

Covid-19: Public Policies and Society's Responses



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Quality information for refining public policies and saving lives



Policy Briefing Note 12

Rise in Covid-19 Deaths and Infections in Vulnerable Communities Aggravate Perception of Helplessness and Risk to Survival

New survey with vulnerable community leaders reveals:

- The increase in Covid-19 deaths has become a glaring issue for the communities: mentions to this issue jumped from 0% in the first survey to 16.5% in this second round of interviews. The spread of the coronavirus infection, mentioned by 5.6% of the responses, increased to 30.4% in our second monitoring survey.
- Community leaders once again mentioned hunger and lack of income as serious problems, as they were unable to overcome disinformation, fake news, and incongruities in the recommendations by public authorities. 40% of respondents stated that food distribution is insufficient.
- 90% of the leaders mentioned that the residents themselves, local associations, and religious entities from the most vulnerable communities have since organized themselves in an attempt to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic.
- The proliferation of strategies for food collection and donation, in addition to initiatives for increasing income and improving information, emerge in the communities as self-organizing efforts. Political parties, class associations, and major companies are not only scarcely present, but viewed with suspicion.
- Public authorities, across different levels, are seen with suspicion and discredit. The government's inefficiency or absence encourages the creation of resident networks and entities for promoting and ensuring survival in the communities.
- Acknowledgement and support for this solidarity network, from both public and private entities, has become vital for a large number of families in their struggle against Covid-19.

Introduction

This Bulletin presents the results of the second wave of data collection by the *Monitoring Panel with community leaders about the impacts of the progress of the Covid-19 pandemic*, conducted by the Solidary Research Network. The consistent gathering of information regarding the main problems faced by these populations amidst the pandemic allows for the anticipation of crises and risk management by the public authorities and the communities themselves.

Our study listened, identified, and systematized the critical problems reported by leaders from over 70 communities, neighborhoods, territories, and locations with high social vulnerability across different metropolitan regions of the country. For this Bulletin, we contacted the same leaders from the first monitoring wave published in Bulletin #7 (May 22) in addition to new representatives from other metropolitan regions, thus enlarging the territorial scope of the research. This time, in addition to six metropolitan regions in Manaus, Recife, DF, Belo Horizonte, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo, we included reports from leaders from Campinas, Salvador, Joinville, and Maringá.

We conducted the interviews between May 25 and June 5, 2020. As in the first wave, we collected the results from the direct statements of 79 leaders (from a total of 108 leaders contacted) who answered brief and standardized questions through mobile applications.

Community leaders and representatives are strategic sources of information in our study, constantly engaged in the everyday life of the community as they tackle the most serious problems afflicting their areas. In constant dialogue with the population, they listen to demands, manage conflicts, and have a more integrated outlook of the territories in which they operate. The World Health Organization (WHO) emphasizes the importance of community engagement for the effective communication of risks as well as for the control of the pandemic in local contexts, especially in highly vulnerable communities. Due to their familiarity with the territory, their experience, and the capillarity of their personal networks, community leaders play a strategic role in promoting measures to prevent the spread of the virus and in building alternative solutions to the social damages of the pandemic.

In this survey, we asked two open questions to these leaders. This Bulletin presents the results of our analysis. Our applied methodology did not incentive specific issues or problems since our objective was to grasp unexpected situations and events engendered by the current crisis.

The first question, replicated from the same question used in the first wave of the study, addressed their perception of the problems and difficulties faced by communities on account of the pandemic. The recurrent use of the same question seeks to grasp changes in the perception of risk as well as the emergence of new problems. The second question, applied for the first time in this Panel, focused on identifying collective or individual solutions and initiatives created and developed by the communities themselves for facing the pandemic¹.

¹ Our formulation was as follows: "The questions below refer to the potential problems, conflicts, and situations of hardship that emerged or were aggravated because of the Covid-19 pandemic and the policies for its containment, such as social distancing, for example. (i) In the past week, what type of problems and situations has the population experienced in the community/territory in which you operate? Please report the main reasons why people have been seeking you or the main problems that you have learned are occurring." (ii) Do you know of individual or community initiatives or solutions developed in the territory in which you operate to contain or overcome problems and difficulties caused by the covid-19 pandemic? What initiatives are these? Tell us about them: What are their goals? Who develops them? Our interest here lies not in government actions, but in responses from within the community itself."

