


# Social participation of community leaders in a context of social inequality and in the coping of the COVID-19 pandemic: a psychosocial approach<sup>1</sup>


## Participação social de lideranças comunitárias em um contexto de desigualdade social e no enfrentamento da pandemia da COVID-19: um enfoque psicossocial

### Hailton Yagiu<sup>a</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3860-2061>


E-mail: [hyagiu@gmail.com](mailto:hyagiu@gmail.com)

### Carlos Roberto Castro-Silva<sup>a</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8880-1042>


E-mail: [carobert3@hotmail.com](mailto:carobert3@hotmail.com)

### Antonio Euzebios Filho<sup>b</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5276-3697>

E-mail: [antonioeuzebios@gmail.com](mailto:antonioeuzebios@gmail.com)

### Sueli Terezinha Ferrero Martin<sup>c</sup>

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5874-063X>

E-mail: [suelitfmartin@gmail.com](mailto:suelitfmartin@gmail.com)

<sup>a</sup>Universidade Federal de São Paulo (UNIFESP), Health and Society Institute - Campus Baixada Santista, Department of Public Policies and Health. Santos, SP. Brazil.

<sup>b</sup>Universidade de São Paulo (USP), Institute of Psychology, Department of Social and Occupational Psychology. São Paulo, SP. Brazil.

<sup>c</sup>Universidade Estadual Paulista Júlio de Mesquita Filho (Unesp). Faculdade de Medicina de Botucatu, Department of Neurology, Psychology and Psychiatry. Botucatu, São Paulo, Brazil.

## Abstract

Our study was conducted within the scope of a broad research-participant project in vulnerable contexts of Baixada Santista, in the coastal region of the state of São Paulo, Brazil, which aims at understanding the psychosocial elements of social participation and the involvement of community leaders in a local peripheral village, by pointing their strengths and weaknesses. Our article updates the reflections based on the actions to confront the COVID-19 pandemic, which has aggravated the consequences of social inequality. It also systematizes information using Atlas.ti software and analyzes them based on the perspective of Qualitative Epistemology and Thompson's Depth Hermeneutics (DP). The results indicate that social participation happens by social organizations. On one side, the fragmentation of local forces and the strengthening of social bonds make it difficult to strengthen social participation; on the other side, awareness processes are present in the search for a common good.

**Keywords:** Social Inequality; Social Vulnerability; Social Participation; Leadership; COVID-19.

## Correspondence

Hailton Yagiu

Rua Silva Jardim, 136, térreo. Santos, SP, Brazil. Zip Code 11015-020.

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## Resumo

Pesquisa realizada no âmbito de um amplo projeto de pesquisa-participante em contextos de vulnerabilidade da Baixada Santista/SP, que objetiva compreender elementos psicossociais da participação social e do envolvimento das lideranças comunitárias de uma comunidade periférica local, apontando suas potencialidades e fragilidades. Atualiza as reflexões baseando-se nas ações de enfrentamento à pandemia da COVID-19 que tem agravado as consequências da desigualdade social. Sistematiza as informações por meio do software Atlas.ti e analisa com base na perspectiva da Epistemologia Qualitativa e da Hermenêutica de Profundidade (HP) de Thompson. Resultados indicam que, de modo geral, a participação social se efetiva por meio de organizações sociais. Por um lado, a fragmentação das forças locais e esgarçamento de laços sociais dificultam o fortalecimento da participação social, por outro, os processos de conscientização estão presentes na busca do bem comum.

**Palavras-chave:** Desigualdade Social; Vulnerabilidade; Participação Social; Liderança; COVID-19.

## Introduction

The dominant ideology has ignored the scenario of poverty and the social inequalities produced by capitalism by propagating the bourgeois individualistic way of life as a parameter of the notion of success or failure, measured by the rule of meritocracy. However, the reality shows that the gap between the rich and the poor has become increasingly evident in neoliberalism - especially in Brazil, one of the champions of income inequality (WSR, 2020), at a time when social conditions deteriorate with the precariousness of social rights and disrespect for human rights.

Patriarchy and patrimonialism (Mergen; Zanetti; Reschilian, 2018), the enslavement of Africans (Gohn, 2019) and their exploitation for almost four centuries contributed to keeping the issue of social inequalities (Moura, 2019), including the fact that, even after the abolition of slavery, this group of people could not enter the labor market due to the lack of state policies that included them as citizens.

