

‘People taking care of people’: Popular Agents in promoting more sustainable and healthy territories

‘O povo cuidando do povo’: Agentes Populares na promoção de territórios mais sustentáveis e saudáveis

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ABSTRACT The COVID-19 pandemic had profound impacts on Brazilian society, but little attention was paid to the socio-environmental determination of the health of peripheral populations. This project arises in this context, with the proposal to identify challenges and potential in confronting the pandemic and its consequences in three peripheral and vulnerable territories in Rio de Janeiro. The Inova-TSS notice was the opportunity to develop research that, simultaneously to generating data, would contribute to empowering these territories to better deal with this challenge, thus contributing to making them more sustainable and healthier. Supported by Popular Education and other dialogical perspectives, this is a qualitative study that combined research, training, extension and quantitative research strategies, and was developed in partnership with five social movements, since its genesis. At the suggestion of these organizations, the research was linked to an action of the popular campaign ‘Periferia Viva’, a course for Popular Health Agents offered in the same territories as the research, where these organizations were already operating. This experience report aims to share challenges and strengths of the constitutive process of this investigation, which integrated activists, health professionals, and residents of benefiting communities as popular researchers, recognizing their condition as subjects in knowledge production.

KEYWORDS Sustainable and Healthy Territories. Sociocultural territory. Community health workers. Health promotion. Knowledge sharing.

RESUMO A pandemia da covid-19 provocou impactos profundos na sociedade brasileira, mas pouca atenção foi endereçada à determinação socioambiental da saúde de populações periféricas. Este projeto surge nesse contexto com a proposta de identificar desafios e potencialidades do enfrentamento da pandemia e suas consequências em três territórios periféricos e vulnerabilizados do estado do Rio de Janeiro. O edital Inova-TSS foi a oportunidade de desenvolver uma pesquisa que, além de gerar dados, contribuiu para potencializar esses territórios para lidar melhor com esse desafio, contribuindo assim para torná-los mais sustentáveis e saudáveis. Apoiado na Educação Popular e em outras perspectivas dialógicas e participativas, este é um estudo qualitativo que conjugou pesquisa, formação, extensão e estratégias de pesquisa quantitativa, sendo desenvolvido em parceria com cinco movimentos sociais, desde a sua gênese. Por sugestão dessas organizações, a pesquisa foi articulada a uma ação da campanha popular ‘Periferia Viva’: um curso de Agentes Populares de Saúde oferecido nos mesmos territórios da pesquisa onde essas organizações já atuavam. Este relato de experiência propõe-se a compartilhar desafios e potências do processo constitutivo dessa investigação, que integrou militantes, profissionais da saúde e moradoras(es) das comunidades beneficiadas como pesquisadoras(es) populares, reconhecendo sua condição como sujeitos na produção de conhecimentos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE Territórios Sustentáveis e Saudáveis. Território sociocultural. Agentes de saúde pública. Promoção da saúde. Compartilhamento de conhecimentos.

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Introduction

‘People taking care of people: a participatory action research on challenges and strategies in facing COVID-19 in three peripheral territories in the state of Rio de Janeiro’ was an experience combining different approaches and interests, drawing on the common objective of contributing to improve life conditions of people living and working in the places where the project was performed.

The project was funded by Programa Inova Fiocruz Encomendas Estratégicas – Call No. 06/2020 – Sustainable and Healthy Territories in the context of COVID-19 pandemic [ID VPPIS-003-FIO-20-16], launched in September 2020, when there was still no vaccine against the novel Coronavirus available in Brazil and the main measure to avoid contagion was social distancing.

The context was especially cruel for rural and urban peripheries, whose populations are mostly Black, have low education level and, in general, survive from informal work. Having no job contract and depending on being in the streets for survival, those people found themselves facing the double threat of dying from COVID-19 and from hunger.