Results

The new data collection of the Panel indicates that the material hardships caused by the pandemic – such as hunger and limited access to income and employment – were once again the most cited problems among community leaders in ten metropolitan regions in the country. Circa 67% of the leaders mentioned hunger and food deprivation. Access to work and income continues to be the second most cited problem, a situation further aggravated by the difficulties when trying to access the federal government Emergency Aid mobile app, mentioned by circa 30% of the informants.

The perception that the number of deaths and infections has increased was further reinforced in this second wave, now emerging as a relevant problem. This data suggests that, apart from the economic impacts, the effects of the pandemic on the health and survival of these populations has become increasingly critical as time progresses. The spread of the infection was mentioned by 30.4% of the leaders against 5.6% in the first wave; and the increase in deaths cited by 16.5% compared to 0% in the first wave as a source of fear and insecurity in the communities.

Mentions regarding an increased dissatisfaction with the government's actions in addressing the health crisis also emerged spontaneously in this new survey, reiterating recurrent reports of failures and shortcomings in the access to different public policies. Both monitoring waves registered significant flaws and failures regarding the provision of health services, the emergency income benefits that fail to arrive, and the discontinuity and imprecision of information and prevention actions against the virus.

Despite the efforts from many solidarity networks and occasional assistance from the government itself, 40% of the leaders reported that food donations are not only insufficient, but suffer from coordination and logistic problems that are difficult to solve.

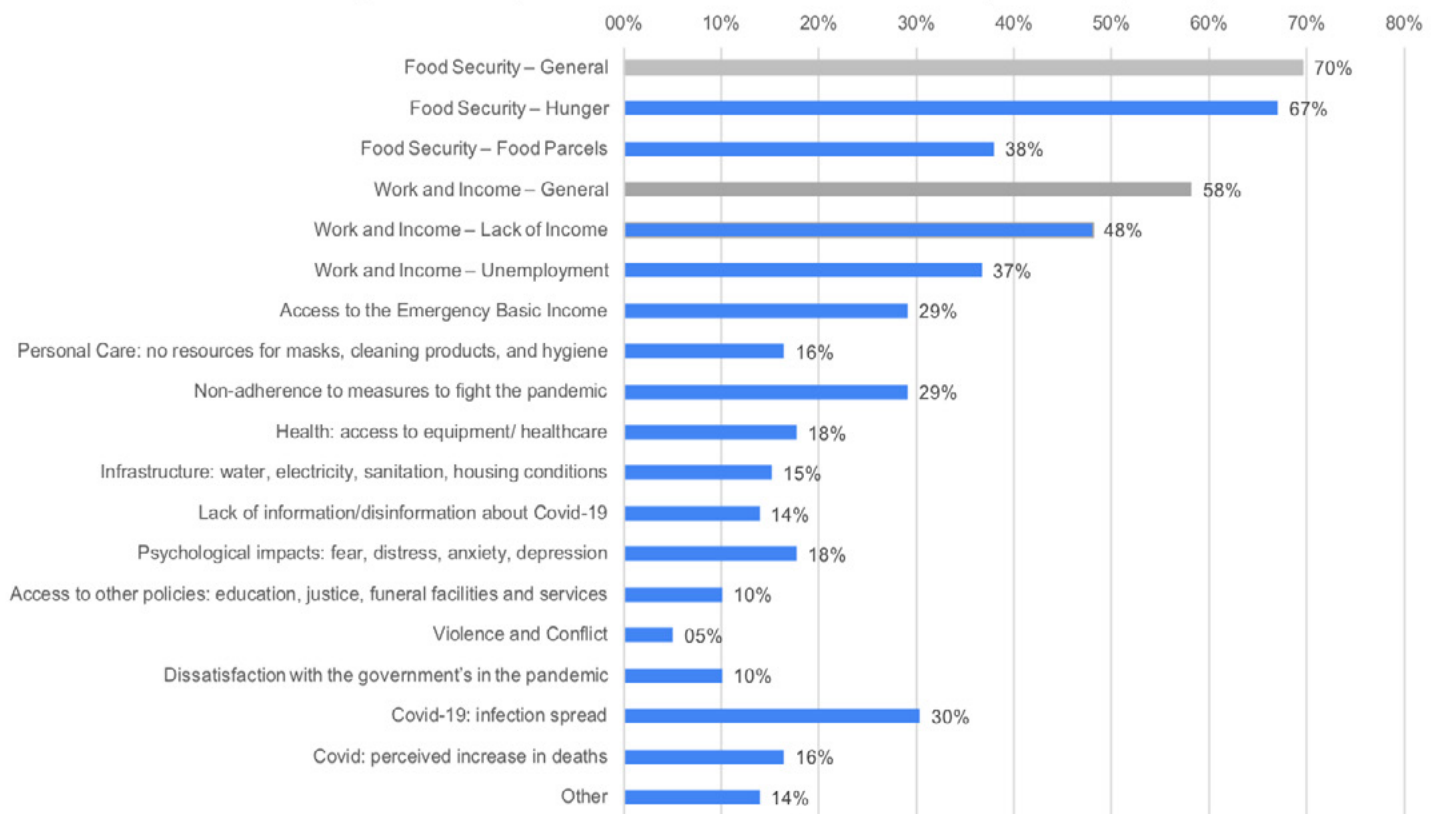
Despite their steadfast presence on social media, assistance from companies, labor unions, and political parties was subpar in the most affected communities.

