# Research Report # 01

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# Repository of Civil Society Initiatives Against the Pandemic

## The Struggle of Civil Society Groups in Brazil's Urban Peripheries (March – June 2020)

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# Introduction

[The Repository of Civil Society Initiatives Against the Pandemic](#) was launched in March 2020, just as Brazilian governors and mayors were announcing the first social isolation measures. By then, international experience had proven that the pandemic would affect everyone, but not equally. The effect on more vulnerable social and economic groups would be particularly dramatic. The virus not turn us into equals. More likely, it would deepen inequality in a country where it is already chronic. The Repository was created to give visibility to the thousands of civil society initiatives that had already begun to appear in those early weeks. Some were mobilized with the help of state institutions; others without them or even despite of them.

After years of austerity economics dominating Brazilian politics, intense debates about the role of the state began to fill the pages of major newspapers alongside of growing reports of contagion. To help millions of people who lost income due to social isolation, the National Congress approved the [Emergency Aid program](#), transferring R$ 600 (about US$ 111[1]) to low income people lacking formal employment. In addition to issuing decrees closing schools and stores, state and local governments invested in the health system, especially in the construction of field hospitals, the purchase of ventilators, and, with less enthusiasm, in the acquisition of tests. Despite the importance of these measures, they have proven insufficient to protect the populations living in urban peripheries, unattended by many public health and social protection policies.

In the *favelas*, self-isolating to stay safe from COVID is a privilege. Social agglomeration begins at home. Millions of families live in small, unventilated houses, and lack reliable access to water to wash their hands. The majority work in the informal economy, which offers no legal protection in times of crisis. Accessing the Emergency Aid program proved to be [more difficult for the extreme poor](#). It took a long time to arrive in their pockets. At the same time, millions of requests were denied. Paradoxically, as one leader in the Federal District told us, the program's announcement resulted in a reduction of donations to civil society groups, since many donors believed that the problem had been resolved.

Knowledge about the dangers of the disease took time to arrive in the urban peripheries. Covid-19 initially was thought of as an affliction of the rich, since the first to be infected were people who brought the virus to Brazil on their way back from vacations in Europe and the U.S. When it did arrive in poor neighborhoods, contagion was more rapid and more lethal. The

[1] Exchange rate for June 30, 2020

majority of ICUs are located far away from poor communities. Basic health care, already precarious in these areas, became more fragile with the spread of the disease. Data from the Project "*UTIs Brasileiras*"("Brazilian ICUs"), of the Brazilian Association of Intensive Medicine, collected between March and May of 2020, show that the mortality rate for COVID-19 in government-run ICUs is twice as high (54.9%) as in private ones (28.2%).

Since the onset of the pandemic, many organizations and individuals mobilized to help. We created the Repository of Civil Society Initiatives Against the Pandemic to follow and register these efforts. In this first research report, we draw a broad profile of the initiatives that appeared between March and June, based on our own data and on that produced by other projects. We focus here specifically on mobilizations conducted in urban peripheries, rather than attempting to describe the vast diversity of civil society initiatives taking place throughout Brazil. In the second part of the report, we offer some initial reflections about the collective action repertoires in use, the goals and agendas mobilized and the relation (or rather lack of one) between these initiatives and public policy efforts to confront the pandemic.

## From the Struggle Against Hunger to Grassroots Communication: The Heterogeneity of Civil Society Efforts

In the first months of the pandemic, the vast majority of civil society initiatives registered in our Repository sought to provide a rapid response to the economic crisis hitting poor neighborhoods. Hundreds, perhaps thousands of small and large projects were receiving donations. They asked for food, hand sanitizer and masks, and cash donations. Some of these projects focused on particular neighborhoods of *favelas*. Others sought to assist specific social groups such as the homeless, the elderly, artists, people living with HIV/Aids, etc..  It was an upsurge in solidarity and mutual aid unseen in Brazil since the campaign against hunger led by Betinho in the 1990s.