In Brazil, participatory processes are marked by a contradiction. If the 1988 Constitution allowed the strengthening of democracy by the emergence of social movements, there is still a great challenge as for the delegitimization of these through traditional hegemonic sectors of society.

However, the social struggles touch the wounds of social inequalities that update and advance public policies. Thus, social participation becomes an important object of scientific reflection.

In our article, we propose a discussion on the aspects of social participation and political involvement of community leaders of a peripheral community of the Baixada Santista, coastal area of the state of São Paulo, by observing psychosocial elements that concern the role of socialization processes in the potentiation of collective actions.

In this perspective, we will point out some of the weaknesses and potentialities expressed in the forms of community organization and socialization, by observing the participatory processes that mark the history of struggles and practices of the current leaders, and then illustrate how the potentialities contributed to face the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, since it has intensified social inequalities

in vulnerable communities due to the impossibility of observing some important aspects for the control of the pandemic (Rodrigues et al., 2020), due to the lack of hygiene conditions, and the difficulty of social isolation due to housing conditions and the necessary displacement for work and living activities.

We understand that social participation is defined as an action that occurs in the institutional sphere and in social movements in a parallel or simultaneous way; develops, according to its formation and character, the social and historical context, logics of internal deliberation and representation and before society and/or the State; one of its dimensions is psychosocial, and this is the focus of the concept of awareness proposed by Martín-Baró (1997), supported by Paulo Freire (1979), which we will resume later.

Awareness, for this author, is a process characterized by different degrees of participation and political involvement, which concern the various ways of generating approximation and/or distancing between personal and collective identities that are produced in the relations of political subjects with a group, movement, collectivity or entity (Martin-Baró, 2017; Vieira; Ximenes, 2008). The leaders' figures emerge from these relationships, being either more or less democratic, fostering different degrees of social participation, strengthening a certain way of reporting collective history.

The contradictions of what the Constitution founded under the aegis of Social Welfare and its operationalization become more explicit in the peripheries of capitalism, especially in countries whose origins come from colonization and patriarchalism and that have institutionalized political violence as a method of confronting movements of resistance and defense of social rights.<sup>2</sup>

Recent literature review on social and political participation in Brazil (Delenogare; Araújo, 2018) observed that most studies seek to understand its development based on historical-cultural and political influences; different shapes, spaces and actors; of the effects produced in collective needs, emphasizing as limitations the lack of space in

government agendas, the restricted institutional actions and lack of engagement of the subjects and pointing to the need to expand the relationship between society and managers, creation of forms of promotion of social participation and ways that subjects appropriate them.

According to Aguiar (2000), one of the factors that favored the weakening of social participation movements was the legacy of Portuguese colonization, in which its leaders administered the country favoring their own interests, thus circumventing the separation between the public and the private.

These perspectives point to the need to examine and deepen the understanding of participatory processes based on the quality of bonds and intersubjective relationships.

The possibility that we find in the theorizations of socio-historical psychology regarding the valorization of the concept of affectivity approximates us to concrete experiences, makes the coexistence and life histories of subjects and groups indicators of a potential to change reality. This allows the understanding of the production of subjectivity dialectically articulated with the experiences in its social environment and emphasizes the political aspect of social participation (Sawaia, 2014).

According to Sawaia (2003), socio-historical psychology understands the construction of social bonds as a phenomenon that cannot be separated from the political relations established in a society that is structured around poverty and violence, in which power relations and asymmetry appear as a social pattern - even producing affections, promoting approximations and dissents at the ethical and political level.

The choice of socio-historical psychology also involves a political conception, because it has questioned and fought the colonization of social psychology by North American and European theories since its emergence in the country, showing that we can understand the singularities of our reality based on theoretical frameworks formulated in the Latin American context.

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<sup>2</sup> YAGIU, H.; CASTRO-SILVA, C. R. Social participation and empowerment in vulnerable communities: scoping review. *Revista Psicologia Política*. To be published. 2020.

## Methods

Studies<sup>3</sup> conducted in vulnerable territories of Baixada Santista focused on the relationship between the health unit and the community, thus contributing to an expanded conception of health. Its social determinations have become an important reference for understanding the complexity of health-disease processes and care in these territories.

