

Communication and social participation in the state of Bahia's Unified Social Assistance System

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1 Introduction

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 establishing the Project BRA/16/006 for the Strengthening of Social Protection Policies in Bahia. Among the products planned are Products 8 and 9. Product 8 sought to identify weaknesses in both the internal and external communications of the state of Bahia's Unified Social Assistance System (*Sistema Único de Assistência Social*—SUAS) and design strategies to improve communication with society in general as well as with other public policies. Product 9 provided an analysis of the instances of social control to identify barriers to the access of participants and point out ways to expand their representation, thus contributing to their role in strengthening SUAS management. Participation and social control are assessed through the perception of users and workers in decision-making bodies, with a focus on conferences and councils.

To this end, 70 interviews were carried out in 39 municipalities in Bahia between November 2020 and March 2021 with SUAS managers, workers and users, covering the state's 27 Identity Territories.¹ These interviews generated a database of 1,820 qualitative responses, which were then codified, systematised, summarised, and analysed.

Respondents were contacted by telephone or, when not possible, via email or social network (WhatsApp). The interviews lasted an average of 40 minutes. All respondents were informed that their responses would be anonymous, and that they would be free not to respond to any questions.

In March 2021, meetings were held with the SUAS Bahia State Workers' Forum (*Fórum Estadual dos Trabalhadores do SUAS da Bahia*—FETSUAS-BA), the Communications Department of Bahia's Department of Justice, Human Rights and Social Development (*Secretaria de Justiça, Direitos Humanos e Desenvolvimento*—SJDHDS) and the State Social Assistance Board (*Conselho Estadual de Assistência Social*—CEAS), to collect official information from institutions relevant to the research. The IPC-IG researchers also reached out to the SUAS Bahia State Users' Forum (*Fórum Estadual dos Usuários do SUAS da Bahia*—FEUSUAS-BA), but received no response. The information collected was incorporated throughout the analysis and in the final suggestions.

2 Profile of respondents

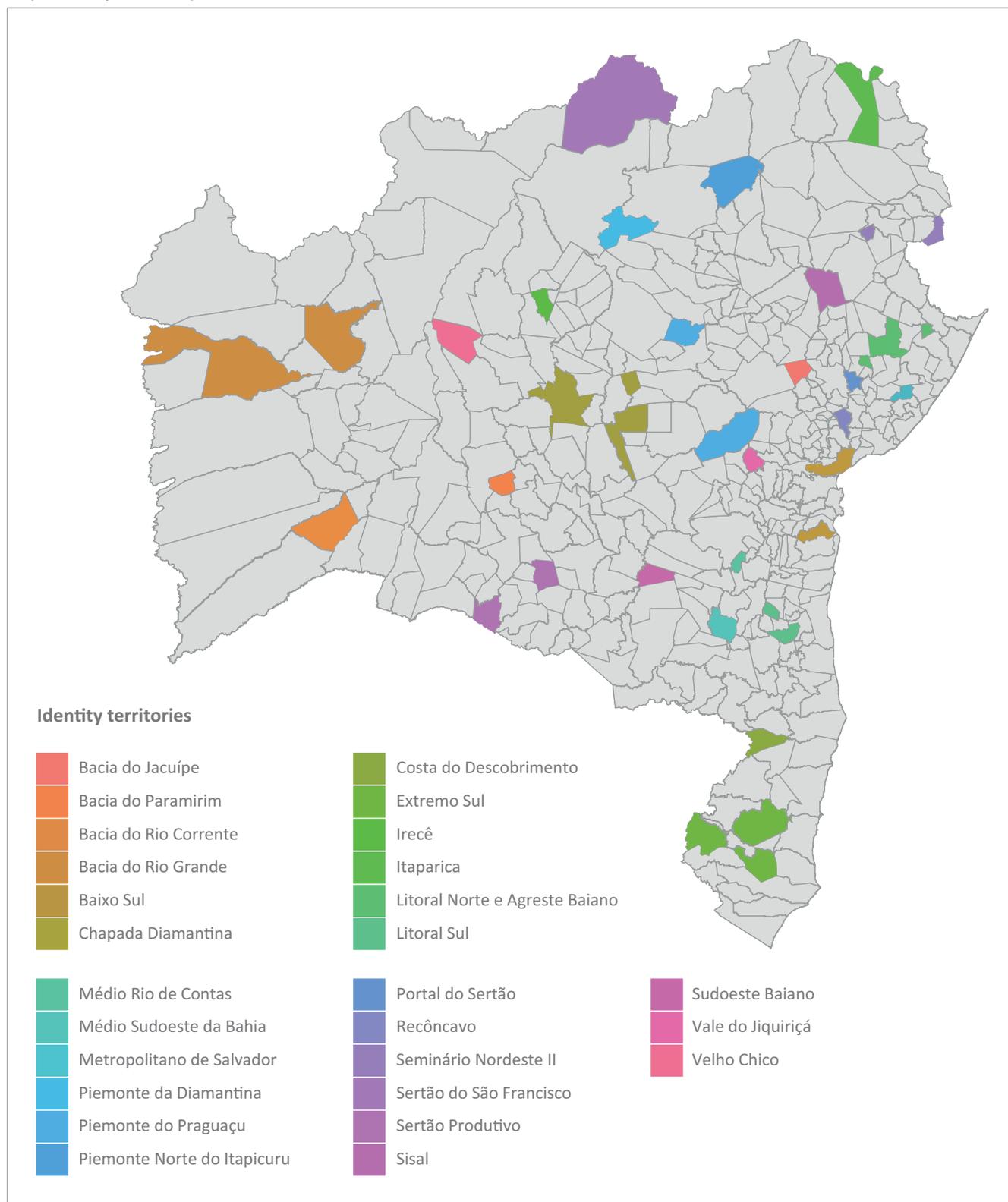
Of a total of 70 interviews, 26 were with managers, 24 with workers and 20 with users or representatives of social assistance entities, underscoring the difficulty of contacting users. Of the 39 municipalities where interviews were conducted, 25 are considered small-sized I (up to 20,000 inhabitants), 9 small-sized II (from 20,001 to 40,000 inhabitants), 3 medium-sized (from 40,001 to 100,000 inhabitants), and 2 large-sized (from 100,001 to 900,000 inhabitants), according to the classification of the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). It is worth mentioning that most of the workers and users interviewed were affiliated to Social Assistance Reference Centres (CRAS), which are present in all of Bahia's municipalities.