The majority are small operations, organized by local philanthropic organizations and neighborhood groups. Some, however, are national initiatives. One such example is the *Mães das Favelas* (Favela Mothers) project, run by the *Central Única das Favelas* (Unified Favela Central - CUFA). According to its website, by the end of June this project had delivered over 600 thousand "physical" food baskets and more than 80 thousand "digital baskets" in hundreds of Brazilian cities. Another national organization that partners with local groups throughout the country is the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST – Landless Rural Workers Movement). The MST has been delivering food baskets with produce from land reform settlements to urban mutual aid groups. Between these large and small initiatives, there are a variety of intermediary programs, such as "*Uma Rede Contra o Vírus*" ("A Network Against the Virus"), created by Ana Moser, an Olympic medalist. The Network organizes food distribution in

various cities. Some of these initiatives, such as *Mães das Favelas*, have significant support from businesses, while others rely only on the resources communities themselves can come up with.

Many of these projects involve complex logistical operations to guarantee that food and supplies get to the families that need them. One campaign in Belo Horizonte, *Comunidade Viva Sem Fome* (Community, Alive and Without Hunger) run by a group called *Força Tarefa COVID-19* (COVID-19 Task Force), put a flowchart on its website explaining this complexity. Their system involves: a) an online mechanism through which individuals and businesses can donate money; b) an interinstitutional commission that identifies families in need; c) partner supermarkets that deliver food and supply kits to distribution centers; d) volunteer teams that organize the kits and deliver them to families; e) a monitoring team that accompanies all of these activities and f) an accountability system that publishes what has been done each week. Of course, many organizations behind distribution projects do not have the resources for this kind of logistical operation. At best, they are able to post a bank account or an address to which donations can be taken, on Facebook or Instagram.

In addition to distribution projects, the Repository has identified a diversity of other types of initiatives, some of which were created by periphery residents, while others are by external groups. Some programs are dedicated specially to helping people gain access to the government's Emergency Aid program. Others seek to provide psychological support for people who are dealing with the emotional difficulties of social isolation, especially when combined with economic hardship and uncertainty. In the Paraisópolis *favela* in Sao Paulo, local groups sought to resolve the problem of insufficient health services by going after donations to pay for a medical team and ambulances. And to deal with the impossibility of traditional mourning rituals in times of social distancing, projects such as *Inumeráveis* (Innumerable) have created on-line spaces for paying homage to those who have died from the disease.

Another category of initiative focuses on producing information by and for the urban peripheries. Media activism was already on the rise in Brazil's favelas, propelled by the dissemination of access to cell phones and the internet and in search of a voice that came from the periphery itself. In the pandemic, these movements have sought to disseminate information about the disease, its impacts and how people can protect themselves from it. The community newspaper, *Voz das Comunidades* (Voice of the Communities), based in the Alemão Complex of Rio de Janeiro, created a smartphone app to combat disinformation and to disseminate reliable information. In addition to reporting on everything going on in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, users receive daily notifications with the tally of cases and deaths by COVID-19 in those territories. Other groups created podcasts about the pandemic directed to

the *favela* population, such as *Pandemia Sem Neurose* (Pandemic without Neurosis), *Lugar de Quarentena* (A Place of Quarantine) and *Papo de Quebrada* (Conversation from the Slums).

Other initiatives seek to mobilize the state to better respond to the pandemic. In April, the *Rede de Coletivos Populares de Paulista* (Network of Popular Collectives of Paulista --COPPA), in the Metropolitan Region of Recife, created an Atlas of Vulnerability mapping the socioeconomic conditions of the town's residents and identifying places where more vulnerable populations lived. The document was presented to the municipal government in the hopes that it would inform decisions on social programs. Another example is the *Quartos da Quarentena* (Quarantine Rooms) Campaign that pressures municipal and state governments to work with local hotels to provide temporary living spaces for poor residents who need to isolate.

Efforts to mobilize the state also include declarations, open letters and petitions presenting denunciations and policy proposals. A network of groups created a campaign called *Renda Básica que Queremos* (The Basic Income that We Want) to defend the continuity of the Emergency Aid program and to publicize problems many social groups have faced in gaining access to it. In April, another group of organizations wrote a document presenting proposals to combat the pandemic and its effects on the poor, systematized in terms of short and medium-term proposals.