This methodological perspective guides our activities since 2009 and the questions that motivated the research arose from the diversified insertion of researchers in teaching, extension and research developed in line with the Pedagogical Political Project of the Universidade Federal de São Paulo, Campus Baixada Santista (Unifesp/BS), in the search for meanings and shared meanings about the understanding of health, care and participatory processes in territories of social vulnerability (Anhas; Rosa; Castro-Silva, 2018).

These projects allowed the emergence of others, including the master's thesis of one of the authors, from which it was possible to update the information on the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in this territory.

Since it is a study of social relations, representations and perceptions of subjects and our source is constituted by a database, we determined the qualitative approach as the most appropriate method for understanding the object of study, because it allows systematizing the knowledge of how human beings live, feel and think. The documentary model was also adopted due to the use of primary sources and the quality of information that this method allows to be extracted from the documents, thus contributing to the understanding of the object studied.

Theoretically and methodologically, this investigation is supported by socio-historical psychology based on Marxism, with historical materialism and dialectical logic as philosophy and method, understanding the human being as a social

and historical being and society as a product of the relationship between them (Bock, 2011).

### **Construction of qualitative information: location, participants and collection of information**

The community where the study was conducted is located between the Casqueiro River and the Anchieta Highway, is the second largest favela in a municipality of Baixada Santista and is built on mangroves, which shows the complexity of its urbanization, considering the preservation of the environment and living conditions. Regarding the state's presence in the territory, it has only one mixed-model Health Unit composed of three family health teams. There is also a day care center, a church and community-based organizations.

Most of the houses are made up of stilts built close to each other and residents live with poor basic sanitation, lack of leisure and socialization options, violence of drug trafficking crime and a high rate of juvenile pregnancy (Anhas; Castro-Silva, 2017). The most recent references of the São Paulo Social Vulnerability Index place it in the very high vulnerability group - subnormal clusters (IPVS, 2018).

According to data from the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2010), its estimated population is 128,748 inhabitants, and of these, 57.9.1% are brown and 8% black; its main economic activity is the petrochemical industries installed in the 1950s, which place it, according to the survey by the Municipal Information Observatory (Bremaeker, 2019), among the richest municipalities in the country with an annual budget revenue of more than R\$ 1 billion (Carro, 2020). However, according to Anhas (2019), 54.02% of its population lives and resides in precarious or risky conditions.

For this study, we analyzed a database composed of information collected between June 2017 and October 2019 in five workshops, twenty-four field diaries, and in-depth interviews with four leaders (three women and one man). One of them works

<sup>3</sup> These are the research projects "Social inequality and subjectivity: life trajectories and struggles for better living and health conditions in vulnerable territory of Baixada Santista" (National Council for Scientific Development (CNPq) no. 407836/2016-0) and "Ethics of care and construction of rights: psychosocial reception in family health practices in situations of social exclusion" (São Paulo State Research Support Foundation (Fapesp) no. 2016-23973-2).

in a philanthropic institution in the community, another is retired and supplements her income with an on-site grocery store, one is retired and the other works in fishing and other occasional works. All have incomplete basic level of schooling and age between 30 and 65 years.

The techniques used were: research of official data and document analysis; thematic workshops; formation of research groups for in-depth interviews; participant observation and field diaries. The formation of research groups occurred in four stages from the meetings for the presentation of the project, by the formation of the research group to the development of research and discussions of the results.

The interviews and workshops were recorded and transcribed according to the Informed Consent Form approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of São Paulo - CEP/Unifesp no. 66235417.3.0000.5505, no. 68720217.8.0000.5505 and CEP no. 2,108,711 and no. 2,198,202.

In a later stage of updating the reflections due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, semi-structured distance interviews were conducted with community leaders via cross-platform messaging applications (WhatsApp, Telegram) or communication software (Skype, Zoom). The interviews were recorded according to the Informed Consent Form approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Universidade Federal de São Paulo - CEP/UNIFESP no. 4,530,562 and stored in digital files for study and analysis. Audio transcription was not necessary, since the management software allows the inclusion of audio files.

### **Information management and analysis**

Information were organized and managed by the researcher himself using the Atlas.ti software and analyzed according to Depth Hermeneutics methodology (Demo, 2012; Thompson, 2000).

