

Cities of Agribusiness: Market-Driven Expansion and Socio-spatial Reconfiguration

Cidades do Agronegócio: Expansão Mercantilizada e Reconfigurações Socioespaciais

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Abstract

The coordinated action of public, private, and landholding agents, linked to the expansion of agribusiness in Brazil, has driven profound transformations in medium-sized cities located in regions of agro-industrial specialisation. In this context, this article analyses recent urban expansion in the municipalities of Ijuí, Santa Rosa, and Santo Ângelo, in the state of Rio Grande do Sul. The study adopts a qualitative, descriptive–explanatory approach, based on documentary analysis of legislation and master plans, examination of secondary data on demography, economy, and land use, and sixteen semi-structured interviews with representatives of the state, the real estate sector, and civil society. The results, interpreted from a critical socio-spatial perspective, indicate that agribusiness-led economic dynamism shapes the strategies of public and private actors in converting rural land into urbanisable areas, thereby intensifying selective expansion of the urban perimeter and promoting medium- and high-standard developments associated with land valorisation. This articulation reinforces the capture of urban planning by economic interests and contributes to the production of selective and unequal urbanisation in the medium-sized cities examined.

Keywords:

Regional studies, Urban planning, Urban studies, Agriculture.

Resumo

A atuação articulada de agentes públicos, privados e fundiários, em conexão com o avanço do agronegócio no Brasil, tem desencadeado profundas transformações nas cidades médias inseridas em regiões de especialização agroindustrial. Nesse contexto, o artigo tem por objetivo analisar a expansão urbana recente nos municípios de Ijuí, Santa Rosa e Santo Ângelo, no Rio Grande do Sul. Para isso, adota-se uma abordagem qualitativa e descritivo-explicativa, baseada em análise documental de legislações e planos diretores, levantamento de dados secundários sobre demografia, economia e uso da terra, e 16 entrevistas semiestruturadas com representantes do Estado, do mercado imobiliário e da sociedade civil. Os resultados, examinados sob uma perspectiva socioespacial crítica, mostram que o dinamismo econômico do agronegócio direciona estratégias de

agentes públicos e privados na conversão de áreas rurais em zonas urbanizáveis, intensificando a expansão seletiva do perímetro urbano e estimulando empreendimentos de médio e alto padrão associados à valorização fundiária. Conclui-se que essa articulação reforça a captura do planejamento urbano por interesses econômicos, contribuindo para a produção de uma urbanização seletiva e desigual nas cidades médias analisadas.

Palavras-chave:

Estudos regionais, Planejamento urbano, Estudos urbanos, Agricultura.

I. INTRODUCTION

Urban space is socially produced through the intervention of multiple agents, including real estate developers, landowners, investors, the State, and sectors of civil society, whose actions are shaped by frequently conflicting interests (Carlos, 2024; Corrêa, 1986, 2022; Lefebvre, 2011). From a critical relational perspective, urban space can also be understood through historical processes of inequality that structure access to land, housing, and urban centrality. In this sense, State action manifests through selective governance and exclusion, while also constituting a terrain of everyday insurgencies, in which marginalised groups construct forms of permanence, occupation, and rights-claiming (Roy, 2023).

Urban inequalities, therefore, emerge from the dynamic interaction among governance structures, communities, and individuals across space and time (Nelson et al., 2023). These inequalities materialise in processes of fragmentation, particularly through the spatial division of the urban fabric by walled and gated communities (Ntcana et al., 2023). Within this framework, elites play a systemic role by capturing municipal institutions, such as zoning regulations and building codes, thereby reproducing geographies of privilege (Lauerman, 2024).

At the international scale, these urbanisation dynamics constitute one of the defining trends of the twenty-first century. While they stimulate economic growth, they also intensify competition for essential resources, including land and labour (Dong; Schaefer, 2025; Jiang et al., 2022; Lee et al., 2023). Urban expansion, particularly in the Global South, is closely associated with rising socio-economic vulnerability in surrounding areas, disproportionately affecting populations with insecure or fragile land tenure. This form of urban growth, sustained by the extraction of resources and capital from hinterland regions, reinforces competitive dynamics that are central to the restructuring of global food systems (Santi, 2025).