The number and variety of initiatives is so great that a new type of on-line effort has become common: collaborative maps and other types of catalogues that list solidarity projects and campaigns. Our Repository has created a section dedicated to keeping track of this kind of initiative. The largest such mapping Project is the *Mapa Colaborativo* (Collaborative Map) led by a network of organizations based in São Paulo, ranging from academic institutions like the Federal University of ABC to social movement organiza-

tions such as the *União Nacional por Moradia Popular* (National Union for Popular Housing). To date, this map lists more than a thousand activities by movements, civic organizations and collectives, and more than five hundred university and laboratory initiatives. With more than 500 projects listed, another large mapping effort is the *[Banco de Iniciativas da Sociedade Civil no Combate ao Covid-19](#) Civil* (Bank of Civil Society Initiatives to Combat Covid-19), organized by the *Rede Nacional de Mobilização Social* (National Network of Social Mobilization - COEP) in partnership with the LABetinho. The Marielle Franco Institute created the *[Mapa #Corona nas Periferias](#)* (#Corona in the Peripheries Map) that focuses on favelas, especially in the city of Rio de Janeiro. The *#RedeSolidária* (#SolidaryNetwork) campaign of the *Associação Brasileira de Organizações Não Governamentais* (Brazilian Association of Non-Governmental Organizations, ABONG), also includes a [map](#) identifying initiatives throughout the country. Another cataloging effort is the [page dedicated to Covid](#) in the Marielle Franco Dictionary of Favelas, a Project created by a group of scientific and civil society organizations in Rio de Janeiro, which includes the Fiocruz (Oswaldo Cruz Foundation), UERJ (State University of Rio de Janeiro) and UFRJ (Federal University of Rio de Janeiro). The page lists hundreds of collectives and projects fighting the pandemic.

In addition to these larger catalogues, which include activities throughout the country, maps for specific cities have been created in [Belo Horizonte](#) and [Curitiba](#). Inspired by their example and concerned that no such initiative existed in the Federal District, our Repository now includes a [collaborative map](#), which identifies dozens of civil society initiatives in the territory of the Federal District.

The fact that so many groups are seeking to map and catalogue an even greater number of civil society initiatives to combat the pandemic is a sign that something significant is indeed underway. The quantity of initiatives and their dissemination throughout the country is accompanied by an enormous diversity of actors. A look at what is going on in the Federal District is suggestive of the variety of organizations mobilized. They include grassroots movements of different origins such as CUFA and *the Movimento Popular por Moradia* (Popular Housing Movement -- AMORA); collectives involved in cultural activities and communication from the peripheries, such as the *Rede Urbana de Ações Socioculturais* (Urban Network of Sociocultural Actions- RUAS) and Casa Azul (Blue House); charitable institutions that run shelters and daycare centers; grassroots college preparation courses, such as the *Rede Emancipa* (Emancipate Network); and collectives of doctors and psychologists. The majority are organizations that already worked in their territories before the pandemic. Some, however, were created to deal with the coronavirus crisis, such as campaigns to collect and distribute donations created by local shops and other private sector institutions.

## Trends and Challenges for Civil Society in Urban Peripheries

*Connections between Collective Action Repertoires.*

One of the most interesting characteristics of the initiatives gathered in our Repository is the creative way that old collective action routines have been joined with new ones. There is something 'traditional' in a good portion of these initiatives, especially the emergency efforts to distribute food baskets. As Pedro Paiva, of the *Movimento Rocinha Resiste (Rocinha Resists Movement)*, explained -- during a *Roda de Conversa* (Conversation Circle) conducted by a Buddhist community radio program -- many *favela* groups already had experience dealing with emergencies, such as the floods and mudslides that annually strike hillside residents. The success of the initiatives depends in large part on the profound knowledge that local actors have of their communities and of the people who live there, as well as of the techniques for organizing emergency solidarity efforts. Much of this capacity was developed the old way, largely through face-to-face communication.

At the same time, the pandemic required innovation. On the one hand, the Repository suggests a greater intensity in the use of a larger variety of digital platforms. The internet is a crucial instrument in the logistics of connecting donors, store owners, producers, distribution centers, beneficiaries and accountability systems. WhatsApp is used to organize the formation of task forces and subcommittees that can get donations to households. Communication with the public increasingly occurs through platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Instagram, through which written documents and videos can be disseminated. Favela Youtubers have been mobilized by groups to produce videos on how to prevent the disease. On-line chats recuperate the tradition of "favela conversation circles", now made available in the form of podcasts on Spotify or through weekly lives on Facebook and YouTube.

