

# A year after historic flood, Rio Grande do Sul continues to face Brazilian government's negligence

**Fátima Ferrante****22 May 2025**

This month marks one year since floods caused by capitalist-driven climate change devastated Brazil's southernmost state, Rio Grande do Sul, in one of the worst environmental disasters in the country's history. This extreme weather event has exposed the utter indifference of the Brazilian ruling elite toward the lives of the state's working population, whose living conditions have only worsened since then.

The flooding hit 478 out of the state's 497 municipalities, representing 91 percent of all municipalities, directly affecting about 2.4 million of the state's 11.2 million residents. According to the Unified Map of the Rio Grande Plan released by the state government, the number of people displaced by flooding and landslides throughout the state reached 877,729. The death toll stands at 184, with 25 still missing, according to the state's Civil Defense.

Despite the purported success of the "reconstruction" of Rio Grande do Sul promoted by Governor Eduardo Leite and representatives of Brazilian President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva's government (Workers Party, PT), the social crisis has worsened dramatically. An estimated 432,000 jobs were lost in 2024 due to destroyed infrastructure and the shutdown of productive sectors. In the worst hit municipalities, between 84 percent and 92 percent of formal jobs were compromised, while small businesses and workers in the informal sector faced difficulties resuming activities and ensuring their livelihoods.

Nearly half (47 percent) of families earning up to two minimum wages reported losing their home, furniture, appliances, or even their means of subsistence. Awaiting a definitive housing solution, around 380 people still remain in shelters in Rio Grande do Sul, with 93 percent of them in the two largest remaining shelters, located in Canoas and Porto Alegre, which are expected to close by the end of the month.

Through programs such as Compra Assistida [Assisted Purchase], which offers up to R\$ 200,000 [approximately US\$ 35,335] to buy existing properties, and Minha Casa Minha Vida [My Home My Life], the Lula government claims to guarantee all the resources for housing solutions. Although the expectation was to provide 30,000 families with permanent housing, only about 1,500 contracts have been signed through the Compra Assistida program by the end of April.

"If the government gave me my house, why am I not moving into it right away? I've been in a shelter for almost a year," questions Claudio Joel Bello in a report by *Agência Brasil*. He lost his home in Canoas, in the Mathias Velho neighborhood, which was completely flooded for over a month, and was selected by the Compra Assistida program to receive a house in Sapucaia do Sul, another municipality in the Porto Alegre metropolitan area.

Following the same playbook used by the ruling elites to cover up the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, recent coverage by the bourgeois media has focused on praising the "resilience of the people of Rio Grande do

Sul" in "returning to normalcy," masking the deepening social crisis and inability of the capitalist system to solve the crises it created. The population's perception, however, is exactly the opposite.

A survey by the Quaest institute, published in May of last year, showed that 99 percent of Brazilians believe the floods in Rio Grande do Sul are somehow related to climate change, and more than half of the 2,045 respondents believe that the greatest responsibility lies with the municipal, state or federal governments.

The population still remembers Governor Leite's statement on May 5, 2024, made alongside President Lula and legislative leaders: "This is not the time to look for those to blame, this is not the time to shift responsibilities." Lula repeated this line the following month during a visit to the state, saying he "does not want to look for those to blame."

In addition to warnings about climate change made by scientists since at least the second half of the 20th century, the "Brazil 2040" study, commissioned in 2014 by the Secretariat of Strategic Affairs of the Presidency of the Republic (SAE) under Dilma Rousseff's government (PT), projected—a decade ago—a rise in sea levels, deaths from heat waves, the collapse of hydroelectric plants, water shortages in the Southeast, worsening droughts in the Northeast, and increased rainfall in the South.

In 2023, Brazil recorded the highest number of natural disasters, with 1,161 events, averaging at least three disasters per day, according to data from the National Center for Monitoring and Early Warning of Natural Disasters (Cemaden). Between January 1 and April 10 of this year alone, over 5.9 million people were affected by disasters in the country, and 925 municipalities declared states of emergency or public calamity, according to data from the Integrated Disaster Information System (S2ID), analyzed by the National Confederation of Municipalities (CNM).

Despite attempts to attribute the floods to a fortuitous act of nature, the direct responsibility and negligence of all levels of government in regard to the scale and impact of the disaster are undeniable. In the case of the state capital, Porto Alegre, the lack of investment and the reduction in human resources and technical capacity for over 10 years at the Municipal Water and Sewage Department (DMAE) and the extinction in 2017 of the Department of Storm Sewers (DEP), a body specialized in urban drainage and maintenance of pumping stations and floodgates, directly contributed to the collapse of the city's flood protection system.

During last year's floods, 19 of the 23 pumping stations near the Guaíba River, which surrounds Porto Alegre and reached its highest level in history of 5.37 meters, surpassing the flood level of 3 meters at the time, had to be shut down because they were either flooded or posed a risk of electric shock, which accelerated flooding in the city's central areas. The Salgado Filho International Airport, the city's bus station, and the Porto Alegre Metro (Trensurb) stations were flooded and remained closed for months before resuming full operation.