In contexts of accelerated growth, urban expansion drives the conversion of agricultural land into built-up areas (Santi, 2025) and may even operate as a mechanism of agricultural industrialisation. In the United Kingdom, for example, urban pressure has compelled smaller farms to downsize or exit the sector, while larger

and more efficient enterprises have expanded (Santi, 2025). In Brazil, despite institutional advances in urban planning legislation—such as the City Statute (Brazil, 2001) and the urban policy chapter of the 1988 Federal Constitution, which establish the social function of property as a core principle—implementation remains constrained by the power of the real estate market and by omission or complicity on the part of public authorities (Maricato, 2011; 2015). Public interventions in the urban fabric, including infrastructure investments and regulatory changes, frequently generate land appreciation that is appropriated by developers and real estate interests (Nobre, 2023; Barcelá, 2024).

This disjunction between normative frameworks and urban practice underscores the need to examine the processes that govern the appropriation and transformation of urban space across scales, to expose contradictions within urban planning and their implications for spatial justice (Godoy et al., 2025; Ferrara et al., 2019).

Although these municipalities periodically revise their urban planning instruments and maintain municipal councils, changes in land-use zoning and infrastructure investment have promoted selective land valorisation, benefiting specific social and economic groups at the expense of collective interests. Real estate speculation, intensified by expectations of urban growth, restricts access to housing for lower-income groups and deepens socio-spatial inequalities (Follmann, 2022; Granero de Melo et al., 2020; Ioris, 2018).

These territories, historically associated with rural dynamics, are thus undergoing complex processes of urban restructuring, driven by economic flows, demographic reconfigurations, and land valorisation strategies that place increasing pressure on the production of urban space (Duarte Cardoso et al., 2024; Ribeiro; Ferreira de Lima, 2025). The spread of medium, and high-end real estate developments across medium-sized cities in strategically significant agribusiness regions signals a new phase of market-driven urbanization (Ribeiro; Ferreira de Lima, 2025; Peres et al., 2025).

Within this context, our study examines the production of urban space in medium-sized cities in north-western Rio Grande do Sul through a case study of the municipalities of Ijuí, Santa Rosa, and Santo Ângelo (RS). With populations of fewer than 100,000 inhabitants each (IBGE, 2022), these cities perform a role of regional centrality, articulating economic and social flows among small towns, rural areas, and the metropolitan region of Porto Alegre (Silveira, 2018).

On this basis, the article is organised as follows: it first outlines the methodological procedures and empirical locus; it then analyses the agents, strategies, and conflicts involved in the production of urban space;

and, finally, it examines the processes and dynamics of space production in medium-sized cities embedded in agribusiness-driven dynamics.

II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative approach, descriptive and explanatory in nature, and is structured as a comparative case study of the municipalities of Ijuí, Santa Rosa, and Santo Ângelo (RS), with analytical emphasis on the period from 2020 to 2023 (Gil, 2023).

The legal–urban framework operating in the three municipalities was examined, considering both federal regulations and local legislation governing territorial management. At the federal level, analysis focused on the 1988 Federal Constitution, particularly Article 182, and on the City Statute (Law No. 10,257/2001), which establishes general guidelines for urban policy. In Ijuí, documentary analysis included Complementary Law No. 6,929/2020, regulating the Municipal Council of the Master Plan; Complementary Law No. 7,053/2021, which reclassifies strategic urban zones; and Decree No. 6,668/2019, concerning approval of the Alameda das Flores subdivision. In Santa Rosa, Complementary Law No. 118/2017, which establishes the Municipal Council for Sustainable Development, and the 2020 Master Plan were analysed, with particular attention to Article 90, which designates 67.84 km² as areas for urban expansion. In Santo Ângelo, Law No. 4,374/2020, which regularises 133.5163 hectares in Linha Picadinha for implementation of the Residencial Rancho development, was incorporated into the analysis, along with the act establishing the Municipal Council for Archaeological, Historical, and Cultural Heritage (COMPATC, 2009).

In addition, sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of the State, the real estate sector, and civil society (Guazi, 2021). As the research involved human participants, the project was submitted to the Research Ethics Committee and approved under Opinion No. 5,468,369 of 14 June 2022 (CAAE 58559822.6.0000.5350).

Data analysis was guided by a critical socio-spatial perspective, drawing on the frameworks proposed by Corrêa (1986; 2022), Maricato (2011), and Santos (2000). This approach enabled examination of how agents, strategies, and economic interests interact in producing unequal urban space and in shaping processes of segregation and territorial valorisation.