At the same time, "off-line" innovations proved to be necessary. Images of meetings of the 425 "street presidents' in Paraisópolis (a favela in São Paulo) to discuss procedures for their solidarity campaign -- six feet separating each person in a soccer field -- have become iconic. On March 21, the group *G10 das Favelas* (G10 of the Favelas) sent out a call, via Facebook, for volunteers willing to visit families, bringing them donations and monitoring their health. Those who joined up would have to learn rigorous protocols not only for holding meetings but also for conducting the visits, such as how to use personal protection equipment and to sanitize donations.

In addition to on-line and off-line innovations, many efforts described in the Repository demonstrate the actors' capacity to *combine* creatively digital and non-digital repertoires. The experiences of media activists that seek to produce reliable knowledge from within the

peripheries are good examples of these interesting combinations. If, on the one hand, the dissemination of cell phones among low-income people has made a new kind of 'bottom up' communication easier, on the other hand many *favela* residents still do not have access to the internet. In addition to using digital tools, these groups spread the word through banners and sound trucks. Meanwhile, the community radio programming airs simultaneously on YouTube channels and on the electromagnetic spectrum that old devices are capable of picking up.

*Discursive Connections*

A second theme of analysis has to do with how the civil society efforts to combat the pandemic connect to longer term projects and agendas, something that the social movement literature calls "frame bridging." In a recent live, Italian sociologist Donatella dela Porta argued that social movements all over the world are connecting demands related to the pandemic to their prior agendas.

By affecting more vulnerable groups more intensely, the pandemic accentuates historical social problems such as economic inequality, racism, violence against women and deficient public health services. In this context, when social movements organized to pressure the National Congress to approve the Emergency Aid program, many understood it as a step in the direction of advancing the broader 'basic income' agenda in Brazil. Data about the unequal impact of Covid-19 on black people also mobilized long-time movements for human rights and against racism. In the same way, feminist groups organized to confront increased domestic violence caused by social isolation. While some groups have focused on emergency solidarity action, the pandemic impelled others to intensify their struggles around these kinds of programmatic agendas.

In many cases, however, programmatic agendas were advanced through solidarity initiatives themselves. Perhaps the most dramatic such connections emerged after police raids in Rio de Janeiro *favelas* interrupted food distribution campaigns on more than one occasion. In April, 2020, the Rio de Janeiro police killed 177 people, a 43% increase in comparison to April 2019. Outrage over these cases, especially the death of a 14 year-old boy, led the *Frente Favelas Na Luta* (Favelas in Struggle Front) to publish an open letter that makes clear the connection between combatting the pandemic and the historic struggle against police violence.

> *"Since the beginning of the Covid-19 Pandemic, favela and peripheral collectives have been the ones that have produced solutions to guarantee food security for thousands of favela residents in the state of Rio de Janeiro and to flatten the curve of contamination in those spaces by distributing hygiene kits and health information. We have tried to produce the public*

The above document mentions another programmatic struggle that is also directly connected to the solidarity initiatives of the favelas: the food security agenda. Partnerships among family farming organizations and urban groups have called attention to the importance of solidarity networks between city and countryside. One effort along these lines was a petition organized by the *Articulação Nacional de Agroecologia* (National Agroecology Articulation), signed by 877 movements and collectives. The document proposes revamping the *Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos* (Food Acquisition Program, PAA), which has been undergoing major budget cuts. Created during the Lula Government under the guise of the Zero Hunger Program, the PAA supports family farmers who produce food to supply social assistance organizations. In an interview posted on the organization's website, Denis Monteiro, the Articulation's executive secretary, makes the discursive connection explicit:

*"In the context of this pandemic, strengthening the PAA is fundamental and urgent because the program has the dual capacity of supporting the productive activities of family agriculture at the same time that it permits the supply and assistance of families suffering from food insecurity."*

Another important civil society initiative that connects the humanitarian emergency with broader agendas is the Observatório dos Direitos Humanos na Crise da Covid-19 (Observatory of Human Rights in the Covid-19 Crisis), launched in late April. The Observatory is led by organizations from a diversity of sectors: LGBT+ Rights, indigenous peoples, human rights, feminism, the black movement, the landless movement, the peasant women's movement, among others. Its objective is to collect information and denouncements about human rights violations in the context of the pandemic.

In sum, although one should never predict what will happen in the fickle world of social mobilization, these experiences suggest that solidarity initiatives have the potential to push political struggles forward. Similar experiences have occurred in other areas, such as housing and domestic violence. These cases demonstrate that the intensification of solidarity efforts in Brazil do not necessarily imply a distancing from more political agendas. On the contrary, it is possible that the network-building underway will help strengthen more long-lasting struggles.