The project, initiated in that context, was developed in partnership with social movements involved in actions to face COVID-19 pandemic in the three territories where this research was conducted. In the city of Rio de Janeiro, there were two localities: the rural-urban community Terra Prometida (Promised Land), in the Complex of Penha, where the Integration Center of Serra da Misericórdia (CEM), member of the Carioca Urban Agriculture Network (RedeCau), was developing urban agroecology initiatives; and the Condomínio Desup, in the Complex of Mangueinhos, where the Workers Movement for Rights (MTD) and the Popular Youth Rise (Levante) distributed food baskets during the pandemic. In the city of Macaé, it was in the rural camping Edson Nogueira, headquarters of

Marielle Franco Agroecology Pedagogical Unity, linked to the Landless Rural Workers Movement (MST).

At the request of these organizations, the project incorporated the Course for Popular Health Agents¹, an action of the popular campaign ‘Periferia Viva’, which was being prepared in the state of Rio de Janeiro, mobilized by these organizations. We took on the proposal, because this strategy would contribute to making those territories more sustainable and healthy, since the objective was to train volunteers to provide guidance to their communities on prevention and care in facing COVID-19.

Being convinced that the processes health-disease-care are complex and their correct understanding requires a multidisciplinary approach, this experience was performed collaboratively, involving researchers from various areas and institutions, social movements, besides professionals and representatives of the three territories involved.

It was not easy to comprise such diversity of interests and organizational structures; it required the adoption of methodologies favoring dialogue and strategies that enabled to define specific competences and responsibilities and to establish a collaboration relationship between the various instances. The aim of this experience report is to share this project’s constitutive dynamics and challenges, committed from the start to promoting a shared construction of knowledges and actions.

This article is organized in four sections, following this introduction. The ‘Project development’ presents the methodology and strategies adopted in the construction and planning of actions. In sections ‘Course for Popular Health Agents’ and ‘Field research’, we share the constitutive process and the main challenges faced in each of them. The ‘Final considerations’ section presents a synthesis, an assessment and the learnings derived from this experience.

Project development

'People taking care of people' was a research that sought to understand the facts in dialogue with the people who lived those experiences, in view of the scientific advance combined with social emancipation. The initial objective was to investigate how the pandemic affected the living conditions and access to health care services of families and individuals who live in the three peripheral territories of the state of Rio de Janeiro.

We adopted the "action-research"²⁽¹³⁻⁴⁶⁾ because its assumptions are compatible with our objectives. This methodology considers the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in the research process, based on dialogue and coparticipation, proposing 'participation', 'consciousness' and 'education' as paths for the elaboration of action projects aiming at the transformation of the social reality combined with knowledge production, together with the working classes.

By aiming at the 'shared construction of knowledge'³, the social movements and the subjects of the territories actively contributed to the investigation, from the diagnosis of problems, through the study design, until the reflection on collected data. In this process, we elaborated a data collection instrument comprising interests and needs of the territories, which was incorporated as pedagogical material into the course for Popular Health Agents.

By the end of the project, we conducted a 'systematization of the experience'⁴. The publication⁵ was structured in two sections and its elaboration was shared between the researchers in charge of the Research section and the social movements responsible for systematizing the experience of the course being offered in their respective territories of activity.

The project was forwarded to the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of the Sérgio Arouca National School of Public Health (Ensp) of Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz), with the questionnaire finalized and approved

before the courses and the field research were carried out, under the Certificate of Presentation for Ethics Appreciation – CAAE No. 54977921.5.0000.5240 and Opinion No. 6.032.039. We produced two Free and Informed Consent Forms (FICF): one aimed at the trainees, and another at the interviewees, explaining the risks and benefits of participating in the study and the possibility of abandoning it at any time.

The 'Basic Care Register' was the basis for the design of the instrument produced by the project team, composed of researchers and professionals of health and representatives of the territories and social movements. The questionnaire had seven axes in which were addressed themes referring to problems and experiences of territorial and collective, non-individual, character.

The project was conducted between March 2021 and March 2023. In 2021, all activities were held online, with the support of the Zoom tool, to which we sought to adapt the conversation circles methodology, as others did⁶.