Ijuí, Santa Rosa, and Santo Ângelo are in the region known as the Northwest Colonial area of Rio Grande do Sul and play a significant demographic role within the regional context. Together, these municipalities account for 31.4% of the population of the Intermediate Geographic Region of Ijuí (RGI), which comprises 77

municipalities and a total population of 760,825 inhabitants (IBGE, 2022). Figure 1 illustrates the territorial configuration of the RGI and its immediate regions, highlighting the strategic position of these urban centres.

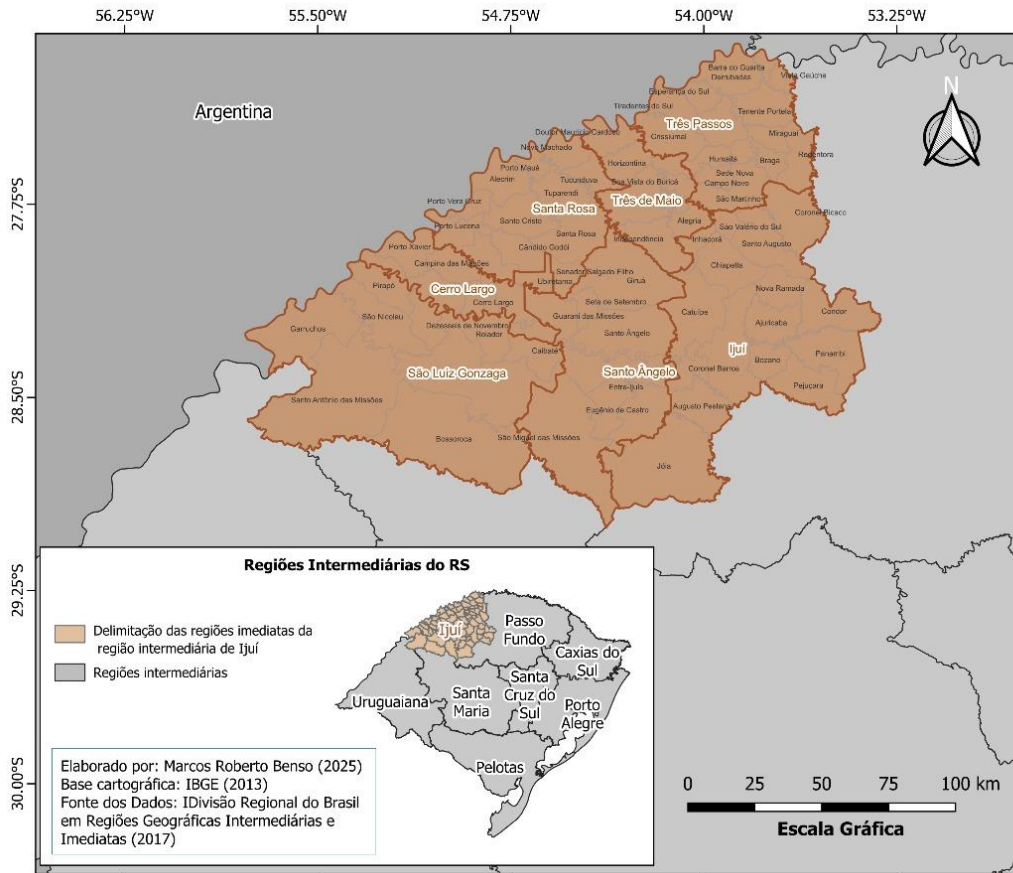


Figure 1 – Map of the Intermediate Geographic Region of Ijuí and its Immediate Regions (Benso, 2025).

Land-use data from the Agricultural Census (IBGE, 2017) indicate that Ijuí has a total area of 68,898 hectares, of which 53,956 hectares (78%) are allocated to rural activities across 1,626 establishments. In Santa Rosa, agricultural land accounts for 62% (30,389 hectares) of the municipal territory, which totals 48,940 hectares, while Santo Ângelo records 70% (47,359 hectares) of its 67,930 hectares under agricultural use. Moreover, nearly all agricultural establishments in these municipalities report formalised labour relations, underscoring the socio-economic centrality of local agriculture.

Nevertheless, the Agricultural Census does not disaggregate land-use categories within the total area indicator, failing to distinguish productive surfaces from areas designated for environmental protection. This aggregated category encompasses land effectively used for crop and livestock production, remnants of native vegetation, Permanent Preservation Areas, legal reserves, unproductive land, water bodies within property boundaries, and support infrastructure such as headquarters, internal roads, and rural buildings.