In the data analysis, we associate Qualitative Epistemology (González-Rey, 2011), which comprises the guiding references of the analyses, as part of a continuous process of deepening the information, valuing the implication and the creativity of the researcher and favoring the emergence of new theorizations.

## **Results and discussion**

We analyzed the narratives of community leaders in participatory processes that mark the history of struggles for the improvement of living conditions, pointing out some potentialities and weaknesses expressed in the forms of community organization and socialization, and presented some issues contextualized by the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Weaknesses expressed in the forms of organization and socialization and in the participatory processes of community leaders**

Social participation is materialized as a collective force “that grows in power as it is shaped by the different reliefs and contours, valuing the modes and moments of the communities in which it is produced” (Costa; Castro-Silva, 2015, p. 288), whose quality is associated with the possibility of forming bonds with the objective of claiming or creating affirmative forms of overcoming the violation of rights (Costa; Castro-Silva, 2015; Gohn, 2019; Lavalle, 2011). However, the lack of connection and mobilization of people represents one of the great difficulties.

*Martina’s speech was very exciting. She said people need to worry, so it’s challenging the issue of participation. For Martina, people don’t feel like it’s their city. It’s like city’s not ours. She said that we need to feel we belong to the city to start fighting for these environmental and health issues, which are so important. (Field Diary, March 28, 2018)*

*Benkos comments on the difficulty in organizing politically in the community. He always refers to leaders as “those who call themselves leaders.” These people would agree to sell themselves in exchange for some position in the office of councils, mayor and deputy mayor. Moreover, “those who call themselves leaders” spread hatred and envy among themselves, by spreading rumors, gossip, causing discord. (Field Diary, April 4, 2018)*

In this line, gossip has a prominent role. For Elias and Scotson (2000), gossip is phenomena whose dynamics

explain norms, beliefs and relationships of a community, whether derogatory or complimentary; they are faces of the same coin, serving to affirm a dominant opinion, consolidate or undo relationships, move away or bring people together, being, therefore, a powerful tool in communication and instrument of social control. In this case, gossip plays a rather negative role in the bonds between the people of the community.

*Gossip is a source of discord and many fights among the residents of the community. The internet, via social networks, appears as something that intensifies the situation.* (Field Diary, November 14, 2017)

*One paper cited gossip and the whole [research group] emphatically confirmed its existence everywhere and in the community.* (Field Diary, September 14, 2018)

In the process of socialization and community organization, violence has contributed to the blurring of the social fabric. Among these, the organization of drug trafficking has interfered in the daily dynamics by dictating rules of conduct and coexistence (Medeiros; Sapori, 2010). In this territory, the leaders note the influence of trafficking in the organization of community dynamics.

*At the time of the gangs and during the period when the Terceiro Comando was at the conducting the trafficking in the neighborhood, there were many robberies and the community was much more violent. It was common, for example, to see corpses and heads floating in the river, bodies of people probably murdered by gangs. That doesn't happen anymore. Conflicts are resolved by trafficking [...] although situations of street fighting and deaths no longer happen, we recognize that other types of violence were brought to the neighborhood.* (Field Diary, December 4, 2017)

The minimization of the presence of the State causing situations of social helplessness (Dimenstein; Cyril Neto, 2020) favors the installation and growth of drug trafficking organizations and the consequent violence, which is a problem difficult to solve in practical and ideological terms, according to Zaluar (1997).

The aforementioned weaknesses are part of a context of extreme poverty and lack of basic sanitation that daily endanger the physical and mental health of the inhabitants, a condition that generates a feeling of humiliation and aggravates suffering, since the place where people live reflects in their own dignity, as described in the book *Quarto de despejo* (Jesus, 2007).

### **Potentialities expressed in the forms of organization and socialization and in the participatory processes of community leaders**

According to Martin-Baró (2017), the perception of social injustices triggers a process of awareness, which, combined with subjective and intersubjective resources can awaken different forms of confrontation. Also according to Martin-Baró (1997), as it gradually decodes the world around, the subject captures the oppression and dehumanization mechanisms, thus transforming the consciousness that perceives the situation as natural and opening the horizons to new possibilities.