Conversely, given the lack of assistance, communities have reacted to the inaction of governments. 88% of the leaders and managers of neighborhood associations and popular collectives reported the dissemination of initiatives developed within the communities themselves to secure material needs or to educate and inform the local population about the appropriate care and prevention measures against Covid-19. Even with limited resources, civil society has thoroughly organized itself to reduce the effects of the crisis. Neighborhood associations and religious, political, cultural entities as well as autonomous residents have acted to respond to material needs in the absence of public authorities, educating and informing the population about the appropriate prevention measures against Covid-19.

The following two graphs represent Waves 1 and 2 of the survey and indicate how the focus of the leaders have changed as well as the concerns of the most vulnerable population in the locations contacted by the Network.

Graph 1

Wave 2: Critical problems experienced by the communities during the pandemic (%)



Source: Monitoring Panel of Community Leaders Amidst the Covid-19 Scenario. Wave 2. 05/25 – 06/05 2020. Multiple Answers in % N= 79.

Graph 2:

Wave 1: Critical problems experienced by the communities during the pandemic (%)



Source: Monitoring Panel of Community Leaders Amidst the Covid-19 Scenario. Wave 1. May 05-11 2020. Multiple Answers.

Enduring problems

The second wave of our research reveals that tackling the material needs caused by the pandemic continues to be the main problem that afflicts vulnerable communities. Issues related to food security (such as hunger) and access to work and income continue to be the most mentioned difficulties by the leaders comprising the Panel. Circa 70% of the respondents mentioned food insecurity as a risk for the vulnerable populations in the locations where they work, with dramatic reports about hunger and food deprivation. Once again, we found the widespread perception that concerns about hunger increases as the epidemic persists and responses remain insufficient. As in the first wave of the Panel, we collected reports about problems involving the demand and distribution of basic food parcels². Approximately 40% of the leaders reported – in the two waves of our study – that the efforts from the public authorities and civil society to donate food have been insufficient and hindered by coordination and logistic problems.

"Some mothers here in the community have been feeding their children cornstarch with water and sugar. That really upsets me."

(Community leader at Morro do Coroa – Rio de Janeiro, RJ)

"The biggest demand was for food, everyone that reaches out to me says there's no food on their table"

(Community leader at Vila Jacuí – São Paulo, SP)

Access to work and income continues to be the second most mentioned problem by community leaders comprising the Panel. As in the first data collection, circa 60% of the informants mentioned that the drastic reduction in income and unemployment continue to be a critical issue affecting the population. In both surveys, circa 30% of the leaders mentioned difficulties when trying to access the federal government's Emergency Income Assistance, with persisting problems regarding registration, cash withdrawal, or receiving the benefit.

"lack of work has become an increasingly worse problem, people are losing work. (...) naturally, you can see how that's a huge problem for low-income folks, because people have nothing, we don't have money savings to go on without working. This money reserve would come, evidently, from the emergency aid offered by the government, which we all know is a joke, and which, unfortunately, many people have yet to receive the first installment."