These indicators reflect an agrarian structure primarily sustained by agricultural production and the predominance of small- and medium-sized producers. In this context, it is noteworthy that, in 2022, Santa Rosa was officially recognised as the national cradle of soybean production under Federal Law No. 14,349, with soybean cultivation constituting a central driver of industrial, service, and primary-sector value chains (SEBRAE, 2022).

Within the agricultural sector, Ijuí stands out for soybean grain production, with an estimated value exceeding R\$125 million, consolidating its position as a significant node in high value-added commodity chains. According to the Agricultural Census (IBGE, 2017), the municipality also leads the state ranking in the number of rural establishments. In Santa Rosa and Santo Ângelo, wheat grain represents the agricultural product of greatest economic value, suggesting a productive structure less oriented towards exports and, potentially, lower profitability. Conversely, pig farming is particularly prominent in Santa Rosa and Santo Ângelo, while Ijuí stands out in egg and poultry meat production. Collectively, these municipalities play a strategic role in the regional supply of animal protein for human consumption (IBGE, 2017).

Within the socio-economic dynamics of agribusiness, demographic trends indicate population decline in smaller municipalities alongside increasing demographic concentration in Ijuí, Santa Rosa, and Santo Ângelo. This pattern favours urban expansion initiatives driven by interests in converting rural land into urban zones, thereby promoting land appreciation through the requalification of land uses (Lima; Silveira, 2018).

In agribusiness-oriented regions, urban dynamics are strongly shaped by crop cycles, during which economic activity generates intensified investment flows towards cities with greater growth potential (Bezerra; Elias, 2011; Andrade; Raihner, 2023).

To capture the perceptions, values, and strategies of concrete agents in relation to contemporary urban conflicts, sixteen semi-structured interviews were conducted with actors directly involved in processes of urban planning and transformation. Interviewees were selected according to the typology proposed by Corrêa (1986).

The agents represented include the State, responsible for public policy formulation, infrastructure investment, and land-use regulation; landowners, who control land and seek to enhance its value through urbanisation; real estate developers, who commodify urban land; actors from the industrial and commercial sectors, whose interests centre on strategic locational advantages; and socially excluded groups, who, under conditions of vulnerability, produce their own forms of occupation and resistance (Lui; Cymbalista, 2022; Winckler, 2021; Miranda Neto, 2022).

Table 1 presents the profiles of the interviewees, organised according to institutional affiliation and their role in the production of urban space. The sample comprises representatives of the State, the real estate sector, and civil society, as well as technical professionals, totalling sixteen interviews.

Table 1 – Characterization of Interviewees and Identification Codes

	Represented Sector	Code
01	Governmental	Ijuí_Governmental
02	Governmental	SR_Governmental
03	Governmental	SA_Governmental
04	Real Estate Agent	Ijuí_Real Estate Agent
05	Real Estate Agent	SR_Real Estate Agent
06	Real Estate Agent	SA_Real Estate Agent
07	Citizens	Ijuí_Civil Society
08	Citizens	Ijuí_Civil Society 2
09	Citizens	Ijuí_Civil Society 3
10	Citizens	SA_Civil Society
11	Citizens	SA_Civil Society 2
12	Citizens	SR_Civil Society
13	Citizens	SR_Civil Society 2
14	Architecture and Planning	Ijuí_Architect
15	Architecture and Planning	SA_Architect
16	Architecture and Planning	SR_Architect

Source: Research Data

Mapping agents and strategies, as argued by Maricato (2011), is fundamental to understanding mechanisms underlying unequal space production (Amorin et al., 2025). Accordingly, this study details the profiles of the agents involved, their practices, and the conflicts that emerge, to examine how diverse and often competing interests shape urban transformations and socio-spatial inequalities in the region.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Concrete Social Agents and the Production of Urban Space through Municipal Councils

To understand how urban space is produced in medium-sized cities in north-western Rio Grande do Sul, it is necessary to examine the municipal councils linked to Master Plans, with attention to their internal organisation, decision-making procedures, and the composition of their members and represented entities. These elements make it possible to identify the actions of social agents involved in the formalisation of urban planning and, as discussed in the subsequent analytical section, to understand how council deliberations are translated into concrete urban transformations.

Furthermore, these transformations are shaped by broader regional economic dynamics, particularly agribusiness, whose capacity to generate financial surpluses directly influences processes of land valorisation and urban expansion in the municipalities examined.

In Ijuí, Santa Rosa, and Santo Ângelo, these councils are legally empowered to issue opinions, propose amendments, and monitor implementation of urban planning instruments. Demands originate predominantly from the Executive Branch, especially planning-related secretariats, although proposals may also be submitted by the Legislative Branch and organised civil society.

