

“Hunger and rage (and the virus) are human things”: reflections on solidarity in times of Covid-19

“A fome e a raiva (e o vírus) é coisas dos home”: reflexões sobre participação social em tempos de Covid-19

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ABSTRACT

Brazil confirmed the first Covid-19 case in February 2020, in a framework of a massive introduction of neoliberal policies which worsen the potential to tackle the problem, especially, health, food and nutrition security and social assistance policies for vulnerable populations. In the absence of the State, civil society initiated a process of (re)constructing social participation actions to fight hunger in Brazil, either spontaneously or through organizations.

Objective

To identify and reflect about civil society's initiatives to curb hunger in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil.

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Methods

In order to identify society's initiatives to fight hunger, two independent systematic searches were conducted in the Google® search engine using the following keywords: "covid civil society initiatives" and "hunger pandemic solidarity campaign".

Results

Fourteen nationwide civil society-promoted initiatives were identified, that among their objectives aimed at fostering collective funding to purchase and distribute foods.

Conclusion

Brazilian society has been historically sensitive to the hunger problem and shows solidarity as a social value. Nevertheless, the State is legally bound to provide food, as a social right.

Key-words: Covid-19. Food and Nutrition Security. Human Right to Adequate Food. Social Mobilization. Social Participation.

RESUMO

O Brasil confirma o primeiro caso de Covid-19 em fevereiro de 2020 num contexto de franca implantação de políticas neoliberais, que pioram a capacidade de enfrentamento do problema, em especial, as políticas de saúde, segurança alimentar e nutricional e assistência social destinadas às populações vulneráveis. Na ausência do Estado, a sociedade civil de forma espontânea ou organizada, iniciou um processo de (re)construção de ações de participação social para o combate à fome no Brasil.

Objetivo

Mapear e refletir sobre as iniciativas da sociedade civil para o combate à fome no contexto da pandemia de Covid-19 no Brasil.

Métodos

Para identificar as iniciativas da sociedade para o combate à fome foram conduzidas duas buscas sistemáticas independentes na plataforma Google®, utilizando as palavras-chave: "iniciativas sociedade civil covid" e "fome pandemia campanha solidariedade".

Resultados

Foram localizadas quatorze iniciativas da sociedade civil de abrangência nacional que têm entre seus objetivos promover campanhas de financiamento coletivo para aquisição e distribuição de alimentos.

Conclusão

Historicamente, a sociedade brasileira é sensível ao tema do combate à fome e presta solidariedade como um valor social. Contudo, cabe ao Estado a obrigação legal do cumprimento da alimentação enquanto um direito de cidadania.

Palavras-chave: Covid-19. Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional. Direito Humano à Alimentação Adequada. Mobilização Social. Participação Social.

INTRODUCTION

The expansion of the new Coronavirus (Covid-19, Coronavirus Disease 2019) pandemic in Brazil, with the exponential increase of disease cases, starting February 2020, associated with the current scenario of dismantling the State and the implementation of neoliberal policies, deepens social inequalities and rekindles an old Brazilian ghost: Hunger [1].

Brazil, despite being off the 2014 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Hunger Map, has been showing discontinuity since 2016 of public policies to face the problem, weakening the systems that ensure rights, and in particular, health, social assistance and food and nutrition security policies for vulnerable populations [2-4].

The effects of the 2016 Constitutional Amendment Act No. 95 and the current management policies of the federal government have been decisive for the straining of the Government Unified Health System (SUS) in the face of the pandemic [5]. Globally, the most successful countries in coping with Covid-19 are those with structured public health systems and/or associated with integrated health networks (public/private) with coordinated command for planning, management and control of sanitary, social and political measures [6].

The application of measures to contain the disease - social distance, home isolation and quarantine, combined with the delay in governmental actions for economic and social protection, aggravated the increase in the unemployment rate and the decrease in income, which had been accumulating in Brazil since 2014 and accelerating since 2016 [7-9]. According to the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE, Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), unemployment rate, which in the first quarter of 2020 was 12.6% (12.85 million unemployed), will possibly increase in the following months, intensifying the phenomenon of cyclical hunger generated by the disease containment measures [10,11].