Identity Territories were one of the criteria used to select the sample of municipalities for this study. Figure 1 illustrates the subdivisions of Bahia by Identity Territories and the municipalities covered in the research.

The difference in the number of interviews and interviewee profiles by municipality was due to the difficulty in establishing contact through phone or email with municipal secretariats, CRAS/Specialised Social Assistance Reference Centres (CREAS), and councils in several of the municipalities selected in the initial sample (34 municipalities, with an additional 34 substitutes). The number of municipalities per Identity Territory is explained by a change in the interview strategy—the adoption of convenience sampling. The research team looked for cities that were not sampled to conduct interviews with more easily accessible populations.

FIGURE 1

Map of surveyed municipalities



Source: Authors' elaboration.

Still concerning municipalities, IDCRAS is a synthetic indicator that seeks to measure the quality of services provided by CRAS (Nunes and Clemente 2015). The IDCRAS average of the 39 municipalities surveyed was 3.75, slightly above the state average of 3.59. IDConselho is another synthetic indicator that measures the level of development of Municipal Social Assistance Councils (*Conselhos Municipais de Assistência Social—CMAS*).

The IDConselho average of the municipalities covered was 2.80, slightly higher than the state average of 2.75. Although the sample size is small and statistical extrapolations are not possible, we found a positive correlation between the quantity of interviews and municipalities with higher IDCRAS, denoting better quality services and structures. The IDConselho average for municipalities with only one

interview was 2.67 (below the state average); 2.92 for municipalities with 2 interviews; and 2.97 for those with 3 interviews 2.97.²

The vast majority of interviewees were women, with an average age between 40 and 44 years old and who had been working at SUAS for an average of 6 years (workers) 7 years (managers). Most users had 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).

Considering the profile of the interviewees, the results of the field research are presented below.

3 Results

3.1 Communications

Despite some challenges, communications between the state of Bahia and municipalities, and between the state and SUAS offices, are being conducted adequately. Challenges include reducing the state's response time to inquiries from municipalities, strengthening institutional means of communication, avoiding the use of informal and personal communications by employees, and increasing the frequency of training for all workers, to improve the quality of social assistance services.

Improving SUAS' communication with its target audience should include face-to-face initiatives, preferably in the communities where users reside, as they have difficulty in accessing other means. Virtual channels should also be established and institutionalised. Communication with this audience must be based on the dissemination of SUAS itself, social assistance rights, and the services and benefits offered by SUAS equipment.

Suggestions include: a) carrying out communication and awareness campaigns to spread the SUAS name more widely; b) building a space to exchange experiences between municipalities, fostering the dissemination of good practices that already exist in Bahia; and c) create an institutional channel to avoid using direct, personal communication (such as through messaging apps, phone calls and personal emails) to clarify doubts about the everyday work of SUAS.

3.2 Social participation

It was noted that it is common to find CMAS that present irregularities according to the Basic Operating Standard for the Unified Social Assistance System (NOB/SUAS).³ This is partly due to a lack of knowledge by NOB/SUAS board members, and partly due to poor compliance control by the population. The population knows very little about the council's decisions due to a lack of proper dissemination. To improve social control, it necessary to raise the awareness of the population about the importance of this institution. Reports of underqualified board members were common.