(Community leader at Morro do Macaco – Cotia, SP)

We found little variation between the two waves of the Panel in mentions to the challenges to maintain social isolation, the lack of information/disinformation about Covid-19, access to health and other policies, and the psychological impacts of the pandemic.

Regarding the lack of information and disinformation about the pandemic, the leaders reiterated that the dissemination of fake news and the inconsistency between the recommendations from the different levels of government confuse the population and further aggravates the management of the crisis. The difficulty of understanding the risks of the virus or the importance of preventive measures suggest flaws in government action, which appears to be ineffective in educational and informational actions.

2 Translator's note: A basic-needs grocery package. The *cesta básica* (or food parcel) is a Brazilian economic term referring to a food parcel to meet the minimum needs of a typical family. The parcel generally contains food items, personal hygiene products, and cleaning products. There is no consensus as to which products make up the *cesta básica* and the list of products included may vary according to the purpose for which it is defined, or according to the distributor that composes it.

"And what really worries us is that we don't have adequate information from the health authorities. Territorial health in our community leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to information. We don't have the correct information. We don't know if our UBS [Basic Health Unit], focused on family health, is addressing this issue of the epidemic here in our Community."

(Community leader at Cangaíba – São Paulo, SP)

"You have a president telling people to go out to the street, and people see the president himself go on television telling people to go out into the street. And so they do it. Many people said: 'but the president said we shouldn't stay home.' The TV shows it, they'll take it at face value, they won't assimilate that information and they'll do what they are seeing on the screen. That is very complicated."

(Community leader at Campo Limpo – São Paulo, SP)

New problems emerge as old problems intensify

Despite the recurring persistency of the most critical problems, the second wave identified the emergence and growth of other topics such as a stronger perception of an increase in Covid-19 infections and deaths. The problem of the infection spread in their territories was mentioned by 30.4% of the leaders who participated in the Panel. In the first wave, only 5.6% of informants mentioned this issue. In turn, the perception of an increase in the number of deaths in the communities, which did not appear at all in the first wave, was mentioned by 16.5% of the community representatives in the second survey. These themes appear in statements that convey great concern and fear, as the threat to health and survival becomes increasingly closer.

"[The community] is becoming scared, because things are getting financially tight, people are getting sick and many friends and relatives are dying from the coronavirus, and the community has no prediction whatsoever of when this will end."

(Community leader at Pina – Recife, PE)

"We're seeing many deaths in our region, many deaths and many people infected. A lot of infected people. The assessment they make, about Latin America, we see here at our end that it's real. The disease is expanding in our regions and infecting many people. And then, some people end up dying. We had confirmations of deaths, in our region, of at least ten people in the last week. But infected, we've heard of a lot of infected people."

(Community leader at A. E. Carvalho – São Paulo, SP)

With life at risk, the feeling of abandonment grows, as captured by the reports of increased dissatisfaction with the government's actions in tackling the crisis. This problem, which did not appear in the Panel's first survey, was mentioned spontaneously by 10% of the leaders in this second survey. Faced with hopelessness, communities increasingly try to establish local responses to the crisis, both collectively and individually.

"The biggest problem here in our community was the government at the beginning of this pandemic. I think they did a lot of things wrong. So they started donating food parcels, a lot of them, in some associations. (...) It was really wrong what they did, it wasn't organized. (...) It's chaos here with several families in need of food, food parcels, hygiene products, cleaning products, (...) And those mothers who need it, they never received that Emergency Aid, so it was a mess, the government made a mess with the population, and in our region the infection rate of this disease is very high. (...) I think the government should have organized itself better, the whole thing turned into a mess, the people all went out into the street. It's chaos around here, it's frightening. And this here is the most affected region."

(Community leader at Brasilândia – São Paulo, SP)

Community initiatives and solutions

"[They are] solidarity actions by our community without help from public agencies. Together we are strong."

(Community leader at Parada de Taipas – São Paulo – SP)

"They're people. The government doesn't help us at all. (...) We're trying to help people who have long suffered and we have come to the conclusion that together, we are stronger."

