

Systemic design and pluriversality in public policies: women's voices in São João dos Patos, Maranhão, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates how systemic design, through a participatory and situated approach, can critically mediate the relationship between public policies and women living in conditions of social vulnerability. Using the Mulheres Mil Program in São João dos Patos, Maranhão, Brazil, as a case study, the research examines the misalignments between institutional guidelines and the women's demands, needs, and forms of knowledge, valuing practices such as embroidery, care, and orality. Through creative workshops, affective cartographies, and the exhibition *Imagining Women for the Future*, design is activated as a practice of listening, cultural translation, and the invention of plural worlds. The findings point to the need for an epistemological redesign of public policies grounded in cognitive justice and citizen co-authorship. The study engages with the "Political Design" axis by arguing that sustainable futures only emerge when they are also affective, rooted, and pluriversal.

Keywords: systemic design; social vulnerability; public policies; Mulheres Mil Program.

INTRODUCTION

In times of climate emergency and socio-environmental exhaustion, it becomes urgent to rethink the role of design in the face of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene—or Capitalocene—as proposed by Haraway (2021) and Preciado (2023). This scenario requires design to transcend its technical and productivist function, adopting a critical, situated, and pluriversal stance capable of mediating conflicts and imagining worlds to come.

However, public policies aimed at vulnerable populations often fail to promote effective transformations because they disregard the knowledge and lived experiences of the territories in which they operate. This disconnection between institutional guidelines and local realities is evident in programs such as the Mulheres Mil Program, nationally established through Ordinance No. 1,015 of July 21, 2011, by the Brazilian Ministry of Education (MEC). As one of the actions of the Brasil Sem Miséria Plan, its main guidelines include: enabling access to education; contributing to the reduction of social and economic inequalities affecting women; promoting social inclusion; defending gender equality; and combating violence against women. These principles serve as a starting point for public policies aimed at fostering autonomy and valuing women in situations of social vulnerability. Although created to promote social inclusion, the program reveals contradictions between its objectives and the everyday desires of its participants.

This article stems from a practical and epistemological concern: why do initiatives that seek inclusion—even when well intentioned—frequently reproduce inequalities and silence local knowledge? The investigation is grounded in experiences with the Mulheres Mil Program in the municipality of São João dos Patos, Maranhão, a territory within the Legal Amazon marked by structural inequalities but also by practices of resistance, care, and solidarity.

Based on a systemic, relational, and participatory design approach, grounded in action research, creative workshops, and sensitive listening practices, the study examines the misalignments between institutional discourses and the lived practices of women in São João dos Patos. Despite the program's emphasis on innovation, entrepreneurship, and employability, what emerges from the territory is a demand for time, recognition, belonging, and justice.

In this context, design is not understood as a problem-solving tool but as an ethical, political, and ontological field. By activating practices of listening, co-authorship, and the re-enchantment of everyday life, it becomes a means of revealing tensions and enabling the emergence of possible futures. Drawing on Foucault (1998), Escobar (2016), Capra (2010), Boulloua (2013), as well as other Latin American voices, this study proposes an epistemological redesign of design practices oriented toward cognitive justice and the valorization of alternative cosmologies.

This article is structured as follows: first, it presents the theoretical framework that underpins the critique of the dominant development model; next, it describes the participatory and situated methodology adopted in the research; then, it discusses the main field findings; and finally, it outlines pathways toward more pluriversal, sensitive, and rooted public policies. In doing so, the paper engages with the theme of the 10th Symposium on Sustainable Design by affirming that there are indeed worlds to come—provided we are willing to listen to what already pulses within the territories.

1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In times of climate emergency and socio-environmental exhaustion, it becomes urgent to rethink the role of design in the face of the challenges posed by the Anthropocene—or Capitalocene—as proposed by Haraway (2021) and Preciado (2023). This scenario requires design to transcend its technical and productivist function, adopting a critical, situated, and pluriversal stance capable of mediating conflicts and imagining worlds to come.

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1.1 Systemic, relational, and participatory design

Systemic design constitutes a critical and transdisciplinary approach that breaks with the technical-functionalist paradigm of modern design, proposing an expanded worldview grounded in the interdependence of living, social, and ecological systems. According to Capra (2006), this perspective is not limited to the sum of isolated elements but understands systems as dynamic and self-regulating wholes, in which each part acquires meaning only through its relationships with the whole. This conception is rooted in Bertalanffy's (1989) General Systems Theory, which emphasizes nonlinearity, adaptation, and complexity as structuring principles of networked life.

Within the field of design, this perspective resonates with authors such as Manzini (2008), who proposes the concept of “inhabiting design”—a form of design that is rooted in everyday life and acts as a symbolic mediator of common existence. For Manzini, enabling design does not merely create objects or services; it produces meanings, bonds, and ecologies of care, directly affecting the physical, social, and symbolic worlds in which it operates.