Considering the diversity of actors involved, we were inspired by Dias and Gama⁷ in their 'Community-based participatory investigation applied to epidemiological researches' and organized the team work in three instances with specific competences: Political-Pedagogical Coordination (CPP), Management, and territorial Political-Pedagogical Coordinations, defining a working method that favored the dialogue between them.

In addition, three thematic working groups were created: Communication, Rights, and Methodology, of which all involved segments participated.

The project's fundamental aspects were defined by the CPP, composed of representatives of the social movements and territories and by the general coordination of the research. In this instance, were established: the integration strategy of the research into the course for Popular Health Agents, the definition of the political-pedagogical project of this training, and the resources' partial destination.

This relationship went well until we were pressed by the schedule, which induced the following reflection: the timing of the movements is subordinated to the conjuncture and the political context. What is strategic at the beginning of a process can become obsolete or unfeasible before its conclusion. Furthermore, militancy is not always a paid activity and/or the militants and leaderships assume many tasks simultaneously, not being able to dedicate their time to a single specific project. The timing of the territories is the daily life. In the case of vulnerable territories, their dynamics is constantly affected by violence and violations of rights, which have impact on their routine and even their right to exist. In contrast, research projects have a defined period of beginning and conclusion, and the liberation of resources is linked to deliveries and accountability to the supporters. The disconnection of these timings is a factor that engenders tension and stress.

The Methodology Working Group (GT), comprising researchers, representatives of social movements and ‘territorial researchers’ of the project, worked on the elaboration of the questionnaire and the definition of the field research methodology.

Each locality had a ‘territorial CPP’, composed of representatives of the social movements and the community, among which a scholarship holder hired by the project to act as local articulator. This instance was responsible for carrying out the course and the field research in the territories. The selection of community representatives and scholarship holders was made by the social movements. Most of them were young women in a process of political training, except for Macaé, whose territorial representatives were MST local leaders.

In the first year of the project, the work was mainly online, performed with the use of the Zoom tool. We were dedicated to the construction and consolidation of the organizational instances, as well as to the actions and the research planning. In addition, we

sought to establish a dialogical and participatory process, based on biweekly meetings of the CPP, besides regular meetings of the Methodology GT and extended meetings between the Methodology GT and the CPP, to conduct an articulated work between the two.

To facilitate and qualify the debate, we promoted seminars and workshops. The first workshop was restricted to the CPP, on the role of this Coordination. Subsequently, we held a seminar on the course for Popular Health Agents and a workshop on the differences and complementariness between the Community Health Agents and the Popular Health Agents, both aimed at the entire team.

Even in the online setting, coherently with the perspective of popular education, we started the events with a ‘mystic’ – a social practice that appeals to emotion, not to reason, and is incorporated into the methodology of the social movements’ meetings⁸ – followed by a short presentation of the participants, and then by the lectures. The participants were divided into smaller discussion groups – the Zoom’s rooms – and, at the end, we presented the synthesis to all. The lecturers were leaders of the movements and researchers who participated in the construction of the courses for Popular Agents in other states of the country.

These meetings were essential to bring together distinct universes and interests, establish a common goal of the project and, especially, build trust between the parties. It is noteworthy that the political nature of social movements requires caution when getting close to new supporters, in the same way as scholars tend to disregard traditional and popular knowledge on topics of their expertise. Antisystemic social movements⁹, like those involved in this project, are constantly subjected to violence and disqualification. The partnership with institutions and researchers is never merely technical-scientific; it is above all a political alliance. Scientists who accept this challenge are ‘militant researchers’¹⁰, not because they abandon

methodological rigor, but because they aim at a science that is engaged and committed to social emancipation.

Still in 2021, we developed the main field research instrument: a closed questionnaire, produced on the Research Electronic Data Capture (RedCap) platform, consisting of seven axes integrated to the themes and schedule of the course for Agents: 1) Household characteristics; 2) Profile of the household head; 3) Food insecurity; 4) Socio-territorial vulnerabilities; 5) Access to health care services; 6) COVID-19 pandemic [considering March 2020 as the initial time frame]; and 7) Work, income and access to rights in the COVID-19 pandemic.