In Brazil, since 2016, the set of policies and programs aimed at ensuring Food and Nutrition Security (SAN, *Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*) with a view to ensuring the Human Right to Adequate and Healthy Food (DHAAS, *Direito Humano à Alimentação Adequada e Saudável*) has undergone progressive dismantling [8]. The main governmental programs of the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy (PNSAN, *Política Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*) aimed at socially vulnerable populations such as the Food Purchase Program (PAA, *Programa de Aquisição de Alimentos*), Popular Restaurants, the National School Feeding Program (PNAE, *Programa Nacional de Alimentação Escolar*) and the *Bolsa Família* Program, presented a drop in investments, with changes in the inclusion, scope and transparency criteria of the management process [9,12].

The worsening of the situation of Food and Nutrition Insecurity (FNI) in part of the Brazilian population has been signaled by scientific entities, scientific associations, Non-Governmental Organizations and investigators based on analyses and technical reports on complaints of violation of rights and absence of actions to comply with the DHAA [4,13-15]. The entire scenario generated by the pandemic underscores the urgency and primacy of actions to face the economic slowdown that is rapidly expanding and deepening, including unemployment, poverty and other forms of social suffering [16].

In the absence of actions and public policies to mitigate the effects of the pandemic, civil society in a spontaneous or organized way, started a process of (re) construction of solidarity actions to fight hunger, in the light of the social movement created by Herbert de Souza, Betinho, in the early 1990s [17,18].

Historically, the existence of the National Council for Food and Nutrition Security (Consea, *Conselho Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*) (2003 - 2019) inserted the theme of Combating Hunger in the field of public policies and social rights and revealed other arrangements in society to face the current situation. Today, new narratives, actors and concerns emerge that, in the 1990s, were not consolidated. Fundamental social protection elements are added in the face of the pandemic, with emphasis on partnerships from non-governmental sectors and, above all, local-based social mobilization that promotes visibility, cooperation and support on several fronts [19,20]. The purpose of this article is to present a brief description-reflection on civil society actions to fight hunger in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic in Brazil.

METHODS

To identify the initiatives to fight hunger promoted by civil society, systematic searches were conducted on the Google® platform. The google.com page was accessed through an anonymous window,

where two independent surveys were carried out using the combinations of keywords in Portuguese: “covid civil society initiatives” and “hunger pandemic solidarity” campaign (“iniciativas sociedade civil covid” and “fome pandemia campanha solidariedade”). Without applying a date limit, the first 20 results (links) were accessed to identify those that compiled solidarity actions during the Covid-19 pandemic. No links resulting from the survey were sponsored (i.e. highlighted at the top of the search results). Two investigators reviewed all the actions registered in each of the 20 links, excluding those not related to food supply and with no national coverage. Actions considered at a national level were those with a wider scope than local actions (e.g. neighborhoods or communities), municipal or just one State of the federation.

The actions included had their available information entered in a database for further characterization and analysis. The survey was carried out in June 2020 and did not intend to exhaustively cover all of them, only those having a national scope. Initiatives disseminated exclusively through social media could not be identified with the search strategy adopted.

RESULTS

The systematic survey method led to the identification of fourteen nationwide civil society initiatives in the fight against Covid-19 which, among several objectives, is the fostering of collective funding campaigns for the acquisition and distribution of food (Chart 1). The disclosure of ten of the fourteen actions occurred, in addition to the identified internet pages, also through the social media such as Instagram®, Facebook®, Twitter®, YouTube®, and LinkedIn®.

Chart 1. Civil society actions to fight hunger in connection with the Covid-19 pandemic.