Across the three municipalities, the bodies responsible for participatory management of the Master Plan combine advisory and deliberative functions. In Ijuí, this role is performed by the Municipal Council of the Master Plan (Conpladip); in Santa Rosa, by the Municipal Council for Sustainable Development (CMDS); and in Santo Ângelo, by the Municipal Council of the City (Comcidade). These councils are responsible for analysing proposals, recommending changes, and overseeing implementation of local urban planning instruments (Ijuí, 2020; Santa Rosa, 2017; Santo Ângelo, 2011).

Despite variations in composition and regulatory frameworks, these councils operate according to a broadly similar procedural logic. Proposals are typically initiated by the Executive Branch, particularly by secretariats responsible for urban planning, which submit regulatory review initiatives and formal requests for opinions. Although the municipal legislature and organised civil society may also introduce proposals, effective inclusion of such matters in the deliberative agenda generally depends on procedural requirements and, frequently, on a prior position taken by the council itself. This condition shapes the institutional processing of urban planning decisions and assigns specific meanings to participatory mechanisms (Ijuí, 2020; Santa Rosa, 2017; Santo Ângelo, 2011).

Once placed on the agenda, proposals are discussed in ordinary or extraordinary meetings governed by internal regulations that define procedures for convocation, quorum, and voting. During these meetings, councils issue technical and political–institutional opinions which, although formally deliberative, tend in practice to function as inputs for final decisions taken by the Executive Branch or the City Council. Consequently, the effectiveness of council deliberations depends less on their formal legal status than on political–institutional articulation among local government, the legislature, and economic actors with greater capacity to influence the production of urban space (Ijuí, 2020; Santa Rosa, 2017; Santo Ângelo, 2011).

In Ijuí, Conpladip is regulated by Complementary Law No. 6,929 of 21 January 2020, representing the most recent update to the local urban planning regulatory framework. Meetings are held monthly in premises

provided by the municipal Executive Branch. The council's composition includes representatives from multiple segments of local society: three members of the Executive Branch appointed by the mayor; one representative from the Regional University of the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul (UNIJUÍ); two representatives from the professional fields of engineering and architecture; one representative of neighbourhood associations; one representative of the commercial and industrial business sector; one representative linked to environmental organisations and social movements; and one representative from the real estate sector.

In Santa Rosa, the Municipal Council for Sustainable Development (CMDS), established by Complementary Law No. 118 of 28 August 2017, meets periodically to assess proposals for amendments to urban policy guidelines. Its composition is divided between representatives of the Municipal Public Authority—appointed from the areas of Planning, Social Development, Environment, Housing, Public Works, and Agriculture—and representatives of civil society. Participation includes two members from business associations, with at least one seat reserved for the real estate or construction sector, two representatives from trade unions, and two members from technical, educational, or research institutions.

In contrast to the institutional arrangements observed in Ijuí and Santa Rosa, Comcidade, in Santo Ângelo, has a permanent meeting space provided by the Public Authority for joint sessions of municipal councils. Responsible for debating urban policies, the council is composed of governmental bodies, including the Mayor's Office, municipal secretariats, and the Urban Mobility Coordination, as well as non-governmental entities such as thematic councils, professional associations, and the local subsection of the Brazilian Bar Association (OAB) (Ijuí, 2020; Santa Rosa, 2017; Santo Ângelo, 2011).

Analysis of the discourses articulated within municipal urban planning councils makes it possible to identify both the plurality of actors involved and the power asymmetries that shape their capacity to influence urban policy trajectories. The accounts examined demonstrate how these bodies, although conceived as arenas of democratic management, reveal tensions, disputes, and structural constraints that condition the effectiveness of social participation. In this sense, they reaffirm earlier observations that action within such councils is marked by unequal political incidence among participating actors (Milani, 2008; Masqueta; Furtado, 2024; Nascimento, 2023).

In Ijuí, the Ijuí Association for the Protection of the Natural Environment (AIPAN), founded in 1974, plays a central role in defending the environmental agenda by advocating preservation zoning and contesting environmentally predatory urban expansion projects. Recent studies highlight the impacts of urbanisation on natural environments, including vegetation loss and expansion of built-up areas, as well as the limited

effectiveness of existing management instruments in containing these processes (Araújo Jr; Tavares Jr, 2018; Bertini, 2024). Considering these limitations, non-governmental organisations and environmental activists assume a fundamental role in promoting more sustainable forms of urban development (Ferreira, 2022; Oliveira et al., 2025; Lacerda; Teles, 2024). Alongside these actors, the Regional University of the Northwest of Rio Grande do Sul (UNIJUI), maintained by the Foundation for Integration, Development, and Education (Fidene) since 1969, has historically contributed through technical training and community advisory initiatives, particularly via faculty and student engagement in urban diagnostics and housing policy actions (Júnior, 2021).