With this increased awareness, and councils staffed by people that are well-qualified and properly trained, the risk of irregularities can be greatly reduced, as well as the risk of CMAS existing merely with a 'notary function'⁴—that is, only to meet the bare minimum requirements for their continuation as established by law, which hinders the performance of their activities. In this way, the council can disseminate the right to social assistance throughout society, to oversee the actions of SUAS management with greater autonomy and to demand compliance with the NOB/SUAS.

Municipalities should work towards ensuring greater CMAS autonomy. To that end, some suggestions include:

- a) encouraging greater participation by users and social society representatives who are not linked to municipal governments;
- b) providing an adequate physical structure for the councils, preferably separate from the SUAS managing body;
- c) providing means of transportation and food to the board members to participate in meetings, as foreseen by the NOB/SUAS,⁵
- d) avoiding the appointment of board members.⁶

The survey found that there are councils that function in an exemplary manner in Bahia. Therefore, the dissemination of good practices among municipalities is essential. Indeed, CEAS is well positioned to disseminate and encourage good practices.

In addition, other themes came up in the interviews. These are issues that directly impact the functioning of SUAS and the survey topics in particular: demand for improved co-financing, the deterioration of working conditions at SUAS, the population's lack of knowledge about their social assistance rights, and the lack of qualification offered to municipal board members,⁷ whose goal should be the greater autonomy of civil society to oversee public authority.

4 Recommendations

Brazil's current fiscal situation, marked by strong budgetary constraints and reduced funding by the federal government, imposes a series of limitations to the implementation of public policies by federated entities, including the state of Bahia and its municipalities. In this sense, in addition to the recommendations that involve a large investment of financial resources, we highlight short-term and low to no-cost alternatives.

Regarding human resources, we detected a shortage of public servants working under the statutory regime (the Brazilian legal regime for civil servants), who, by virtue of having permanent employment relationships, have the potential to exercise the profession more effectively. Thus, we recommend **gradually hiring more statutory employees**, bringing Bahia's percentage of 14.07 per cent statutory employees working in CRAS closer to the national average of 30.48, according to the 2019 SUAS Census (Brazil 2020).

Even given the Brazilian scenario of limited public expenditures and a possible limitation on public tenders, **the recommendation is to establish contracts under the statutory regime**. Discussions should be carried out regarding whether and how municipalities could carry out public selection processes and conduct hires via a CLT⁸ contract. An outsourcing model based on fixed-term contracts is common in many municipal governments, however this may represent a risk to SUAS' consolidation in the country and make it even harder to continually capacitate its workers.

BOX 1

Low or no cost recommendations

Creation of an institutional and exclusive email address for CMAS and CRAS/CREAS and, if possible, the provision of an exclusive landline.

Creation of a document listing all CMAS board members, to be updated annually, including the following information: full name, date of birth, gender, email, education, representation (civil society or government), function, and the start date as well as the end date of their term.⁹

Government provision of material resources for the functioning of the council, as directed by NOB-SUAS 2012, with special focus on providing an exclusive physical space for the CMAS, preferably separate from the Secretariat responsible for the social assistance agenda.

Increase the dissemination of CMAS and SUAS on social networks (such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp), creating CMAS accounts on these channels if they do not yet exist.

Hold open CMAS meetings regularly and in conjunction with community leaders, preferably outside the council's headquarters—in the communities where users live (especially in rural areas).

As in other sectoral policies, we recommend the elaboration of a transition procedure for SUAS human resources and management personnel. We have observed complete turnovers of human resources staff accompanying changes in public administration. This means that new workers take over the positions without any training on how to properly conduct the work required. Thus, arrangements should be considered to establish gradual transitions, ensuring the transfer of knowledge from workers at the end of their contracts to new staff.

Regarding the managers and secretaries of the municipal social assistance offices, **we recommend that the State of Bahia liaise with mayors**, especially those who have been newly sworn in, to: a) **update the legal social assistance frameworks** in their municipalities, in accordance with the standards detailed in NOB-SUAS 2012 (or an eventual later revision); b) **provide guidance on good practices for the choice of managers and secretaries responsible for SUAS**—it is a common practice to appoint people without academic training and/or SUAS work history,¹⁰ which unfortunately contributes to the non-professionalization of politics.

Since the enactment of the Brazilian Constitution of 1988 and the Organic Law of Social Assistance (LOAS), the debate on social assistance policy has progressed towards professionalising, regulating, and understanding social assistance as a state policy, putting in check common practices of appointing first ladies or unqualified personnel. Many studies point to an increase of professionals in the field acting as managers, even though it is still common to see sweeping human resources changes accompanying cabinet changes after elections. This subject requires permanent vigilance and discussions in social assistance spaces. In this sense, it is **recommended that municipalities enforce, in accordance with their local contexts, the appointment of people with proper training, preferably in the fields of Social Assistance, Psychology or Public Administration**, and with years of professional experience in SUAS.