In this sense, systemic design is activated in this research as an ethical, political, and aesthetic practice of listening and co-authorship, in close alignment with the methodologies of NASDesign – the Systemic Design Research Center (Federal University of Santa Catarina – UFSC), of which the first author is a member. The workshops conducted with women in São

João dos Patos—such as the creation of authorial stamps, affective cartographies, and the exhibition *Imagining Women for the Future*—functioned as design dispositifs for cultural translation, opening fissures within the technical model of the Mulheres Mil Program for the emergence of peripheral and embodied epistemologies.

By integrating the notion of autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela, 2001), design is understood here as a system capable of self-definition and symbolic renewal through the interactions it establishes with territories and subjects. In this context, the Mulheres Mil Program was re-signified by the women themselves as a space of care, listening, and identity reconstruction—a process that moves away from the logic of productivity and toward *buen vivir*.

The work of NASDesign reinforces this approach by proposing a model of projectual sequentiality—Feeling, Acting, and Realizing—which articulates visual thinking, sensitive listening, and collaborative processes to establish a pedagogy of encounter. This methodology shifts the focus from the final product to the system of relationships that makes it possible, as highlighted by Aros (2016), who understands design as a relational rather than merely functional process.

From a decolonial perspective, the research also draws on Escobar (2016), for whom design can be repositioned as a tool for civilizational transition. Rather than reinforcing modern universalism, systemic design, when situated, participates in the construction of a pluriverse in which multiple worlds coexist and resist. Within this horizon, the knowledge of women in São João dos Patos—such as embroidery, care practices, orality, and the aesthetics of encounter—is recognized not as illustration but as legitimate epistemology.

In dialogue with Pérez-Bustos (2015), we understand that feminine practices of expression—such as drawing, embroidery, and the symbolic use of language—produce knowledge and should be incorporated into design processes as political and pedagogical dispositifs. Thus, systemic design does not operate as a neutral language but as a field of symbolic dispute, traversed by cosmologies, affects, and possibilities for the future.

Therefore, systemic, relational, and participatory design, when rooted in territories and activated through listening, becomes a platform for reimagining public policies, valuing silenced voices, and constructing plural and sensitive futures aligned with cosmologies of care and cognitive justice.

1.2 Public Policies and Power Relations

Public policies, traditionally understood as rational and neutral instruments of the State, are approached here as fields of symbolic, technical, and affective dispute, shaped by multiple interests, discourses, and power relations. In line with Foucault (1976, 1998, 2008), we understand that such policies operate as technologies of government, traversed by disciplinary dispositifs that normalize bodies, behaviors, and ways of life under the mantle of inclusion and modernization.

For Foucault (1998), discourse is not only what is said but also what structures what can be said, thought, and institutionalized. Thus, the discourses that underpin programs such as Mulheres Mil—marked by terms such as “entrepreneurship,” “innovation,” “efficiency,” and “productive inclusion”—do not operate innocently; rather, they function as truth-producing mechanisms that construct a desired subjectivity for participating women, often detached from their lived realities.

These discursive guidelines manifest in the pedagogical field through standardized curricular instruments, quantitative targets, and training models oriented toward productivity, which disregard the temporalities, bonds, and local knowledge of women in São João dos Patos. As evidenced in interviews and workshops, many participants do not recognize themselves in the proposed curricula and express alternative aspirations for success: freedom, well-being, belonging, and the right to time.

Boullosa (2013) expands this understanding by proposing that public policies be viewed not as a linear set of state decisions but as contested flows activated by a multiplicity of actors, dispositifs, narratives, and contexts. From this perspective, public policy ceases to be a closed plan and becomes a field of permanent negotiation, traversed by institutional and insurgent forces disputing meanings about what should be done and why.

In the case of the Mulheres Mil Program, the misalignments between institutional structures and the everyday knowledge of the women reveal tensions between a neoliberal management model and the potency of territories as living spaces of knowledge, care, and resistance. The attempt to align professional training with market indicators—such as productivity, formalization, and entrepreneurship—produces a form of symbolic exclusion: ways of life that are not institutionally recognized become invisible or undesirable.

Foucault (2008) reminds us that power relations are not located in a single center but traverse institutions, bodies, knowledge systems, and practices. By acting upon vulnerable populations through disciplinary mechanisms, the State defines who may speak, what may be learned, and which futures may be imagined. In this process, public policies may either reinforce exclusionary patterns or, if redesigned, open fissures for listening, co-authorship, and the recognition of the epistemic plurality of territories.