Despite the plural composition formally prescribed in normative frameworks, the internal dynamics of Conpladip tend to reproduce asymmetries in participation among the different represented segments. Long-established business organisations in the municipality, such as the Association of Real Estate Companies, founded in 1988, and the Commercial and Industrial Association, active since the early twentieth century, possess consolidated institutional trajectories and organisational capacity. This positioning facilitates their sustained and influential participation in urban planning debates. By contrast, the Union of Neighbourhood Associations, established in 1974, faces structural constraints typical of community-based organisations, frequently affected by processes of co-optation and institutional dependence that limit its autonomy and capacity to shape deliberations. These uneven capacities and political positions contribute to the configuration of an unequal deliberative arena.

The materiality of the discourses further reinforces this pattern of asymmetry, revealing how such inequalities are reproduced within council decision-making processes. Testimonies from community organisations consistently point to perceptions of differentiated treatment between popular demands and proposals originating from economic actors. One community representative (Ijuí_Civil Society) stated that initiatives “that come from the bottom up” tend to receive less attention, while agendas associated with investors advance more rapidly, reflecting a structural tendency favouring “those who can invest more.” This perception is echoed by another civil society interviewee (Ijuí_Civil Society 2), who encapsulates the disparity through the metaphor “for some, coffee breaks; for others, corridors,” suggesting that economic primacy is expressed even through the exclusion of community groups from strategic arenas of debate.

Market-based interviewees emphasise the organisational power of the real estate sector (SA_Real Estate Agent). These actors observe that urban planning rules “change according to what the market has to offer,” pointing to the pressure exerted by business interests. By contrast, community leaders from different municipalities (Ijuí_Civil Society 3; SA_Civil Society 2) report processes of exhaustion, loss of internal credibility,

and a persistent sense of occupying merely “extra” positions within deliberative spaces. Their participation is frequently dependent on external partnerships to achieve any tangible impact. Taken together, these testimonies demonstrate that political power and capacity for influence remain unevenly distributed, empirically confirming the asymmetries identified in the preceding analysis.

The predominance of the Executive Branch in council management further reveals a pattern of framing and constraining community participation, limiting autonomy and reinforcing centralising dynamics. Across different municipal contexts, social representatives report that meeting schedules and agendas are defined in advance by the Executive Branch, thereby restricting the effective action of council members and community leaders.

One interviewee (Ijuí_Civil Society) states that, in Conpladip meetings, decisions are mobilised only “when they need to approve something urgent for them,” suggesting selective activation of the council. A governmental representative from Santa Rosa (SR_Governmental) acknowledges that, although technical analyses are conducted, the council “only legitimises what is proposed.” Similarly, another civil society interviewee (SR_Civil Society 2) describes public hearings in which the population is merely informed, since “the Executive Branch already brings what it wants ready-made.”

These accounts converge on the perception that community representatives are incorporated into pre-structured decision-making circuits, configuring mechanisms of institutionalised co-optation (Froener; Lima, 2024; Lima et al., 2023). Meanwhile, urban expansion continues to be driven by economic interests and pressure from the real estate market, often overriding social demands. As one interviewee notes (Ijuí_Civil Society), “the master plan has been greatly altered due to economic demands,” while a real estate actor from Santo Ângelo (SA_Real Estate Agent) reiterates that planning rules vary “according to what the market has to offer.” This articulation between economic elites and public authorities suggests that key decisions are frequently taken “outside official channels,” as reported by the same interviewee, who recalls participation in meetings where “the decision has already been made” prior to the formal deliberative process.

Urban Expansion in Ijuí, Santa Rosa, and Santo Ângelo (2020–2023)

Within this context, councils and public hearings function largely as mechanisms of formal validation rather than as effective deliberative arenas. Testimonies from civil society representatives reinforce this interpretation, pointing to the limited capacity of social actors to influence decision-making. In Santa Rosa, interviewee SR_Civil Society 2 notes that the Executive Branch “listens to people, but does not implement any changes,” revealing a disconnection between public consultation and the incorporation of social demands. In

Ijuí, interviewee Ijuí_Civil Society 3 characterises community participation as that of an “extra,” underscoring the marginalisation of popular contributions. Taken together, these accounts suggest that, across the three municipalities, institutionalised participation operates primarily as a stage for ratifying decisions already shaped within political–administrative and economic spheres, while restricting the substantive inclusion of proposals originating from civil society.