The questionnaire elaboration was a dialogical and participatory process. A first version, developed by a health researcher, was submitted to the critics of social movements and researchers during online meetings, when each axis was discussed. In the sequence, the updated version with the teams' inputs was validated in the territories, and the new suggestions were incorporated into the instrument approved by CEP/Ensp.

The complexity of the instrument reflected the plurality of interests. All participants wanted to have their questions in the questionnaire, which intended to generate data to support the movements and communities' struggles. The instrument's validation process was conducted in the territories, during the cycle of workshops on Popular Research on Health: the first action of the project held in person, as from January 2022.

The workshops of Popular Research on Health were aimed at the 'territorial researchers' and open to militants, health professionals and the movements' supporters. Its objective was to problematize the role and place of popular research and of Popular Health Surveillance¹¹, debating with who lives, militates and works in these places about the meaning of this for their territories.

With the intention of promoting an encounter of the territories' representatives, we

held workshops in the city of Rio de Janeiro gathering Manguinhos and Penha. The first and the third workshops were at Manguinhos Park Library and the second at the headquarters of CEM, in Terra Prometida. Due to the distance, in Macaé we condensed the cycle in two meetings at the Edson Nogueira camping; one of these with the presence of the territorial researchers of Penha and Manguinhos.

The workshops had two distinct moments. In the morning, we organized conversation circles and debated issues related to the territories' 'socio-environmental determination of health'¹², articulating concepts of collective health with their own realities and promoting a debate between theory and practice. In the afternoon, we had the validation of the questionnaires, carried out in pairs composed preferably of participants from different territories. At the end of the meetings, there was the reading of the corresponding axis, registering the highlights, which were later incorporated into the instrument. The questionnaire validation process in the territories revealed mistakes in the construction of certain questions and answers and in terms of language, thus the communities' contribution was essential for its adequacy.

The questionnaire was used as paradidactic material of the course for Popular Health Agents and applied in the field by the trainees, as part of their training process.

Course for Popular Health Agents

The course for Popular Health Agents¹³ is an action of the popular campaign 'Periferia Viva'¹, originally aimed at facing the COVID-19 pandemic in peripheral territories, already carried out in various places of Brazil.

In the state of Rio de Janeiro, the course was held in articulation with this research, with benefits for both parties. The research provided the resources for the achievement of this action, ensured its certification as an Extension course of the Institute of Social Medicine of the State University of Rio de

Janeiro (IMS-Uerj), and granted a popular researcher scholarship for each of the three territories. In return, the trainees contributed to the research process, sharing their impressions, evaluations on their respective territories, and performing as popular field researchers. The title of the project, 'People taking care of people', is related to this campaign and results from this partnership.

The course adopted the original political-pedagogical proposal¹³, adapted to our (post-) pandemic context and moment. During the elaboration of the proposal for the Call, we noticed the need to introduce the themes of communication and access to rights in the pandemic context of this training. These two modules were developed and integrated into the pedagogical program of the course.

Communication researchers and professionals, associated to VideoSaúde Distribuidora (HealthVideo Distributor) of Fiocruz (sector of the Institute of Scientific and Technological Communication and Information - ICICT), developed the module 'Popular communication as a tool for struggle and political action' and produced a video-documentary on the project. Based on studies on the articulation between the fields of information, communication and health¹⁴, they sought to link the strengthening of community bonds to the research's actions, debating issues related to the dissemination of fake news and disinformation, and how algorithms operate in the present context of strong capillarity of digital platforms, all associated to large technological and financial conglomerates.

Professors and extension-researchers of the extension project 'Work, Dialogue and Action' (DiaTrab) of the National School of Law of the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (FND-UFRJ) developed the module 'Rights', based on the dialogue with residents of the territories. The intention was to meet the demands and challenges faced by the communities, their regulation by legal norms and the possible legal-political paths to face them.