(Community leader at Educandário – São Paulo – SP)

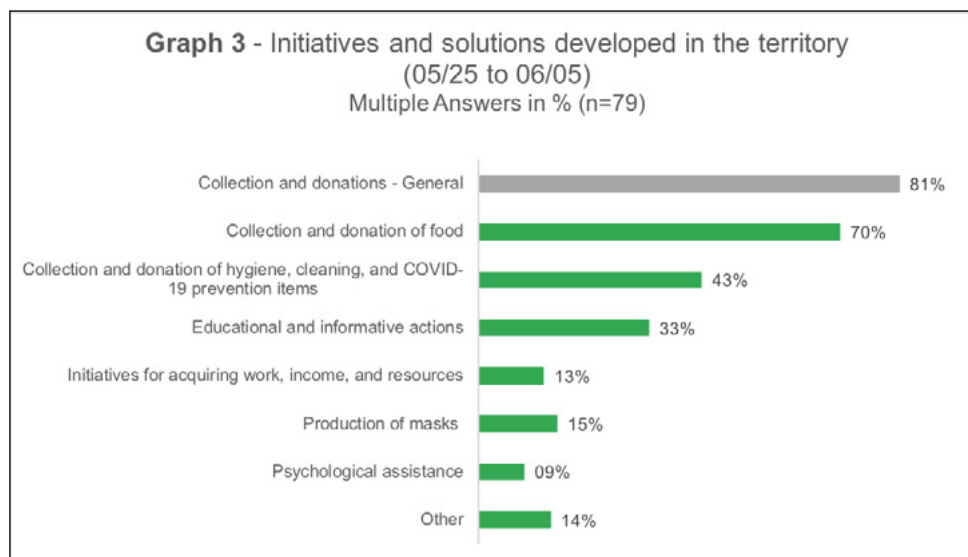
"In general, a united community becomes stronger."

(Community leader at Roda de Fogo – Recife – PE)

The words of the community leaders could not have been more eloquent to characterize the initiatives developed in the territories: due to the absence of the State, the communities began to organize themselves to face the economic and health crisis. 88.6% of community leaders mentioned the existence of at least one initiative or solution developed within the territory to try to overcome problems aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. And these are not one-off initiatives: circa 60% of the leaders in all 10 metropolitan regions reported the existence of 3 or more initiatives in their territories.

Initiatives developed

As expected, the main initiatives involve fundraising and donations: 8 out of 10 leaders reported actions of this nature. Among the items collected and donated, the most common are food (about 70%) and items related to hygiene, cleaning, and prevention to Covid-19 (43%), but they are not the only ones. The leaders also reported the donation of clothes, gas canisters, electronic items, and books.



Data collection: from 05.25 to 06.05). Multiple Answers in % (n=79)

The lack of information and disinformation about Covid-19 propelled different educational actions regarding the disease. About a third of community leaders identified this type of initiative in their territories, a clear indication that civil society understands the importance of disseminating reliable information for everyone. This process occurs through different forms: distributing educational flyers about disease prevention together with the food parcels, posting videos and audios in mobile messaging groups, use of cars with loudspeakers on the streets of the communities, communications on lampposts, and door-to-door educational campaigns.

"So, we what try to do, through this WhatsApp group as well as social networks is to talk to these people, communicate with these people in order to try and contain this pandemic. We also recorded an audio message and played it on a sound car driving in the territory, instructing people with a more popular language so they can understand. And the production of some flyers that we stick on some lampposts and walls in the territory, informing people about the disease and how to contain this disease. Also, all food parcels go with flyers, all hygiene kits go with flyers instructing people on how to take care of themselves."

(Community leader at Sapopemba – São Paulo, SP)

"A sound car visits the favelas and drives through the streets singing a rap song, with conscious lyrics, speaking the language of the Community about how to protect themselves from the Coronavirus."

(Community leader at Morro do papagaio - Belo Horizonte, MG)

"There's a guy here, he works in advertising. So everybody pitched in and we had him out on the street, doing the outreach work, alright? So the car drives around here all day long. And so it's the community that pays for this. Here, no one else, other people don't have this."

(Community leader at Ermelino Matarazzo - São Paulo, SP)

Other aggravating problems during the pandemic have also been the target of community initiatives. The psychological impact has been addressed by partnerships with psychological care centers and voluntary online assistance by psychologists, as mentioned by almost 10% of community leaders.