[Barreto] told about his role together with Martina in the fight of ISAC [Instituto Socioambiental e Cultural], because the pit<sup>4</sup> also brings damage to the class of anglers, who have their work product contaminated and therefore no possibility of being marketed or consumed. He stressed the importance of raising awareness among the population about the risks to which they are exposed due to the presence of pits for the disposal of heavy metal waste by companies that claim to seek progress, but by misinformation and disrespect. (Field Diary, March 1, 2018)

<sup>4</sup> Located in the Piaçaguera river channel, the pit stores 2.6 million cubic meters of sediments that have contaminants banned by the Stockholm Convention on Organic Pollutants, the pollution levels found exceed four times the highest level ever described in the literature (Mesquita, 2019).

*The critical awareness that arises in the face of the reality that surrounds it provides a new praxis that, in turn, opens to new forms of consciousness. According to Martin-Baró (1997), the awareness process results in strengthening the subjects and the community, because people realize that the situations of oppression they live in are shared by other people in the community.*

*that's why I tell the fisherman, it's not by speaking that we're going to [...] we'll only be able to change something when we have information and then we work on that information then see which one is better for everyone. Did you understand? And that's not a simple thing, that happen overnight, we have to see, legislation, law, rule, what is up to us to do, for this common. (Barreto)*

The human being is transformed as he modifies the reality, being a dialectical process that, according to the author, can only happen with dialogue between the subjects (Martin-Baró, 1997; Montero, 2010).

*Oh, yesterday I was talking to some women here on our street, we're forming a commission for us to go to the trap house to talk to them about the funk party they're doing here. (Petra)*

*then we started to organize ourselves in the Mothers Club to see how we could claim [...] then the big obstacle was the railway network, and Father Antonio helped a lot in this construction [...] he formed a team, bring people [...] financially support a bus to take us to the legislative assembly to press deputy, to press the Union Heritage Service/SPU, because there was no ambulance, it wouldn't enter in if someone died. (Martina)*

The awareness of a situation of deprivation leads a group of people to organize themselves to claim their rights or to create solutions, a group that mobilizes begins to demand better living conditions. As pointed out by Touraine (2007), since they have lived male domination in their lives, women may take more general actions for the recomposition of life.

*And I saw that here the children lived in a very high risk situation, besides poverty, right, the health, everything: the situation was precarious, much more than we see now, right? There were children walking around naked because they lacked clothes [...] And then as I already knew the Salvation Army in Santos, I invited them, and Margareth Ingrid was there. I invited her to come and do this work here in the community. (Petra)*

*[A social worker] helped in the organization, as guidance [...] how could guide ourselves, to organize ourselves so that we can register, so that we can actually exist. Because the society had the statute, but it was not registered due to the lack of money, [...] we did not know the way to register it, we would register it but it was not legalized so we kind of existed clandestinely, we had an internal organization but it was not legalized. So the first legal entity was made by women. We did it. [...] it is the Community Association [...] which still exists. (Marina)*

The active presence of female leaders from the beginning, based on awareness processes, has opened possibilities for a new praxis, including by effectively participating in the organization and collective mobilization in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

## The COVID-19 pandemic and the intensifying effects of social inequalities

A large part of the population that had already suffered from the lack of fundamental rights had the situation aggravated by the investment cuts proposed by PEC 241, which justified the containment of social programs that had been fighting enormous social inequalities by assuming that the country's economic problems are caused by public spending, directly putting social rights at risk (Fiocruz, 2016).

In this context, the covid-19 pandemic arrived in Brazil in 2020<sup>5</sup>, whose advance explained the consequences of social inequality by affecting more

5 On February 26, 2020, the first case was confirmed in Brazil in the city of São Paulo (Croda; Garcia, 2020).

directly the populations with greater difficulties of putting into practice isolation and social distancing due to the need to fight for survival and the housing precariousness (Caponi, 2020; Santos, 2020). In this case, as explained by Nakamura e Silva (2020, p. 156),

the bodies are distinctly vulnerable to infection, access to health services, illness and, therefore, death resulting, among other things, from the absence of public policies that require health strategies linked to other initiatives to respond to the various aspects involved in the necessary confrontation of the pandemic.