This decision-making logic materialises in a series of urban transformations that derive directly from council deliberations and are subsequently formalised through legislative instruments. Between 2020 and 2023, these processes resulted in significant changes to zoning regulations, the configuration of urban zones, and the definition of new expansion vectors, reshaping the territorial organisation of Ijuí, Santa Rosa, and Santo Ângelo. Table 2 synthesises these changes, illustrating how decisions taken within political–administrative arenas are translated into laws, decrees, and regulatory adjustments that reorient land use and redefine areas of urban growth.

Table 2 – Overview of Municipal Transformations (2020–2023)

Ano	Ijuí	Santo Ângelo	Santa Rosa
2020	Reclassification of areas from ZR2 to ZR1 reduced permitted uses and raised residential standards, increasing land values near the Costa do Sol subdivision. Adjustments to the urban perimeter south of BR-285 expanded the formal urban area, while consolidation of ZU2 and ZU3 zones, supported by technical studies, established new vectors of urban expansion.	Conversion of an Urban Expansion Area into an Industrial Area (Linha Picadinha) stimulated productive occupation in a peripheral zone with access to RS-344. Reclassification of a residential area as an Inducing Axis Area redirected tertiary and secondary activities and promoted densification around new developments, extending the urban boundary into previously sparsely populated areas.	Large-scale amendments introduced by the Master Plan (LC 148/2020), including redefinition of the Urban Zone and creation of new boundaries, such as Vila Cascata, restructured the urban framework. Revision of the urban road system, coupled with investments of R\$20 million in the paving of 32 streets, expanded infrastructure provision and consolidated new urbanisable areas, favouring continued expansion into peripheral residential zones.
2021	The ZU2 zone located between RS-342, Rua do Comércio, and Arroio Espinho was reclassified as ZR1, incorporating a recently expanded area into the consolidated urban fabric. Formal expansion of the urban perimeter (LC 7.125/2021) was accompanied by major public investments, including Parque da Pedreira (PAC2), new subdivisions such as Alameda das Flores, and paving projects financed by Caixa, accelerating continuous urbanisation towards UNIJUÍ.	—	—
2022	—	A Permanent Preservation Area adjacent to URI was reclassified as a Transition Area, signalling potential future urban use. Although environmentally sensitive, these areas possess infrastructure and transport access, enabling controlled expansion and favouring medium- and high-end condominiums and subdivisions, such as the Reserva das Missões development.	—

Ano	Ijuí	Santo Ângelo	Santa Rosa
2023	Additional reclassifications, including conversions from ZU3 to ZC3 and from ZU2 to ZR2, increased land-use flexibility and established new axes of urban occupation, creating commercial and residential fronts in peripheral zones.	—	LC 190/2023 introduced further amendments to the Master Plan, consolidating expansion guidelines and adjusting zoning regulations in response to recent real estate dynamics and road infrastructure investments.

Sources: Ijuí. Complementary Law No. 7,125 of 2021. Amends the urban perimeter of the Municipality of Ijuí. Ijuí: Municipal Government, 2021; Ijuí. Municipal Master Plan. Ijuí: Municipal Government, 2023; Ijuí. Complementary Zoning Laws (2020–2023). Ijuí: Municipal Government, 2023; Santo Ângelo. Urban Development Master Plan. Santo Ângelo: Municipal Government, 2023; Santo Ângelo. Land Use and Occupation Legislation Relating to Industrial, Inducing Axis, and Transition Areas. Santo Ângelo: Municipal Government, 2023; Santa Rosa. Complementary Law No. 148 of 2020. Establishes the Master Plan of the Municipality of Santa Rosa. Santa Rosa: Municipal Government, 2020; Santa Rosa. Complementary Law No. 190 of 2023. Updates zoning and urban expansion provisions. Santa Rosa: Municipal Government, 2023; Santa Rosa. Road System: Official documents of the Municipal Government. Santa Rosa: Municipal Government, 2023.