Therefore, it is essential to rethink public policies not as stable structures but as contested ecosystems, in which the role of design—particularly systemic and situated design—is to problematize dominant discourses, amplify silenced voices, and propose symbolic rearrangements that transform policies from mere management tools into living fields of collective invention and cognitive justice.

1.3 Pluriverse, alternative cosmologies, and decoloniality

The critique of modern universalism—grounded in the ideas of linear progress, instrumental rationality, and the hierarchical ordering of knowledge—is one of the central axes of this research. Aligned with Arturo Escobar's (2016) proposal for an epistemic and ontological turn through the notion of the pluriverse, this investigation recognizes the coexistence of multiple worlds, each with its own ontologies, situated ways of life, and cosmologies rooted in territories, affects, and lived experiences. The pluriverse is not merely the negation of universalism but the radical affirmation of ontological diversity and the legitimacy of non-hegemonic forms of existence, creation, and knowledge.

In São João dos Patos, practices such as embroidery, orality, traditional cooking, and care—historically associated with domestic labor and devalued by institutional structures—emerge as embodied epistemologies (Pérez-Bustos, 2015), whose knowledge is woven into the body, memory, and networks of solidarity. These practices function simultaneously as means of symbolic production and political resistance against the imposition of standardized curricula and employability metrics.

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According to Marisol de la Cadena (2010), it is necessary to move beyond the limits of modern politics to include what she terms “untranslatable practices,” that is, forms of being and knowing that do not fit within established categories but possess their own intrinsic value. By approaching embroidery as a political act, this research claims the legitimacy of a textile epistemology that connects time, territory, aesthetics, and care—dimensions absent from classical criteria of professional training.

Escobar’s (2016) proposal also implies the development of policies not as projects of modernization but as fields of plural co-authorship. He warns that development, when understood as dis-envelopment—devoid of genuine engagement with territories—often advances at the cost of destroying other ways of life. The critique of the neoliberal development model is therefore also a critique of public policy design that neglects local meanings of well-being, community, and autonomy.

Authors such as Viveiros de Castro (2015) reinforce this shift by proposing a “reverse anthropology,” in which Indigenous and peripheral peoples are not studied as objects but recognized as subjects of thought and cosmology. This epistemological inversion is central to decolonial design, as it enables the imagination of public policies not as the application of external solutions but as acts of cultural translation, respect for difference, and the creation of contact zones between worlds.

Dilger and Pereira Filho (2016) further this critique by arguing that development projects, even participatory ones, often carry colonial assumptions when they seek to adapt communities to an external logic of productivity and innovation. They propose a pedagogy of coexistence—close to Freire’s (2000) “pedagogy of encounter”—that values listening, reciprocity, and co-authorship as foundations of political action.

Thus, the recognition of the feminine cosmologies of São João dos Patos—expressed in narratives, practices, and future imaginaries—calls on design to operate not as a tool of intervention but as a practice of ontological care. The pluriverse here is not a conceptual abstraction but a concrete reality in which voices, aesthetics, and knowledges coexist, resist, and redesign the world. As Escobar (2016) reminds us, the role of design in this process is to assist in the realization of these other worlds, which already exist—albeit at the margins—and seek to flourish.

1.4 Imagining futures as a political and pedagogical practice

Imagination, far from being a utopian or escapist exercise, is understood here as a political practice of world-making. In line with Kira (2016) and Escobar (2020), imagining futures is not about predicting scenarios but about activating possibilities that challenge the present and articulate collective desires. In this context, imagination becomes an ethical, insurgent, and pedagogical gesture by shifting the power of creation from experts to historically marginalized subjects, promoting what Gutiérrez (2021) calls “possible decolonial futures.”

Within the field of design, this shift implies abandoning the notion of the project as a predictable solution and adopting prototyping as provocation (Halse et al., 2010). The prototypes—symbolic artifacts created with the women of São João dos Patos during the workshops—functioned as triggers for collective reflection on the limits of current public policies and the possibilities for transformation. Through affective cartographies, stamps bearing messages of resistance, and bottles containing dreams placed in the time capsule of

the exhibition *Imagining Women for the Future*, images of the future emerged that were not grounded in the neoliberal logic of efficiency but in values such as food sovereignty, the recognition of care, community bonds, and creative freedom.

These futures do not follow the logic of productive innovation but rather that of re-existence (Santos, 2019)—a mode of being that resists the colonization of the imagination and sustains life as the center of the social project. For the women of São João dos Patos, imagining the future also meant recovering memories, validating affects, and contesting the meanings of the present. In this process, design acted as a symbolic and ethical mediator, calling forth subjectivities to engage in shared creation and to re-signify established narratives.