On the other hand, we see the “establishment of networks of solidarity, community initiatives and responses that, as in other health challenges already experienced, are fundamental links in the construction of answers that have required us to have uninterrupted reflections” (Nakamura; Silva, 2020, p. 157), as happened in this community, which, despite all the stress, counted on the solidarity of the residents, which is a necessary cooperation to face the minimization of the presence of democratic institutions.

*the stress level of people increased, we saw that people got more impatient, I myself witnessed like about three assaults against women. (Martina)*

*unemployment has also increased, the difficulty increased a lot, because this is a very needy community, the abundance here is very large, abundant of everything, right, but at the same time solidarity [...] solidarity has increased a lot. (Martina)*

The leaders were also able to organize themselves to fight the spread of the virus by raising awareness among residents, by using technological resources offered, and partnering with companies and organizations to obtain the necessary items for protection.

*we organized an internet group called good people, formed mostly by young people, because we are very supportive to each other here, so depending on the need, what is happening, it's like an alarm*

*is triggered, you know, in each one, so everyone mobilizes. (Martina)*

*I decided to do this awareness work, we partnered with some organizations, we received donations of alcohol gel, mask, liquid soap, we filled bottles and put in strategic points, we made posters, we started to do this work so that people would become aware [...] then we started to partner with other organizations, we got market baskets, donations to collaborate with other people that had no food... this at the boom of the pandemic. (Martina)*

Aggregating social participation and collective work has allowed leaders to make themselves subjects of history and assume the role that the neoliberal capitalist state is failing to fulfill. They know that, as Scaramboni reminds us (2020, p. 14), “the importance of lives lies in the actions built by the collectivism, which insist on living and fostering society projects that imply not in the extermination of people, but in the end of inequalities”. They face adversities as they can, despite the set of affections that the pandemic is triggering and intensifying, especially the negative ones, generating psychic suffering, such as fear, anger, envy, and longing. However, they also trigger hope, “a constant partner (fear nourishes hope and hope allows us to live in spite of fear)” (Sawaia, 2020, p. 4).

In this regard, Scaramboni (2020, p. 11) emphasizes that:

*In these deadly paths, staying alive maintaining the relation with the possibility of living is the first challenge. Weaving a production of care and coping practices to the refusal of death, with information, masks, water, soap, harm reduction strategies and what else possible.*

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought more than just medical and epidemiological consequences, for example: the social, political and economic effects, causing an intensification of existing precariousness such as poverty, vulnerability by the absence of fundamental rights, the unhealthiness of housing, besides the lack of either state interventions or



private investments, bringing numerous challenges for leaders in a moment when the emergency aid ends in the country.

## Final considerations

We found that community leaders have a history of achievements related to improvements in living conditions despite the existence of what are considered weaknesses, such as the current lack of mobilization existing in the community, the demotivating perception of corruption and the disarticulation between the leaders and violence of the drug trafficking organization.

Despite the existence of potentialities such as the processes of awareness, organization and dialogue with the community to achieve some objectives - such as the creation of the Mothers' Club and the organization of an institute against the pit (ISAC) - most actions have not yet resulted in an implementation of public rights and policies of health, education, assistance or culture.

The precariousness of living conditions in the community, accentuated by the presence of the pandemic, triggers social participation, since this becomes a concrete need today. The question is: how to foster social participation beyond voluntarism?

The selective presence of the State in this and other communities has given rise to new movements of social participation, actors and leaders. The church and trafficking emerged, both fulfilling different functions, but often acting in a common field: assistance.

We found that making people appropriate the territory is one of the great challenges, thus boosting democratic and participatory processes aimed at combating the injustices and sufferings of populations put on the sidelines by an institutionalization, whose origins date back to colonialism and patriarchy that mark the origins of our country.

These processes can advance public policies and lead the State to a path of greater social equity by denouncing social inequalities, being, therefore, an important object of scientific research and reflection.

Our study has the gap related to the development of other themes related to the phenomenon of social participation, such as: overcoming assistance and voluntarism; gender issues, considering the leading

role of women in this community; the aspects that lead to leadership in this community and the role that the State plays in vulnerable communities.

These issues remain as themes of desirable future investigation with the purpose of contributing to the necessary confrontation of inequalities.

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## Authors' contribution

Yagiu participated in the information management and analysis, writing, critical review and approval of the final version. Castro-Silva, Euzebios Filho and Martin participated in the writing, critical review and approval of the final version.

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