Today, the flood protection system is far from restored, let alone modernized. A flood protection board was only created in January this year at DMAE, which still faces the risk of privatization, a campaign promise made by Mayor Sebastião Melo in last year's municipal elections.

A comprehensive study of the city's flood protection system is only expected to be ready by July 2026, and DMAE predicts that the city will be effectively protected in three to five years. These forecasts do not even include the construction of a defense system in the South Zone, where some neighborhoods are left unprotected from the advances of the Guaíba River.

Of the 14 floodgates in the flood protection system, the two that were ripped out by the floods have not yet been replaced, three were removed and replaced with concrete walls—against the recommendations of specialists—and work on the remaining floodgates is still unfinished. None of the pumping stations is fully recovered and operational at full capacity, and the process of rebuilding the levees involves relocating families.

According to Fernando Dornelles, a hydrologist at the Institute of Hydraulic Research (IPH) of the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), if a similar flood were to hit the capital:

I believe it would flood again, because we would still have to face it with emergency alternatives, like sandbags, which are more vulnerable than a well-designed and properly fixed steel floodgate. ... And the levee in the Sarandi neighborhood never reached the project's designated height.

On March 31, a severe storm with winds at 111 km/h hit Porto Alegre and several other cities, making it clear to the population that they remain vulnerable. Health units in the capital reported roof damage, flooding and power outages, affecting the Emergency Hospital and the São Lucas Hospital of the Pontifical Catholic University, which had to relocate its patients in the emergency room. In Eldorado do Sul, around 450 homes and 15 municipal schools were affected. Videos of a waterspout forming over the Guaíba River were recorded by residents and circulated on social media.

In addition to the privatization of common utilities, such as water and energy, the expansion of agribusiness activities and the weakening of environmental agencies and laws promoted by Governor Leite, the floods exposed the failure of the state's monitoring, forecasting and warning systems and the deficiencies of Civil Defense agencies.

Of the 94 weather stations of the State Secretariat for the Environment and Infrastructure (SEMA), 60 were available on the website of the National Water and Sanitation Agency (ANA), of which only 12 were actually transmitting data. Military personnel and politicians without experience or technical abilities were in charge of Civil Defense agencies, a scenario that remains the same in many municipalities today.

Apart from the installation of new weather radar in Porto Alegre in August, projects to expand and restore the monitoring network have not yet been executed, and there is no plan for its full implementation. Today, for example, no official agency makes forecasts for the level of the Guaíba River.

Failures of the warning system and preparedness, rescue efforts—relying heavily on the help of volunteers—resulted in the loss of lives. A study by IPH/UFRGS, published in December, concluded that many deaths could have been prevented with an efficient warning system and the early evacuation of at-risk areas.

Walter Collischonn, professor at IPH/UFRGS, said:

Getting a warning at your house that there will be heavy rainfall in your state is not the same as being told that at seven o'clock in the evening you will have to leave your house because it will be flooded. That's another level of information precision. Painting the state red and saying a warning was issued is not enough.

In February, Governor Leite and Mayor Melo visited the Netherlands to learn how that country manages floods and lives with river flooding. According to reports, they admired concepts such as the “sponge city.” The trip was widely criticized. Concepts like “sponge city” are not new in Porto Alegre and were previously implemented.

In the 1990s, several retention basins—the main instrument of the “sponge city” concept—were already being implemented in Porto Alegre. In practice, past and current administrations have ignored or opposed these ideas.

A recent ANA study showed that climate disasters similar to last year's floods in Rio Grande do Sul are expected to become five times more frequent in the region in the coming years. What used to occur, on average, every 50 years should now happen, with greater intensity, every 10 years.

In this scenario, prevention and adaptation should be top priorities, but despite the mobilization of emergency resources, the Lula government's main priority has been to achieve a zero fiscal deficit. The federal budget for prevention and combating environmental disasters fell from R\$ 1.9 billion (approximately US\$ 336 million) in 2024 to about R\$ 1.7 billion (approximately US\$ 300 million) in 2025. Parliamentary amendments earmarked for climate disaster programs also dropped by nearly half, from R\$ 69.9 million (approximately US\$ 12 million) in 2024 to R\$ 39.1 million (approximately US\$ 6 million) in 2025.

Regarding environmental preservation, the Lula government's insistence on extracting oil in the Foz do Amazonas Basin—which faces strong resistance from environmental agencies and society due to the high environmental risks—clearly shows its priorities.

The capitalist mode of production—in which profit always takes precedence over human and social needs—is the main contributor to climate change, as well as the greatest obstacle to confronting it. Loyal servants of capitalism, those responsible hide their role in perpetuating the social crime by invoking concepts of fortuitous events or force majeure.

As perpetrators of the crime, their response to the environmental crisis is not to advance real solutions but rather in line with their policies promoting division and nationalism in an era of imperialist war. Climate change is an existential threat to everyone worldwide, and the only social force capable of facing this threat by taking power from the capitalist class and organizing society based on social and human needs—not profit—is the international working class.



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