By understanding imagination as a field for the invention of worlds and the affirmation of alternative cosmologies, we reaffirm the role of design not as a technical act but as a practice of ontological transition capable of nurturing more plural, sensitive, and contextualized public policies.

It is from this perspective that the research adopts its methodological approach: not to apply ready-made solutions but to establish processes of listening, co-creation, and symbolic reformulation based on the concrete experiences of the women participating in the *Mulheres Mil* Program in São João dos Patos, Maranhão.

The following section presents the methodology adopted in this investigation, focusing on participatory practices, critical discourse analysis, and situated and insurgent systemic design experiments.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative and exploratory approach grounded in participatory action research (Thiollent, 2009). It aligns with a pluriversal ethics, recognizing the multiplicity of ways of life and local knowledges as the foundation of design practices committed to worlds to come. The methodology articulates theory and practice within a dynamic of co-authorship, valuing the knowledge of women in situations of social vulnerability and promoting the protagonism of their voices throughout the investigative processes.

2.1 Context and territorial scope

The investigation was conducted in the municipality of São João dos Patos, Maranhão, Brazil, between 2021 and 2024, focusing on the editions of the *Mulheres Mil* Program carried out in partnership with the Federal Institute of Maranhão (IFMA). The selection of this territory was motivated by the city's trajectory in implementing policies aimed at the education of women in situations of social vulnerability, as well as by the presence of initiatives of cultural and productive resistance, such as the "Creation Laboratory" and activities developed in collaboration with the Fashion Revolution movement. While the territory bears the marks of structural inequalities, it also expresses everyday practices of care, solidarity, and collective reconstruction.

2.2 Research participants

The study involved 28 women from São João dos Patos, aged between 20 and 60, as well as educators, teachers, local managers, representatives of public institutions, and researchers

affiliated with the following research groups: the Systemic Design Research Center (NASDesign) and the Research Group on Narratives in Innovation, Design, and Anthropology (NIDA). Participant selection was intentional, prioritizing individuals with significant involvement in the program and trajectories representative of the investigated context, with a focus on their concrete experiences in the educational activities of the Mulheres Mil Program.

2.3 Listening and creative strategies

Data collection was structured through integrated strategies consistent with a systemic and relational design approach. The following instruments were employed:

1. **Open and in-depth interviews**, aimed at constructing life narratives, exploring perceptions of the program, and eliciting future projections;
2. **Participant observation**, conducted during workshops, training sessions, and institutional meetings;
3. **Document analysis**, including course plans, reports, photographic records, ordinances, and institutional materials;
4. **Dialogical and creative workshops**, such as the “Creation Laboratory” and futures workshops, which used collage, collective writing, affective cartography, and narrative embroidery as expressive and epistemological dispositifs.

These strategies were selected for their capacity to activate sensitive listening, situated imagination, and symbolic mediation within the educational processes.

2.4 Data analysis procedures

Data analysis was guided by Content Analysis (Bardin, 2011), articulated with depth hermeneutics and the premises of a systemic approach (Capra, 2010). The narratives were transcribed, coded, and organized into emergent categories, revealing tensions, potentials, and collectively constructed meanings. Data triangulation was conducted at three levels:

- Researchers: technical and theoretical analysis of the data;
- Participants: reflective feedback through dialogue circles;
- Invited experts: critical review carried out by external scholars.

2.5 Methodological Rationale

The choice of participatory action research aligns with the principles of design as a relational and situated practice, as well as with the notion of cognitive justice. This approach enabled the emergence of subalternized knowledges, the revaluation of alternative cosmologies, and the co-authorship of desirable futures grounded in the territories. By breaking with hegemonic models of research and public policy formulation, this methodology reaffirms a commitment to social transformation, care, and the creation of plural and livable worlds.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this research reveal the potential of design as a practice of listening, mediation, and co-authorship within territories, particularly in contexts where public policies present

gaps between their normative discourses and the lived realities of populations. Based on the experience with the Mulheres Mil Program in São João dos Patos, Maranhão, important tensions, forms of resistance, and symbolic reconfigurations were identified for understanding worlds to come.

3.1 Institutional Misalignments and Pluriversal Knowledges

The results indicate the presence of structural dissonances between the guidelines of the Mulheres Mil Program—grounded in productivity, innovation, and employability—and the meanings attributed to the program by the women of São João dos Patos, who perceive it as a space of affection, care, belonging, and subjective transformation. Although formulated as a policy of productive inclusion, the program assumes broader and more symbolic functions in this territory, connected to the reconfiguration of ways of life and the valorization of traditional knowledges.

A recurring statement among participants—“we learn things we didn’t know we knew”—expresses the activation of embodied and historically devalued epistemologies, such as embroidery, sewing, care practices, orality, and manual know-how. These practices, treated as “complementary” within institutional regulations, emerged in the workshops as central to the redesign of subjectivities and to the construction of alternative futures.