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Initiative	Responsible	Beneficiaries	Action	Coverage
#FavelasContraOVirus	Central Única das Favelas	Slum dwellers	Awareness actions, food and alcohol gel	National
Apoie os povos indígenas	Articulação dos Povos Indígenas do Brasil	Indigenous villages	Food, medicine and hygiene supplies	National
#DesafioCorona	Individuals and legal entities	Families economically affected by the crisis	Food, hygiene and cleaning supplies	National
Ação da Cidadania contra o Coronavírus	Associação Comitê Rio da Ação da Cidadania Contra a Fome a Miséria e Pela Vida	Families in large urban centers dependent on informal work	Food and basic food baskets	26 States and Federal District
Campanha de doações COVID-19	Ação Social para Igualdade das Diferenças	Families of people with disabilities in situations of extreme vulnerability	Basic food baskets, personal hygiene kits and medicines	16 States
Solidariedade aos grupos mais vulneráveis	Central de Movimentos Populares	Highly vulnerable families	Basic food baskets and perishable products	16 States
Campanha Movimento de Luta nos Bairros, Vilas e Favelas	Movimento de Luta nos Bairros, Vilas e Favelas	Homeless families	Basic food baskets and cleaning supplies	15 States and Federal District
Corona no Paredão	ONG Gerando Falcões	Families from vulnerable communities	Digital basic food baskets	12 States
Fundo de emergência para Sem-Tetos afetados pelo coronavírus	Movimento dos Trabalhadores Sem Teto	Homeless individuals and residents of peripheries	Basic food baskets	10 States and Federal District

Chart 1. Civil society actions to fight hunger in connection with the COVID-19 pandemic.

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Initiative	Responsible	Beneficiaries	Action	Coverage
<i>Mutirão do Bem Viver</i>	<i>Sociedade do Bem Viver</i>	Homeless population, peripheral residents and vulnerable territories in the countryside and forests	Agroecological food baskets, essential items	8 States
<i>Campanha da Rede Nacional de Acolhimento LGBTQIA+ do Brasil</i>	Pro LGBT entities+ ¹	LGBTQIA+ population dependent on informal work or who is in a host space	Basic food baskets and hygiene products	6 States (BA, PE, AM, MG, RJ, SP)
<i>Doação de alimentos e materiais de higiene para quilombolas</i>	<i>Coordenação Nacional de Articulação das Comunidades Negras Rurais e Quilombolas</i>	<i>Quilombos</i> affected by COVID-19, which are overcoming disaster situations	Food and hygiene supplies	NS
<i>TETO Brasil</i>	<i>Organização TETO Brasil</i>	Communities in a state of precariousness	Basic food baskets, hygiene kit and water	NS
<i>#EspalheSolidariedade</i>	<i>Habitat para a Humanidade Brasil</i>	Families in situations of social vulnerability	Food, hygiene and cleaning supplies	NS

Note: ¹Host Homes, Networks for Fighting and Combat LGBT Phobia, Centers for Sociability and Rights of the LGBTQIA + Population.

NS: Not Specified; BA: Bahia; PE: Pernambuco; AM: Amazonas; MG: Minas Gerais; RJ: Rio de Janeiro; SP: São Paulo; LGBTQIA: Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites, Transsexuals or Transgenders; ONG: *Organização Não Governamental*.

The populations served include slum dwellers, homeless people, peripheral residents and vulnerable territories in the countryside and forests, indigenous people, people with disabilities in extreme vulnerability conditions and their families, families who depend on informal work, LGBTQIA + population (Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals, Transvestites, Transsexuals or Transgenders), street-dwelling families, among others.

Out of the fourteen initiatives, only two existed before the pandemic, the “*Mutirão do Bem Viver*” and “*Teto Brasil*”. Thirteen operated with cash donations from individuals and/or legal entities, through deposits in bank accounts, or “online collections” for further acquisition and distribution of food. Nine actions disclosed in real time the amount of donations that, at the time of data collection, reached a total of approximately 19 million *reais* distributed among all the benefits covered by the campaigns.

Only four initiatives estimated the total number of beneficiaries. Two of them pointed out that 267,467 individuals had been helped and the remaining two had helped a total of 7,557 families. Although not all actions informed the States covered, all the units of the Federation were, in some way, reached. Three of the actions also request the involvement of volunteers in their campaigns.

Among all the initiatives – “*Mutirão do Bem Viver*” stands out, as it is a society action that proposes a new supply dynamic: the short production circuit, dialoguing with the guidelines of the National Food and Nutrition Security Policy encouraging sustainable, decentralized and agro-ecological systems going from production to food distribution [20], and promoting access to adequate and healthy food.

