

SUAS Bahia: communication challenges and strategies to reach civil society

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In 2018, a partnership was signed between the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the International Policy Centre for Inclusive Growth (IPC-IG) with the government of the State of Bahia, Brazil, which was materialised in a letter of agreement within the scope of Project BRA/16/006 for the Strengthening of Social Protection Policies in Bahia. One of the products foreseen by the letter is Product 8, “Study on the SUAS forms of communication developed by the state and municipal administrations”. It aims to identify weaknesses in the internal and external communication of Unified Social Assistance System (*Sistema Único de Assistência Social*—SUAS) and propose strategies to improve communication with society in general as well as across other public policies in the state of Bahia. This One Pager details the main findings related to this product and presents some recommendations for public policy.

Created in 2005 and enacted into law in 2011, SUAS is the system that organises social assistance services in Brazil. It is structured in a decentralised and participatory manner. According to Paragraph 2 of Article 6 of its enactment law, “the SUAS is integrated by the federal entities, by the respective social assistance councils and the social assistance entities and organisations covered by this Law” (Brazil 2011, freely translated by authors). Therefore, SUAS’ responsibilities, including internal and external communication strategies, are shared between the Union, the Federal District, the state, and municipalities.

To conduct the study, 70 interviews were carried out in 39 municipalities (out of a total of 417). Of these interviews, 26 were with SUAS managers, 24 with workers and 20 with users or representatives of civil society/social assistance entities. Interviews with counsellors of the Municipal Social Assistance Councils (*Conselhos Municipais de Assistência Social*—CMAS), whose main objective is the social control of the policy, were prioritised.

All in-depth interviews were conducted via telephone, with an average duration of 40 minutes, including a set of 7 to 8 questions (for users and workers/managers, respectively) related to communication. The vast majority of interviewees were women, with an average age of 40 to 44 years old and who had been at SUAS for an average of 6 years (workers) and 7 years (managers). Users had mostly completed high school, while managers and workers had generally completed some form of higher education.

Table 1 summarises the respondents’ answers regarding the main strategies and communication channels used by SUAS in 2021, the most cited barriers that hinder communication, and some suggestions that were collected during the interviews.

The main takeaway of the study is that SUAS Bahia should prioritise awareness campaigns that combine multiple communication channels to reach existing and potential users, leveraging new technologies such as social networks, but still prioritising in-person messaging.

In addition, one should not lose sight of the overall precarious situation of SUAS equipment and workers. Federative entities should consider increasing investment in social assistance policy, prioritising hiring professionals under the statutory regime and investing in better material working conditions.

Table 1
SUAS communications strategies

Main communication channels and strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The most cited strategies were the use of a sound car, community radio, itinerant visits, and—more recently and deepened with the COVID-19 pandemic—social networks. There was a consensus that even though social networks are on the rise, physical presence in communities is still crucial for effective communication with the target population.
Main barriers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> From the point of view of managers and workers, the lack of knowledge about SUAS represents the main communication bottleneck. This barrier was also the most emphasised by users. Regarding the dialogue between state and municipality, the low level of human resources allocated to SUAS can lead to slow response times, with deleterious impacts on the social assistance work. The percentage of statutory employees working in the Reference Centres for Social Assistance (<i>Centros de Referência de Assistência Social</i>—CRAS) in Bahia (14.07 per cent) is below the national average of 30.48 per cent (Brazil 2020), which compromises linkages with the population and, therefore, hinders communication capacity.
Suggestions for SUAS communication efforts
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respondents were unanimous in pointing out the need to carry out awareness campaigns regarding SUAS and its services. They also pointed out the need to understand social assistance as a right, rather than a benefit. SUAS budget increases were suggested, mainly by managers, including purchases of more material goods for work (own vehicles, for example). Other suggestions were made that do not necessarily imply greater expenses, such as strengthening the interconnection of SUAS with other institutions in the city (mainly with the CMAS), and improving the management of public policy (for example, organising a workers’ chart in the secretariats in charge of the social assistance agenda and establishing a schedule for communication campaigns).

Source: Authors’ elaboration.

References:

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