The image below synthesizes this process experienced during one of the creative workshops conducted by NASDesign. The women created authorial stamps with phrases such as “I am an embroiderer and my art has value” and “If it is to teach, one must listen,” printing their voices, marks, and claims onto fabric. These artifacts functioned as symbolic provotypes of resistance, listening, and authorship, breaking with the utilitarian logic of technical training and establishing a field of sensitive, pedagogical, and political expression.



Figure 1. Stamp-Making Workshop

The figure above materializes the process of symbolic re-signification that permeates the entire methodological proposal of this research. By creating authorial stamps with phrases of resistance and the valorization of everyday knowledge—such as “I am an embroiderer and my art has value”—the participating women activated design as a practice of political enunciation and meaning-making. This simple yet powerful gesture transforms the act of stamping into a pedagogical and affective dispositif in which memory, language, and authorship are intertwined.

The image therefore illustrates not merely a stage of the workshops but a moment of rupture with the technocratic logic of formal education, affirming that knowledge also emerges from

the body, orality, and touch. In this way, design becomes rooted in the territory as a relational and insurgent language—a means of giving form to what was previously silenced.

In this context, design did not operate as a formal project tool but as a relational field capable of symbolically translating the desires, absences, and potentials of the participants. As proposed by Escobar (2016) and Capra (2010), this is an ethical and systemic form of design that recognizes territories as producers of meaning and peripheral cosmologies as legitimate modes of existence and creation.

Thus, the Mulheres Mil Program in São João dos Patos demonstrates that the transformative potential of a public policy lies not only in its technical implementation but in its capacity to create space for listening, co-authorship, and the valorization of plural ways of living, knowing, and dreaming.

3.2 Embroidery, Memory, and Affects as Epistemologies

Although the Mulheres Mil Program is presented as a public policy of inclusion, its structure reveals ambivalences. By operating within a technocratic logic of indicators, targets, and results, the program tends to standardize experiences and render invisible the singularities of the territories in which it operates. This tension was described by one of the participants as “a program that helps, but does not listen to everything,” indicating the fracture between intention and lived experience.

To investigate these ambivalences, we applied the NASDesign Projectual Guide methodology, adapting its structure to local realities. The methodological proposal is organized into three phases—Feeling, Acting, and Realizing—and guides processes of listening, co-creation, and systematization based on a situated epistemology that articulates design thinking, systems thinking, and visual thinking (Capra, 2010; Escobar, 2016).

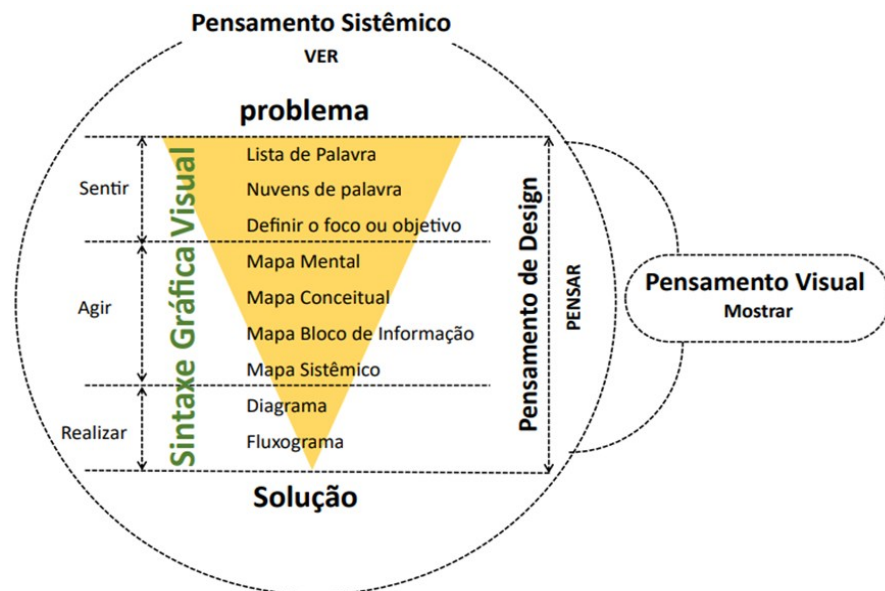


Figure 2. Projectual guide of the systemic design research center – NASDesign

In the Feeling phase, we conducted dialogue circles and applied the “Life Map” method, through which the women were able to narrate their trajectories, desires, and frustrations. We observed that the participants expressed a strong desire for recognition and autonomy, particularly through traditional practices such as embroidery and care work. However, they reported that their voices are frequently disregarded due to institutional impositions.