The lack of resources has been the target of initiatives mentioned by 1 in every six leaders: assistance for writing a CV, accessing the emergency income benefit, delivery of financial resources to pay bills for basic items, such as gas.

The most interesting initiatives, however, are those that fuse different fronts of action. The production of protection masks and the sale of recycling materials are some clear examples. In the first case, the assistance cycle begins with the collection of patchwork for sewing masks. From these scraps, volunteers and professional seamstresses produce masks, which may then become three different initiatives: (1) total donation of voluntarily-produced masks; (2) exchange of masks for a kilo of food, subsequently donated to vulnerable families; and (3) purchase of the masks by the entities themselves, which are then donated, thus ensuring the livelihood of the seamstresses.

As for recycling, these refer to donations coming from families within the community itself and, with the sale of the material, the money is donated to the most vulnerable families.

We posted requests for recycled items on Facebook, networks, social media in general, even on WhatsApp. (...) We're taking it all to our small warehouse belonging to the Association, and companies then purchase this product (...) we exchange all that value for a coupon in a supermarket or a drugstore, and so they're doing the exchange, right. (...) We're working together with other collectives exchanging masks for food, thus ensuring the main assistance tool.

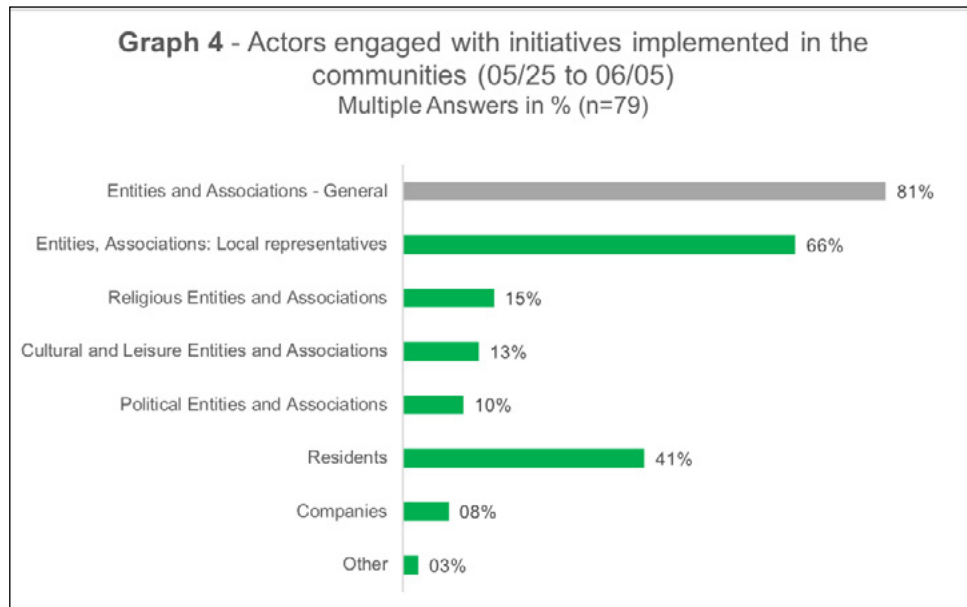
(Community leader at Jardim São José - Francisco Morato, SP)

"We made an agreement with some seamstresses who are closer to us (...) We promoted a patchwork campaign in the neighborhood of Santa Teresa. Whoever had fabric, donate it to us, fabric and thread. And then we made an agreement (...) with a seamstress [which we later expanded]. What did she do? She sold 3 masks for R\$10.00 for the campaign people. And, in parallel, she would sell 2 masks for R\$10.00, each one for R\$5.00. And, for every 2 masks that she sold, she'd donate one to the campaign."

(Community leader at Morro do Coroa – Rio de Janeiro, RJ)

The actors behind the initiatives

Four out of five community leaders mentioned the activities carried out by entities and associations in their territories. The most cited were those by local representatives. Almost two thirds of the leaders interviewed mentioned groups of community leaders, popular collectives, and neighborhood associations. Solutions emerge from entities with ties to local leisure and culture, from amateur football teams, and cultural associations, as well as evangelical and Catholic groups. Together, they represent almost a third of the groups working in the communities investigated by the Panel.



