

IRSA - CONGRESSO MUNDIAL DE SOCIOLOGIA RURAL (01/10/2025 A 20/01/2026) - IRSA 20 - CAPITALIST FORESTRY, RURAL LABOR, AND LAND INJUSTICES: TOWARDS A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ROLE OF FORESTS AND TREE PLANTATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY LAND QUESTIONS, AGRARIAN QUESTIONS AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

FROM SHOCK TO GOVERNANCE: PATHWAYS OUT OF INFORMALITY IN BRAZIL'S WINE SECTOR AFTER THE BENTO GONÇALVES SCANDAL

Davide Carbonai (davide.carbonai@gmail.com)

The 2023 rescue of more than 200 Bahian workers from slave-like conditions in Bento Gonçalves,

Rio Grande do Sul, exposed the depth of labour informality in Brazil's wine-producing Serra

region. More than an isolated scandal, it revealed the structural mechanisms that sustain

informality: outsourced recruitment chains, fragmented and municipalized collective bargaining,

weak unions, and a political culture that tolerates precariousness and racialized migration.

This paper examines how that crisis, crystallized in the “Fênix” outsourcing case, became a turning

point in the governance of seasonal labour. Drawing on inspection reports, collective agreements,

official statistics, and over twenty interviews with inspectors, union leaders, employers, and rescued

workers (2022–2024), it traces the evolution from chronic institutional voids to the emergence of

coordinated mechanisms such as the “In Vino Veritas” operation and the tripartite Grape Pact.

These initiatives signaled the first attempts to rebuild formal labour regulation and collective

bargaining in a sector historically governed by informality.

Three analytical contributions emerge. First, the paper conceptualizes structured informality as an

institutional condition that normalizes exploitation and erodes social protection. Second, it

interprets the 2023 crisis as a “policy window” that temporarily aligned public authorities,

employers, and unions, allowing the creation of new compliance and monitoring instruments. Third,

it assesses the reach and fragility of these governance innovations in 2024–2025, identifying the

conditions under which crisis-driven reforms can consolidate into lasting forms of labour

formalization.

By integrating qualitative evidence and governance analysis, the paper argues that confronting

contemporary slavery in agriculture requires addressing informality not as an economic residue but

as a political and territorial system. The Bento Gonçalves case illustrates both how institutional

erosion systematically excludes migrant workers from protection, and how crisis-induced

cooperation can open genuine—though fragile—pathways out of informality.

Palavras-chave: rio grande do sul; slave labour; unions; winery; collective bargaining.