their differences in managing institutional and organizational ambiguities. *Defensores* have mobilized the symbolic structures of the PDO to advance their careers. But they have done that while also using the symbolic force of the law to build trust with and strengthen ties to *assistidos* and policymakers in resolving climate-related disputes, illuminating how political and relational embeddedness coexist within a sociocultural framework.

For example, the actions taken by Abel, Melissa, and Laura while infusing the PDO with their structural view of the law and operationalizing their ties within and beyond the PDO ultimately helped them transform an informal task force into a formal “nucleus.” While this move has advanced their interests and careers within the PDO, it has also facilitated how these *defensores* can use the law and their networks in the bar, the bench, and political forums. They are, after all, embedded in the state and in the fight against the very same state that employs them.

Defensores, therefore, have found ways to navigate the bureaucracy and serve *assistidos* while relying on their connections by being politically and relationally embedded in this complex network of competing interests. As climate change compounds conflicts and disrupts institutions everywhere, it demands creativity by social actors to mobilize the symbolic structures of organizations in their use of the symbolic force of the law to resolve disputes and maintain social order. This is precisely where the concept of symbolic embeddedness helps unpack the roles of power and agency in shaping not only social action but also climate action in the course of social relations aiming to resolve social-ecological disputes.

Institutional change or continuity might ensue from these distinct institutional and organizational logics as well as legal and social actors’ behaviors. The PDO in Brazil’s Amazon is a case that shows how conflict and cooperation coexist in collective action taken to change institutions and organizations in the social-ecological systems within which they are embedded. As legal ambiguity is inherent in rules and norms, how actors rely on social relations, marked by power and capital asymmetry, within the settings in which they interact while resolving conflicts, offers an avenue to analyze institutional and organizational dynamics during the climate crisis.

Further research might develop on other issues. Here, I have treated an organization itself as a field of power. However, the PDO is also part of organizational networks, raising questions about whether it is becoming similar to or different from, for example, private law firms or other state legal offices. Also, a comparative analysis of risk management surrounding development programs could assess other characteristics of dispute resolution, such as contrasting flood governance and financial reparations in Brazil to similar processes in the United States (Elliott 2021; Elliott and Howell 2017; Sterett 2015). And, while this article details how symbolic embeddedness coexists with political, relational, and socionatural embeddedness (Kaup 2015; Li 2016; Michelson 2007), further research could disentangle other elements of these distinct types of embeddedness.

Finally, and most important, future work could expand the concept of symbolic embeddedness beyond legal actors. Since lawyers are members of *the* profession tasked with resolving disputes in the social system (Bourdieu 1987), the focus on their relations with their colleagues, *assistidos*, and policymakers provided an ideal laboratory for empirical application. Arguably, all social actors rely on multiple forms of capital to advance their interests in the social space without necessarily disrupting social order, calling for future avenues of research on symbolic embeddedness.

In conclusion, questions remain about the fate of social order as social-ecological disputes continue to escalate following problems with climate adaptation and mitigation policies in the Global North and South alike. If climate action taken in the course of

social relations has the power to engender both institutional and organizational movement toward sustainable development practices, it is imperative to understand whether and how citizens recognize and approach rules and norms when facing climate injustice. Conflicts will accompany social life in the social-ecological systems within which relations are embedded. Scholars, therefore, ought to pay increasing attention to the motives for and the circumstances under which actors use rules and norms to catalyze climate action and maintain social order during the current climate crisis. ■

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NOTES

1. On case selection beyond Brazil, see Seawright and Gerring (2008).
2. Granovetter (1985) also used the terms *intrafirm* and *interfirm* when referring to social action within and between organizations, respectively.
3. It is noteworthy how symbolic embeddedness differs from social embeddedness. Social embeddedness emphasizes actors' shared relations within social networks (Granovetter 1985), along with the structural conditions that either facilitate or constrain the construction of such relations (Kaup 2015; Krippner 2001; Polanyi 2001). Symbolic embeddedness, as I conceptualize it, centers on actors' shared institutional, organizational, and cultural meanings, which are built through their relations in social networks. While social embeddedness focuses on the formation of ties, symbolic embeddedness focuses on how social actors operationalize their relations in constructing institutional, organizational, and cultural meanings. Lastly, as I argue in the next sections, symbolic embeddedness coexists with political, relational, social, and sociocultural embeddedness.
4. The words *assistidos* and *defensores* include men and women.
5. Convenience sampling certainly poses limitations to research. However, considering that my object of study is specific populations, this is a suitable strategy.
6. The position of *defensor público geral* (chief public defender) follows an election procedure. *Defensores* select three names (rank-ordered) by vote and submit them to the state governor, who can choose anyone from this list. Thus, a candidate can be any age when selected for the position.
7. To the best of my knowledge, nobody at the PDO knew that I was going to this meeting, which might have otherwise influenced what I ultimately found.
8. This would be about USD 5,800 today.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE FOR DEFENSORES PÚBLICOS

1. When and from which university did you earn your law degree?
2. When did you become a public defender? Was this your career goal? Did you have any other previous experience before joining the Public Defender's Office?
3. Are there any lawyers in your family? Did this influence you to become a public defender after you graduated?
4. How has this career changed since the empowerment of the Public Defender's Office circa 2006?
 - 4.1. Compared to before 2006, how well prepared do you think your colleagues are to fulfill the Office's mission?
 - 4.2. What has changed in terms of the public examination and the characteristics of the admitted lawyers after 2006?
 - 4.3. Has this rise in wages and professionalism changed the organizational structure and culture of the Office in terms of expanding the services you provide?
5. How would you summarize the challenges that your Office faces nowadays?
 - 5.1. Have some structural problems changed since public defenders started to earn more and gained in professional status? If so, how?
 - 5.2. Is the Public Defender's Office currently divided into units that handle specific legal matters (e.g., family, property, criminal law)?
6. Does the Office organize any type of outreach initiatives? Have you ever participated in an outreach initiative to provide access to justice outside of the Office?
7. What are the formal criteria to screen cases and determine whether the petitioner has the right to bring a lawsuit?
 - 7.1. How easy/challenging is it to work with petitioners? How cooperative are they? What would you consider the main characteristics of "good" versus "bad" clients?
 - 7.2. When you deny assistance, is there a way for clients to try to bring the lawsuit one more time?
8. What are the major barriers for claimants to reaching the Public Defender's Office?
9. To conclude our interview, if you could, what would be your ideas to make your work more accessible for the population in need?