The module favored dialogical and

participatory dynamics and was divided in three meetings: the first addressed the construction process of 'Rights', their legal advances and setbacks in different historical moments, and fundamental human rights. In the dynamics, the residents produced a Violation of Rights Map of the territory, identifying the main violations and reflecting on possible ways to face them.

In the second meeting, a 'Counter of Rights' was organized to listen to residents' demands and make referrals to entities and institutions. Based on these claims, the third meeting addressed the themes: Fundamental Rights, Women's Rights and Domestic Workers' Rights.

Since the first edition, the courses for Popular Health Agents adopted the 'pedagogy of alternance', which comprises moments of school-time, when the contents are studied in the classroom, and moments of community-time, when the trainees seek to link the apprehended knowledge with their realities, including through tasks to be carried out in their territories.

In Rio de Janeiro, the training had a duration of 80 class-hours divided in five modules, worked between the school-time and the community-time: 'Who are we and how to understand the pandemic'; 'Popular communication as a tool for struggle and political action'; 'How to take care of my community'; 'Reading the Territory'; and 'Rights'. The certification was given to those who participated of, at least, 75% of the training.

The courses were held simultaneously in the three territories, under the coordination of the social movements, between June and October 2022, the same period of the interviews. Originally, the trainees would be residents in the territories only, but the groups of Manginhos and Macaé were incomplete, therefore the movements responsible for the courses decided to accept people from other communities. The program of the course was a common one to all groups, though each organization worked on the theme according to

its reality. In Macaé, the course was associated to the training in agroecology, which was ongoing in the 'Marielle Franco Pedagogical Unity'. In Penha, the 'slaughter of Complexo do Alemão'¹⁵ and a dispute between the drug traffic and the local militia affected the Terra Prometida, leading the module 'How to take care of my community' to focus on health and violence, and the community-time focused on agroecology and health. In Manguinhos, where the course included trainees from different places, the debate was on the various territories and the possibilities of action.

The course methodology included that in the community-time, every trainee would accompany ten families of the own territory. In the definition of the research strategy, it was decided that the interviews would be conducted with these same families, during the home visits, taking advantage of those moments to correlate the issues of the questionnaire with the local reality.

Field research

The trainees of the course for Popular Health Agents acted as popular researchers in two ways: applying the questionnaire to families of their neighborhoods, and sharing their reflections and analyses on this process.

In consonance with the Freirean^{10,16} proposal of an emancipatory educational practice that valorizes doubts, rather than answers, the instrument was included as paradigmatic material of the course. The axes of the questionnaire were associated to the modules of the course and worked on in the classroom by the facilitator, who clarified doubts and took advantage of the instrument to stimulate the trainees to reflect on their socio-environmental context.

The questionnaire was applied to families accompanied by the trainees, during the stages of community-time, and the research strategy expected that it would be conducted with the support of tablets provided by the project. The number of participants planned in the research design was of 60 Popular Health

Agents, with 20 of each territory; and of 600 interviewed families, with 200 in each of the three territories.

Although the distribution per territory was different (28 of Edson Nogueira camping, 15 of Terra Prometida, and 17 [residents] of Manguinhos), 60 trainees participated in the research, as originally planned. On the other hand, the number of the questionnaire's respondents was lower than the goal, which was based on the planning that each trainee would accompany ten families in the community, but this did not actually happen. In the Edson Nogueira, 20 persons were interviewed and none of them answered the questionnaire completely. In Manguinhos, there were 58, and only 22 answered the 7 axes of the questionnaire, in which many questions remained without an answer. In Terra Prometida, there were 28 and all the questionnaires were completed.

Although the field research strategy had been defined in accordance with the movements and territories, on the eve of starting the courses and interviews it became impossible to adopt the method in the Edson Nogueira camping due to the lack of electric power; and, in Manguinhos, as the trainees were from different places, sharing the tablets became unfeasible. For this reason, the questionnaire was adapted to be answered on paper, which had negative consequences for the research because most of the instruments remained incomplete.