The Acting phase consisted of pedagogical experimentation workshops in which the participants redesigned the program's training plans, proposing new contents and formats more consistent with their ways of life. This stage demonstrated that when women become authors of their own educational processes, there is greater engagement, appropriation, and meaning.

In the Realizing phase, the emerging proposals were systematized into guidelines for the reformulation of the Mulheres Mil Program, including: (i) the introduction of continuous cycles of training and follow-up; (ii) the adoption of active methodologies such as design thinking and project-based learning; and (iii) the valorization of local productive practices as a structuring axis of educational activities.

These stages connect with what Kira (2016) calls "design as a politics of futures," insofar as the projectual act shifts from technical problem-solving to the shared creation of possible worlds. The affective cartographies produced by the participants during the workshops revealed futures grounded not in institutional promises but in community bonds, emotional well-being, and reclaimed personal time.

By observing this divergence between the "future desired by the State" and the "future envisioned by the women," an epistemological gap becomes evident between public policies designed in administrative offices and the ways of life generated at the margins. As Weber (2023) emphasizes, lasting transformations in public policies occur only when communities are recognized as agents of change. In this context, design operates as a tool of cultural translation, enabling everyday life, affects, and local knowledges to guide the invention of more just and plural practices.

3.3 Structural contradictions: when the discourse of inclusion produces exclusion

The analysis of institutional documents, teaching materials, and interviews conducted with participants of the Mulheres Mil Program revealed a structural contradiction at the core of the policy: the rhetoric of inclusion, when grounded in technical and productivist parameters, may operate as a vector of symbolic and epistemic exclusion. Terms such as "autonomy," "entrepreneurship," and "innovation" are widely promoted, yet they are often disconnected from local realities and the ways of life of the women in São João dos Patos.

This dissociation became evident in participants' statements, which highlighted difficulties in applying content such as the entrepreneurship module, sometimes perceived as irrelevant or inaccessible. As one participant reported, "I have never sold anything, but I learned to do it more carefully." This type of response reveals that the program's established criteria of success—formalization, income generation, and performance—overlook other legitimate forms of achievement, such as self-esteem, emotional security, subjective autonomy, and community belonging.

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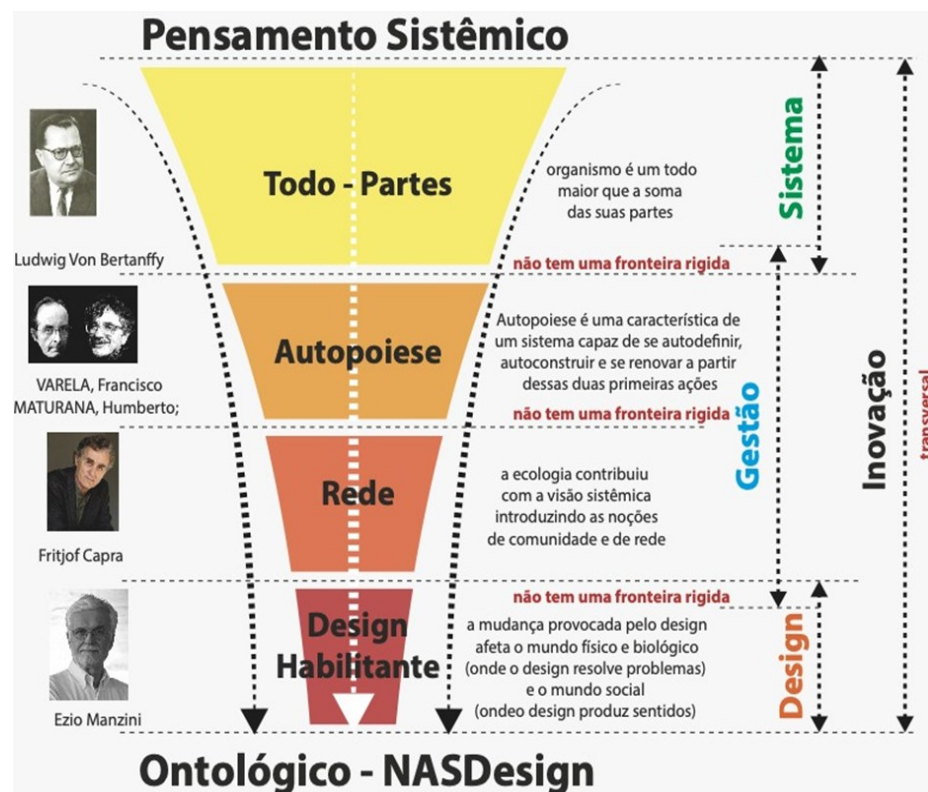


Figure 3. Systems Thinking Diagram

To understand these tensions, we drew on Systems Thinking, as illustrated in the NASDesign ontological model. The diagram below shows that public policies such as the Mulheres Mil Program operate within interdependent layers of complexity that cannot be reduced to technical solutions. The linear logic (problem → solution) must be replaced by an ecological, relational, and multiscalar approach capable of recognizing that the territory is not a neutral setting but a living system inhabited by knowledges, affective networks, and histories of resistance.