DISCUSSION

Covid-19 made visible the perverse effects of the weakening of Food and Nutrition Security Program policies in Brazil. Noteworthy is the extinction, on January 1, 2019, of the National Secretariat for Food and Nutrition Security (SESAN, *Secretaria Nacional de Segurança Alimentar e Nutricional*) and of the National CONSEA, which directly reflected in the increase in practices of violation of the DHAA [21,22].

In this connection, the pandemic caused by Covid-19 intensified the inequality of access to adequate food by the Brazilian population. The most vulnerable population, in which the spread of the virus is accelerated by poor living and health conditions, feels the threat of hunger intensely [4,23,24]. The pandemic has contributed to a worsening of the InSAN situation, in view of the current scenario of increasing poverty and extreme poverty in Brazil [25].

The federal government was inefficient at mitigating the impact of the health crisis generated by Covid-19 and aggravated by the previous social scenario of weakening social rights. In the National Congress, the payment of an emergency aid amounting to half the minimum wage was approved, for informal workers, individual Microentrepreneurs (MEI), self-employed and unemployed [26-28].

Although insufficient, federal congressmen and senators, as a result of strong pressure from civil society movements articulated with the theme of SAN, including the Brazilian Forum on Sovereignty and Food and Nutritional Security, also proposed another support measure: from April 2020, within the scope of the PNAE, a decree was issued on the distribution of food kits for those responsible for students of public schools with the criteria of requirements defined by the management of each municipality [29,30].

The network of civil society participation in solidarity actions to fight hunger was configured with the inclusion of different individuals, from associations' activists, researchers, non-governmental organizations, political entities, philanthropy support groups to citizens self-conscious about the matter. Social mobilization was highlighted, especially when emergency actions were insufficient. Initiatives promoted either spontaneously or through organized civil society, for the supply of food and/or meals in socially vulnerable communities turned out to be essential in some locations [31]. However, the population assisted by these actions is actually entitled to them; therefore, it ought to be the State's commitment to promote measures that remedy the situations of vulnerability and ensure the DHAAS, either in situations such as the current pandemic or after this episode, focusing then on structuring actions, that reduce social inequalities [32].

In the set of solidarity actions, the enhancement thereof stands out in the institution of Federal Law No. 14.016, which establishes the legal security for the donation of food ready for consumption by establishments such as hospitals, snack bars, restaurants, supermarkets, among others [33]. Food donation cannot be considered a solution to hunger, as it minimizes the problem without solving the structural issues of InSAN embedded in the history of Brazil [34].

The legal framework of emergency and structuring SAN policies and programs presents actual alternatives to alleviate the existing InSAN situation. However, in order for long-term improvements to happen, public investment needs to promote health, food and nutrition security and social assistance policies again.

CONCLUSION

The Brazilian society has historically been sensitive to the issue of fighting hunger and offers solidarity as a social value. Some initiatives, with a focus on food sovereignty and sustainable consumption, have contributed to bring about new arrangements for food supply such as short production circuits, generating a close relationship countryside-city, urban-rural, social movements and society [35,36].

However, it is wise to be vigilant, as hunger is an important social marker of inequalities in the context of so many violence and rights violations in Brazil and it is the State that has the legal obligation to comply with DHAAS. Thus, society has an irreplaceable role in denouncing violations of rights and pressing the State to assume its responsibilities.

CONTRIBUTORS

JTC OLIVEIRA participated in the conception, design, analysis, interpretation of data, writing, review and final approval of the article. AM CAMARGO participated in the conception, design, analysis, interpretation of data, writing, review and final approval of the article. BOB MACHADO participated in the conception, design, analysis, interpretation of data, writing, review and final approval of the article. AR OLIVEIRA participated in the conception, design, analysis, interpretation of data, writing, review and final approval of the article. GMR FIATES participated in the conception, design, analysis, interpretation of data, writing, review and final approval of the article. FAG VASCONCELOS participated in the conception, design, analysis, interpretation of data, writing, review and final approval of the article.

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