We found that 114 municipalities in Bahia (about 27 per cent of all municipalities in the state) have not yet enacted a SUAS Municipal Law, according to data from the 2019 SUAS Census (Brazil 2020). Therefore, we recommend that the Government of Bahia carry out a task force and advise these municipalities on how to proceed. In addition, the 2019 SUAS Census also indicates that 41 of the municipalities that have enacted the law do not foresee the creation of the CMAS and/or its attributions (ibid.), and therefore **their laws must be updated**.

Regarding low or no-cost alternatives, we recommended the elaboration of good practice brochures, directed at the Municipal Secretariats responsible for social assistance and at the CMAS and their board members, featuring clear and concise content, preferably spanning just a few pages. Among the suggested good practices, we highlight the following (which can even be geared at CRAS and CREAS):

Finally, the main recommendation, which was a consensus among all groups of respondents and the state institutions surveyed (CEAS and FETSUAS-BA), is to **carry out more comprehensive and territorialised training campaigns** (involving workers and users)—that is, outside the state capital (Salvador), aiming to reach the populations of small towns and in rural areas. It is also recommended that the training prioritise Popular Education methodologies,¹¹ valuing the local knowledge of populations, with dialogical and horizontal practices, such as conversation circles and public hearings.

The main objectives of the training should include:

- the qualification of workers** for the exercise of their functions, ensuring the mastery of services available through SUAS and reinforcing good social service practices to society;
- the qualification of workers and members of civil society who act as board members in CMAS, especially users, aiming to internalise in them the importance of exercising social control in spaces inside and outside the council, fostering the understanding of social assistance as a right and reinforcing the oversight role of the board, which should not be merely bureaucratic.

It is suggested that at least one focal point should be established for each SUAS office or city in Bahia—i.e., a worker who will act as a purveyor of good practices in popular education methodology, being responsible for the creation of **a culture of permanent education**.

Finally, to measure progress or deterioration in social assistance policy, including the communication and social participation spheres, we highlight the **strong relevance of inputs provided by the SUAS Censuses** on data relative to SUAS as a whole, and suggest that **they should be used by policymakers as sources of data** to prioritise strategic objectives and define performance indicators.

1. According to the state's Department of Planning (*Secretaria do Planejamento*—SEPLAN/BA), an 'identity territory' is "a physical space, geographically defined, usually continuous, characterised by multidimensional criteria, such as the environment, economy, society, culture, politics and institutions, and a population with relatively distinct social groups". <<https://bit.ly/3jodVQm>>.
2. It is noteworthy that there were cities with only 1 interview and high Council ID, and the opposite too, not being a rule for everyone.
3. Document prepared by the federal government, detailing the policy's guidelines. "The NOB/SUAS regulates the public management of the Social Assistance Policy throughout Brazil, carried out in a systemic manner by federative entities, in accordance with the Federal Constitution of 1988 and the Organic Law of Social Assistance (LOAS), 1993" (Brazil 2012, freely translated by authors).

4. Term mentioned by respondents from different segments and in more than one city, indicating the possibility of being a widespread reality in the state.

5. NOB/SUAS 2012 provides that the "managing bodies of the social assistance policy" must "provide the councils with infrastructure, material, human and financial resources, bearing the expenses inherent to their operation, as well as travel, transportation, food and accommodation costs for both governmental and non-governmental board members, in an equitable manner, in the exercise of their functions, both in activities carried out within their geographical scope of action or beyond" (Brazil 2012, freely translated by the authors).

6. Even though there is no legal provision regarding how each CMAS must appoint its councillors, social workers at social assistance conferences underscore that board members should be elected in their assemblies, transparently and with the participation of their class representatives, avoiding, therefore, nominations from unqualified representatives or those who do not in fact represent them.

7. The training of board members is provided for in NOB/SUAS 2012 as an obligation of SUAS management bodies.

8. Consolidation of Labour Laws, the decree that regulates Brazilian labour relations, mainly in the private sector.

9. The Secretariat responsible for the social assistance agenda can also benefit from this practice, by annually organising the list of workers working in the municipality's SUAS.

10. It is worth pointing out that the interviewed managers stood out positively for their high level of education and long time working at SUAS. They were the interviewees who best understood the questions and provided the most in-depth answers. This indicates that there are success cases in Bahia municipalities that can serve as a reference for others via, for example, regional social assistance forums.

11. Respondents from FETSUAS-BA cited the Paulo Freire method as an example.

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