Figure 3 provides a visualization of the complexity involved in the implementation of public policies such as the Mulheres Mil Program. Far from linear processes between problem and solution, the diagram reveals the interdependence of symbolic, affective, institutional, and territorial layers—demonstrating that educational actions do not operate in isolation but are embedded within living ecosystems.

This model helps explain why the program's technical guidelines, when disconnected from local realities, tend to fail in achieving transformative outcomes. It shows that real impact occurs when design is grounded in care, listening, and an ecology of relationships, as advocated by Capra (2010) and Manzini (2008).

Thus, the diagram is not merely an explanatory resource but a key for critical interpretation: it invites the reconstruction of educational processes from the territory, recognizing it as an active subject and co-author of the policies that affect it.

Reading this model makes it possible to see that, by privileging only the technical dimension of training, the Mulheres Mil Program ignores the deeper layer of “inhabiting design” (Manzini, 2008)—the one that transforms not only the physical world but also the symbolic and social worlds. Likewise, concepts such as autopoiesis (Maturana & Varela) help us understand that communities should be viewed as systems capable of self-definition, reconstruction, and renewal based on their own dynamics—something rarely contemplated by formal guidelines.

In this sense, the shortcomings of the Mulheres Mil Program do not stem solely from its implementation but from its epistemological conception: by failing to recognize the territory as an active agent and by imposing decontextualized models, the policy tends to reproduce cycles of exclusion under the discourse of inclusion. The redesign of pedagogical practices therefore requires a systemic turn—reframing policy not as a closed project but as an ecosystem in continuous transformation, nourished by listening, dialogue, and co-creation.

3.4 Coauthorship and institutional critique

Beyond the symbolic field, design was also mobilized as a tool for institutional critique and proposition. The women systematized their suggestions in reports, posters, and presentations delivered to IFMA and to the program’s coordinators. Among the proposals were: increased time for peer listening, workshops involving children, the valorization of local cultural practices, and greater attention to emotional health.

These materials were compiled into a public exhibition attended by representatives of public policy institutions. This act of visibility represented not only an institutional advancement but also a symbolic milestone of the women’s political presence: “We had never shown our work like this. Now they saw that we know and we feel.”

In this way, design operated as a field of co-authorship and constructive critique, expanding the women’s presence in decision-making processes and contributing to the reinvention of more just, plural, and territorially grounded institutional practices.

3.5 Redesigning the Guidelines: What Do Women Want from the Mulheres Mil Program?

The participatory workshops conducted with women from São João dos Patos revealed a collective desire for structural and symbolic transformations in the Mulheres Mil Program (PMM). Rather than rejecting the program, the participants expressed the need for a redesign that takes into account their trajectories, temporalities, and cosmologies—an initiative rooted in affects, local knowledges, and the plurality of ways of life.

The critique of a rigid curriculum and the centrality of productivity gave way to the proposal of a more sensitive pedagogy that values everyday dignity, care, listening, and autonomy. Among the main elements identified as urgent were:

- More listening prior to enrollment: understanding who the participants are, what they know, and what they wish to learn;
- Curricular flexibility: incorporating traditional knowledges—such as embroidery, local culinary practices, and care—as pedagogical axes;
- Emotional support and psychological care: recognizing emotional overload and the multiple roles carried by the women;
- Networked learning: fostering lasting collective bonds, including after the completion of the courses, with continuous institutional support.

These points emerged clearly during the construction of affective maps of local knowledge, an activity in which the women used words, images, and symbols to represent their histories, desires, and what they considered essential in a “real” educational program. In these maps,

embroidery appeared not merely as a technique but as a link between generations; homemade food as shared affection; and free time as a fundamental right.

These affective maps functioned as instruments of radical listening, enabling the visualization of community desires that would hardly be captured through institutional forms. As Pérez-Bustos (2015) argues, manual and aesthetic practices—such as drawing, embroidery, and spontaneous writing—are legitimate forms of knowledge production and should be recognized as such in policy-making processes.

One participant's statement encapsulates this new horizon: "I do not want only to learn how to make money; I want to learn how to live better." What is being claimed here is not merely technical qualification but symbolic recognition and structuring care. The redesign of the PMM, therefore, cannot be merely functional; it must be ontological, ethical, and communal—aligned with the notion of "inhabiting design" (Manzini, 2008), which recognizes the territory as a living subject and co-author of solutions.