Terra Prometida was the only territory where the questionnaire was answered directly on the RedCap, which contributed to the fact that the 28 interviewed families answered the 7 modules completely.

When the project was concluded, we held an evaluation meeting in each territory, inviting the course participants/researchers to share their difficulties and the evaluation of the instrument and the field research strategy. In order to integrate the group, we formed a circle and started the meeting with the 'spider web' dynamic, named as such because a ball of wool is thrown from hand to hand; each

one who receives it, speaks and throws it to the next one, and so on, until a web is formed. Then, we made a 'conversation circle' mobilized from key issues.

In these meetings, we evaluated that the study of the questionnaire in the classroom, in addition to its field application, contributed to bringing the participants closer and strengthened their bond with their neighborhood, and to making them perceive the systemic and historical dimension of the problems experienced by their communities. By interviewing their neighbors, the trainees were confronted with the problems that affect them directly, perceiving previously naturalized situations of violence and violations of rights as 'limit-situations'¹⁷. In this exchange, they envisioned the collective dimension of these challenges. This modifies the perception of ways and practices to face them and stimulates the organization and collective action.

The conversation circles also revealed hindrances common to the territories, with the expectation of some interviewees that the inquiry would be linked to some immediate benefit and the constraints engendered by the questions about food (in)security, violence and mental health. In this aspect, the sensibility of the popular researchers was fundamental to listen to the voice of silence and see what the selected option was not able to reveal.

A general conclusion was that the questionnaire was too extensive and that this could have hindered its field application. However, there was also an agreement that all the questions were important and should be included in the interview. Finally, many of the trainees said they felt better prepared after this experience, manifesting the wish that the project would continue.

Besides the questionnaire and the two trainings, we developed three products of scientific dissemination, aimed at the community and the general society: a video-documentary¹⁸, an exhibition, and a publication presenting a systematization of the experience⁶.

Final considerations

This was a qualitative research with a quantitative approach. Our research material included participant observation, annotations, reports, and image and audio-visual registers of the training in Popular Health Research, the stages of the courses for Popular Health Agents, and conversation circles conducted with the research participants: militants, representatives of the territories, and popular trainees/researchers of the Agents course. It also included a field research instrument aimed at socio-territorial data collection: a questionnaire developed in dialogue with the social movements, validated in the territories before being applied, and used as paradigmatic material of the course for Popular Health Agents.

The aim was to investigate the main challenges and potentialities of the researched territories, in the process of facing the COVID-19 pandemic, bringing to the research the perspective of those who live, work and act in these places.

One strategy was the creation of three organization instances and thematic working groups, composed of community members, social movements and researchers, mobilized in a collaborative and dialogical working dynamics. The other strategy was to articulate the research with the course for Popular Health Agents, which was already in construction by the partner social movements. The research was conducted with trainees of the mentioned course, who also performed as popular researchers, interviewing families in their communities and sharing their impressions about their territories drawing on problematizing questions.

Another aim was to develop a research methodology that would integrate the communities as popular researchers. In this process, carrying out the workshops on Popular Research on Health, in combination with the collective and participatory evaluation of the questionnaire was positive, whereas

the questionnaire application was a challenge. The field strategy previously agreed was not pursued in all territories and the trainees were not sufficiently prepared to perform as field researchers. We consider that it would have been more appropriate to study the questionnaire with the students in the classroom, and to select some of the better-prepared and more available trainees to perform as field researchers, training them and paying them for this task.

Finally, it is worth remembering that a truly emancipatory research and learning process is

a two-way path, in which all are affected and ‘become better’. This is the Freirean ideal that drove the construction of this project.

Collaborators

Niemeyer CB (0000-0003-0269-3413)* contributed to the elaboration and revision of the manuscript. Lara PC (0000-0002-2564-0376)*, Xavier JB (0000-0003-2814-7875)*, and Azevedo LO (0000-0002-4876-5948)* equally contributed to the revision of the manuscript. ■

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