These urban changes reveal the direct influence of rural dynamics on the production of urban space. Across the three municipalities, areas affected by regulatory changes are predominantly located in peri-urban zones, where urban and rural uses overlap and pressures for new land uses are most pronounced. This process is closely linked to the regional economic structure, which is strongly sustained by agribusiness.

According to agents in the real estate sector, a substantial share of the capital circulating in urban expansion derives from surpluses generated by agricultural production. One interviewee from Santa Rosa (SA_Real Estate Agent) notes that “those who buy land on the edge of the city today are, to a large extent, producers who had a good harvest and want to diversify their investment.” Similarly, a participant from Ijuí (Ijuí_Real Estate Agent) states that “money from the countryside has become the engine of the local real estate market; when soybeans are doing well, lot sales skyrocket.” In Santo Ângelo, a real estate agent (Santo Ângelo_Real Estate Agent) reinforces this perception by observing that “these peri-urban areas are seen as a store of value by those who already have consolidated income in agribusiness.” Taken together, these testimonies indicate that urban land is converted into a financial asset. Such dynamic drives artificial land appreciation and real estate speculation at the urban fringe, directly linking council decisions to accumulation logics rooted in rural production.

Recent transformations in Ijuí, Santo Ângelo, and Santa Rosa reveal patterns of urban space production that, despite local specificities, converge around expansion, land valorisation, and reconfiguration of zoning structures. In Ijuí, a strategy of selective territorial qualification is evident, marked by higher residential standards and reorganisation of urban zones, combined with expansion of the urban perimeter. These measures, together with infrastructure investments and new housing developments, channel growth towards areas near BR-285, Arroio Espinho, and the UNIJUÍ campus, reinforcing urbanisation vectors shaped by accessibility and locational advantages (Cox, 2017).

In Santo Ângelo, urban restructuring is organised around economic induction, materialised through creation of Industrial Areas, Inducing Axes, and reclassification of environmentally sensitive zones into transition areas. These changes open new opportunities for real estate development in territories with high market potential. Expansion towards RS-344 and Linha Picadinha, accompanied by high-end condominium projects, exemplifies a selective model of peripheral growth that intensifies socio-spatial differentiation.

In Santa Rosa, revisions to the Master Plan and extensive interventions in the road system have expanded urban growth capacity and adjusted land-use regulations to accommodate new development fronts, particularly in peripheral neighbourhoods receiving increased infrastructure provision. Substantial public investment in paving functions not only as a functional improvement but also as a mechanism of land valorisation, consolidating new axes of growth. Across the three municipalities, zoning changes and urban investments thus articulate public and private interests, reshaping expansion patterns, redistributing urban activities, and reconfiguring internal socio-spatial hierarchies.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

The interaction among public, private, and landowning agents, driven by the economic dynamism of agribusiness in Brazil, constitutes the primary force shaping profound transformations in the medium-sized cities of Ijuí, Santa Rosa, and Santo Ângelo, in Rio Grande do Sul. Agribusiness-led growth directs the strategies of these actors towards conversion of rural land into urbanisable zones, intensifying selective expansion of the urban perimeter.

This process is reinforced by the predominance of economic interests over the social right to the city, resulting in capture of urban planning and production of a markedly selective and unequal urbanisation. Although municipal councils formally combine advisory and deliberative functions, they often operate as mechanisms of validation for decisions already structured, limiting substantive incorporation of proposals originating from civil society. This asymmetry is reflected in the widespread perception among community representatives that investor-led agendas advance more rapidly, while popular demands receive limited consideration.

The material expression of this capture is evident in application of agribusiness capital within local real estate markets, which actively guides urban expansion. Real estate actors confirm that financial surpluses accumulated through agricultural production, particularly soybean harvests, function as a key driver of the local real estate market, as producers seek to diversify investments and treat urban land as a store of value.

This dynamic stimulates artificial land appreciation and fuels real estate speculation, concentrating urban transformations in peri-urban areas. Socio-spatial reconfigurations emerge through selective territorial qualification strategies in Ijuí, economic induction mechanisms (Inducing Axes) in Santo Ângelo, and extensive road infrastructure interventions in Santa Rosa. Across the three municipalities, regulatory changes and public investments in infrastructure articulate public and private interests, consolidating a model of selective peripheral growth centred on medium- and high-end developments, thereby deepening socio-spatial differentiation and inequality.

Finally, this study contributes to geographical studies by demonstrating that articulation among public authorities, private capital, and landowning agents, underpinned by agribusiness dynamism, constitutes a structural process of urban planning capture that decisively shapes production of space in medium-sized cities.

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