3.6 Public policies as living ecosystems: proposals for transition

Based on the systemic analysis and listening processes conducted throughout the research, we propose understanding public policies as living ecosystems—composed of multiple actors, languages, affects, and temporalities. In the context of São João dos Patos, Maranhão, the Mulheres Mil Program ceased to be merely a technical training policy and came to be experienced as a symbolic territory for the collective invention of futures.

Among the proposals emerging from the participatory workshops and design dispositifs, the following stand out:

- The creation of living laboratories for pedagogical co-creation, involving students, educators, and territorial representatives;
- The establishment of participatory protocols for curricular review, based on continuous cycles of listening;
- The recognition of manual, narrative, and aesthetic knowledges as valid practices of knowledge production;
- Articulation with local cultural initiatives, such as AMAC, to broaden the program's educational scope;
- The incorporation of design as a transversal tool, mediating processes of prototyping and the imagination of possible worlds.

A symbolic and methodological milestone of this process was the exhibition *Imagining Women for the Future*, organized as the culmination of the workshops. In this exhibition, participants were invited to engage with three stations: (1) *Women Who Inspire*, featuring portraits and narratives of local female figures; (2) *Time Capsule*, where they wrote messages to the future and placed them in symbolic bottles; and (3) *Imagining Futures*, with collaborative panels of desires, dreams, and proposals for their lives.



Figure 4. Exhibition Imagining Women for the Future.

These artifacts—collages, embroidered phrases, cartographies, and bottles containing messages—functioned as provotypes (Halse et al., 2010), that is, prototypes designed to provoke conversations, reflections, and collective decision-making. Rather than merely representing the future, they activated the possibility of dreaming, something that, according to participants' accounts, had not always been available to them.

Through content analysis of the bottles and panels (Bardin, 2011), themes emerged such as “having my own studio,” “working with what I love,” “being respected as a woman,” and “learning at my own pace.” These statements indicate that the program's greatest value did not lie in productive outcomes but in the construction of bonds, the experience of care, well-being, and the strengthening of self-esteem.

As one participant expressed when speaking about her mother: “She was never famous, but at home she made all the difference. She taught me to embroider, to work ethically, and to dream of a better future.” This relational and affective dimension is therefore central to the redesign of the PMM. As Escobar (2016) argues, imagining other worlds is part of the struggle for cognitive and political justice. By co-designing these possibilities with the women, we position ourselves within design as a practice of transition, capable of displacing established patterns and fostering ecologies of care, belonging, and dignity.

The metaphor of the living ecosystem, therefore, is not merely conceptual. It expresses the desire for a public policy that breathes with the territory, that recognizes diversity as strength and imagination as a tool for transformation. At the end of the exhibition, what remained was not only the desire for the course to continue—but the desire to exist fully.

4. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The experience with the Mulheres Mil Program in São João dos Patos, Maranhão, reaffirms the potential of systemic, relational, and participatory design as a tool for critical mediation between public policies and territories in situations of vulnerability. Rather than imposing technical solutions, design here operated as a language of listening, co-authorship, and provocation—opening pathways for the situated construction of possible futures.

The workshops, affective cartographies, stamps, life maps, and especially the exhibition Imagining Women for the Future revealed that the women of São João dos Patos seek not merely insertion into the labor market but a redesign of the possibilities of existence: with

time, recognition, bonds, and dignity. The expressed desires do not fit within institutional spreadsheets—they embroider ontologies, relationships, and worlds to come.

This article demonstrated that the contradictions of the PMM stem not only from its implementation but from its epistemological model. By disregarding local knowledges as legitimate forms of knowledge, public policies tend to reproduce exclusionary logics under the guise of inclusion. Conversely, by positioning the territory as an epistemic subject and design as an ethical and insurgent practice, it becomes possible to re-enchant the meanings of education, citizenship, and transformation.

Throughout this process, we recognize that there is no neutral design: every design practice carries ethical, political, and ontological implications. When aligned with cognitive justice (Escobar, 2016), design operates as a tool of transition—shifting the focus from control to care, from performance to belonging, and from productivity to *buen vivir*.

We therefore conclude that truly transformative public policies are those capable of flourishing through listening, respecting the complexity of social ecosystems, and recognizing rooted knowledges as guides for institutional redesign. It is not a matter of adapting territories to policies, but of adapting policies to the worlds that already exist—and that resist.

By connecting the Mulheres Mil Program to the principles of political and systemic design, and to the aesthetic power of women's voices from the Brazilian sertão, we reaffirm that worlds to come are not distant fictions—they are already germinating in the hands, words, and practices of those who resist. May design, then, become a practice of care for emerging worlds.

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