*Disconnections from the State*

Unfortunately, the relationship between such initiatives and public authorities has been characterized by generalized disconnection. Government action during the pandemic has focused on regulating social isolation, shutting down and opening up the economy, supporting the hospital system and transferring income the low-income groups. It is not our purpose to evaluate these policies, which have been studied by other research groups such as *RedeCoVida*, the *Monitor de Evidências Covid-19* (Covid-19 Evidence Monitor), the Covid-19 Observatory, and the *Rede de Pesquisa Solidári*a (Solidary Research Network). So far, however, we have seen little interaction between the kinds of civil society initiatives discussed here and government policies.

Partnerships between government institutions and civil society organizations are rarely mentioned in the documentation included in our Repository. One important exception are the reports by organizers of the *Rede Brasilândia Solidária* (Solidary Brasilândia Network), a group from a São Paulo suburb that has been dramatically affected by Covid-19. Community efforts to promote social isolation took place in Brasilândia in partnership with the managers of government-run health clinics located in the neighborhood. Another important example of a state-society partnership included in the Repository is the "*Se Liga no Corona!*" (Be Alert to Corona!) campaign, a joint project run by Fiocruz (a federal public health research institution), the NGO *Redes da Maré* (Maré Networks) and groups from the Manguinhos community of Rio de Janeiro to produce reliable information about the pandemic. The organizers created a seal to validate information produced by partner community organizations. Content is submitted to Fiocruz specialists, who, if appropriate, give it the *Fiocruz Tá Junto* (Fiocruz is Present) seal, indicating that the material has scientific legitimacy.

This kind of partnership, however, is rarely reported in our Repository. In most cases, leaders from the urban peripheries refer to the state in terms either of its absence or of its violent presence. When the *Gabinete de Crise do Alemão* (Alemão Crisis Office, a collective of Community groups) in Rio de Janeiro created a center to attend people with Covid-19 symptoms, one of the leaders of the collective, the journalist René Silva, noted:

> *"It is an expensive project that should be done by the government. If they don't do it, we have to. That is our motto, of those who live amidst gunfire. We don't wait around for the government and authorities. We think: is it possible that the government will not do a thing to save these people?"*

As we have emphasized, the mobilization of periphery-based civil society groups in response to the emergency has only been possible because before the pandemic, they had already formed dense organizational networks. These networks are led by people who live in the communities and have a profound knowledge of their needs, as well as of the inequalities that pervade them. Without idealizing these organizations, we can affirm that they often have more legitimacy among the local population than do state institutions. In the cases of communities controlled by militias or organized crime, the State cannot even enter territories where some civil society groups work. At the same time, their resources are limited. While funding comes mostly from within the *favelas* themselves or from hard-to-come-by donations, the humanitarian crisis these groups seek to face has deepened exponentially.

# Conclusions

The initiatives mapped in the Repository and analyzed in this first report demonstrate that there is a powerful process of civil society mobilization taking place in Brazil to confront the pandemic. The goal is to alleviate the suffering of the poor living in urban peripheries. However, this process faces enormous challenges if it is to be sustainable for the duration of the crisis. Vulnerable groups cannot depend only on solidarity efforts. At the same time, public policies aimed at social assistance and economic development in these territories would be much more effective if they worked in partnership with local organizations, taking advantage of their knowledge, legitimacy and network connections.

One important research agenda in the coming years is to examine the extent to which participatory institutions such as Health Councils have operated during the pandemic as a channel of communication between state and society. We know that in many cities these institutions have been deactivated. A report by Professor Carla Martelli about the experience of Araraquara, São Paulo – a municipality that has maintained a strong participatory budgeting program in recent years – suggests that such participatory structures can produce micro-territorial connections between state and society during the pandemic. Many *favelas* however are off the radar of most councils, even in cities where they are still in operation.

Another important theme for future research refers to the impacts of the mobilization processes on Brazil's associational tissue. At the same time that state institutions have had difficulty in penetrating the territories of urban peripheries, civil society organizations also face many obstacles. The need to confront the pandemic has led to the creation of new ties among organizations and new kinds of collective action repertoires. We need to observe the extent to which these changes will be sustained over time.