

SUAS Bahia: challenges and strategies for participation and social control

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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 is Product 9, “Study on the social participation process of users and social assistance workers”, which aims to analyse instances of social control to identify barriers to user access and identify ways to expand their representativity, thus expanding the role of users in strengthening the management of the Unified Social Assistance System (*Sistema Único de Assistência Social*—SUAS). Participation and social control are assessed through the perception of users and workers in these deliberative entities.

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). The Municipal Social Assistance Councils (*Conselhos Municipais de Assistência Social*—CMAS) are permanent deliberative entities of SUAS, which are linked to a municipality and whose composition is equally distributed among government and civil society representatives. Its activities include standardising, disciplining, monitoring, evaluating and inspecting “the management and execution of services, programmes, projects and social assistance benefits provided by the social assistance network” (Brazil 2012, freely translated by authors).

To conduct the study, 70 interviews were carried out in 39 municipalities in the state of Bahia between November 2020 and March 2021. 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, with a set of 13 (to users) to 9 questions (to workers or managers) related to social participation.

The vast majority of interviewees were women, with an average age between 40 and 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. The users or representatives of civil society/social assistance entities linked to the CMAS formed three groups: the largest was composed of beneficiaries of the *Bolsa Família* programme, a second group (civil society representatives) comprised people who do not participate in any programme, and the third was composed of people

linked to SUAS through another programme or group (elderly, youth, Protection and Comprehensive Family Care (*Proteção e Atenção Integral à Família*—PAIF, among others).

The responses indicated that several CMAS units exist merely with a ‘notary function’, that is, only to meet the bare minimum requirements for their continuation as established by law, which hinders the performance of their activities. The barriers faced by councils that led them to this situation include: i) difficulty in engaging people to be counsellors; ii) lack of knowledge regarding SUAS among the counsellors; iii) lack of qualification among the counsellors; and iv) lack of knowledge by the general population regarding their social assistance rights.

Nevertheless, Bahia has excellent CMAS units, and the dissemination of these experiences is essential for strengthening social control in the state. They all had something in common: the active participation of people who use the SUAS infrastructure: community leaders, elderly people, people living in rural areas, among other groups engaged in historical social struggles.

It was also frequently heard during the survey that users and workers alike enjoy making use of the CMAS space. Workers reported improved self-esteem and better performance as they recognised the importance of their work in the council. Furthermore, civil society representatives in the CMAS are potential disseminators of SUAS services, as they are perceived by their contact networks as a focal point regarding these matters. In addition, this space has great potential to break with the idea of social assistance as a favour, and to disseminate it as a right.

The main takeaway of the study was that the solution to avoiding irregularities in the CMAS involves raising awareness among the population (whether workers or members of civil society in general) regarding the importance of this institution. In addition, for the CMAS to be able to effectively inspect public authorities and contribute to the improvement of social assistance policies, it is necessary for people to properly understand their role, thus leading to well-informed counsellors and a population actively interested in occupying spaces of social control.

References:

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