Data collection from 05.25 to 06.05). Multiple answers (n=79)

Individual actions from residents further promote this local activity. No less than 40% of community leaders mentioned residents self-organizing in their territories by way of different initiatives. Individuals not belonging to organized groups in the community engaged themselves on different fronts of action, whether in the collection and donation of food and prevention instruments, sewing masks, distributing materials, cleaning the streets to reduce the infection spread, or door-to-door educational campaigns.

"Production of cloth masks by volunteer residents of the favela."

(Community leader at Morro do Papagaio – Belo Horizonte, MG)

"People are trying to minimize the hardship of some families with volunteer work by distributing food parcels, masks, and hand sanitizer."

(Community leader at Ermelino Matarazzo – São Paulo, SP)

"The younger residents here from the neighborhood are gathering and dividing tasks to attend people at risk of infection from covid-19, for example: they gather 3 or 4 young people/teenagers for surveying the priorities for this target group. After the survey, they divide the tasks, one team goes to the supermarket, drugstore, grocery store, another team goes to the UBS [Basic Health Unit] and/or popular drugstore to fetch continuous use medication, if they can't find it at the UBS, they search the rest of the health network."

(Community leader at Capão Redondo – São Paulo, SP)

Not only are the initiatives interconnected, but the actors articulate their cooperation. Almost a third (31.6%) of community leaders referred to network actions alongside other actors. A diagnosis of distribution problems with food parcels due to fragmented donations led to an articulated movement between entities and associations. Many reports mentioned how larger organizations, such as the *Central Única das Favelas* (CUFA), got in touch with community leaders to carry out the distribution of donations in their territories and promote further cooperation between community leaders and neighborhood associations for mapping regions that have already received donations, identifying and

prioritizing the most vulnerable families, and redistributing and exchanging food donations as well as cleaning and hygiene items between communities.

"We're well organized with other entities as well, who work with the community, on how to better organize the distribution of food, so that some families don't receive too many food parcels at once from several different entities, while others are left unattended. So we're organizing distribution, knowing who's receiving what, and who hasn't received it yet".

(Community leader at Morro do Meio – Joinville, SC)

"The community's response was to solve the problem, ourselves, without public authorities, without anything... it's these initiatives to go after food through collective actions among us, with WhatsApp groups, soccer groups, church groups (catholic, evangelical), and residents' associations. These were the actions we took to solve this problem, and we've done better than the public authorities. I took part in an action with the CUFA (Central Única das Favelas). They've been doing outstanding work, and which the government should take as an example. For example, Mãe da Favela, which we did through the CUFA to donate R\$300 to mothers (...) we registered everyone and it worked better than the federal government program. Everyone received the money and they received it quickly: there was no fraud, nothing"

(Community leader at Campo Limpo – São Paulo, SP)

Lastly, it is worth mentioning the small number of reports regarding the participation of companies and even political associations in these territories. 10% of community leaders cited the actions of social movements, unions, and political parties. In the case of companies, the percentage was even lower, with only 7.5% of mentions.

Political associations were not mentioned in the networked initiatives and they are still seen with suspicion by the leaders. The reports also question the low participation of major companies in providing donations, and they often perceive political activity in the territories as a self-promotion strategy for the next elections.

Recommendations

- As in the first monitoring round, the information collected suggests that coordinating efforts for food distribution is essential.
- The lack of a coherent and clear line of action by the public authorities remains a source of constant concern for the population and encourages the formation of resident support networks. To provide support for this solidarity network is vital for the health and survival of many families.
- The fight against disinformation, which fosters disbelief and confusion about the dangers of Covid-19, remains important. It is essential that public authorities, at its various levels, promote these community initiatives.

ABOUT

We are over 70 researchers, actively engaged in the task of improving the quality of public policies within federal, state, and municipal governments as they seek to act amidst the Covid-19 crisis to save lives. We dedicate our energies towards rigorous data collection, devising substantial information, formulating indicators, and elaborating models and analyses to monitor and identify pathways for public policies and review the responses presented by the population.

The Solidary Research Network has researchers from all scientific fields (Humanities as well as Exact and Biological Sciences) in Brazil and overseas. For us, the combination of skills and techniques is vital as we face the current pandemic. The challenge ahead is enormous, but it is particularly invigorating. And it would never have come to fruition if it weren't for the generous contribution of private institutions and donors who swiftly answered our calls. We are profoundly grateful to all those who support us.

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