

This study looks into the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the favelas

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Favela is commonly known as an informal setting in Brazil. Here, I use the term in this sense adding the observations made by Simpson (2013), who poses that the conventional distinction between formal and informal and the views of a "dual city" are too blurred to define its reality. Then, "perhaps the single persistent distinction between favelas and the rest of the city is the deeply rooted stigma that adheres to them and to those who reside in them." (Perlman, 2010: 30 cited in Simpson, 2013)

Those that are not perceived or seen and even concerned in the formal policy making sphere (Chen and Carré, 2020; Maringanti, 2020)

This paper looks at the responses to the COVID-19 crisis in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It discusses the complexities of urban inequality in favelas to challenge the understanding of favelas¹ as a spatial boundary in the city. This study concerns institutions of urban governance and what responses they put in place for the livelihood of the invisible², low-skilled workers and women by exploring what these responses mean to individuals when considering urban inequalities in Brazil.

This paper subscribes to the understanding of inequalities in cities as a multidimensional experience. As such, it employs a definition of urban inequality in line with the one advanced by Frediani, Cocina and Acuto (2019), which captures the experience and identities of those living in urban settings. To this matter, the main question guiding this study is: *What institutional conditions allowed local organisations to advance urban equality throughout responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro?*

By asking this question, this paper adds to the body of knowledge on institutional and urban governance. To do so, I first discuss the path of institution formation and formal governance that enable such institutions to deliver policies to urban dwellers in Brazil. Then, I introduce an overall figure of the inequalities present in countries of South America such as Chile, Colombia and Brazil and their implications for the livelihoods of urban dwellers in Brazil.

This study employs the lens of complexity applied to social science from Byrne (2005) and Cilliers (1995) as a framework to look into the responses created for COVID-19 by local initiatives in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Specifically, this framework is important because it allows to dig into these complexities through an in-depth case study analysis of community responses that emerged in Rio by exploring how *the institutional gap left by formal government* affects our conception of favelas.

This study aims to expand the understanding of urban institutions by focusing on the subsidiarity of local communities and their self-governance capacities to portray favelas as a capable urban institution. Here, the aim is to stretch the concept of an urban institution to include the collectives, communities, and grassroots organisations that operate in favelas vis-à-vis the role of institutions of government. To be clear, the collective responses to COVID-19 allow for an understanding that favela can represent more than a term for spatial and urban inequality: it can embody an institution capable of self-governance and self-organisation on its terms - an institution constructed by those invisible to the formal government.

The academic relevance of this discussion is to further the understanding that institutional conditions are shaped by and are part of civil society. The emergence and existence of other forms of institutions such as associations and organisations confirm the long-argued trend in urbanisation theory: the informal matters (Castells, 1992; Caldeira, 2017). The societal relevance of such investigations lies upon the necessary and urgent need of elevating those often forgotten by formal policy settings. Formal government responses often overlook those in informal jobs, racialised groups and women. Worse, these groups are left to their own devices in moments of crisis such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (De Pádua Cavalcanti Bastos et al., 2020). As such, this study seeks to understand the subsidiarity and responses created by grassroots organisations in the favelas of Rio, contributing to a broader societal effort to prevent future damage to the most vulnerable in society.

This paper is organised as follows: the second chapter contains a brief overview of institutions, urban inequality, informality, and health in South American countries such as Chile, Colombia and Brazil. This review attempts to highlight key aspects of institution formation in these countries and what urban trajectories are embedded in institutional development as well as its consequences of such for inequalities present in cities such as Rio de Janeiro. This section provides the foundation of a broader picture of inequalities present in South America but particularly in Brazil. Such discussion, although important for this paper, is not exhaustive because it focuses only on the aspects of urban inequality in the informal economy, particularly in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro.

South America

The following section provides a critical review of the development of

Both autonomy and stability are crucial for the development of democratic institutions. These institutions define how people live and the type of policies they have access to; who prospers and who perishes (Acemoglu and

This fragmentation becomes visible when looking into less privileged areas of cities and the policies directed at them. For example, when looking back at the history of Rio de Janeiro, one finds that a large portion of the city resulted from workers' settlement and was never part of a planned urban area (Fiori and Brandão, 2009). In Bogota, the consequence of this urban trajectory is that wealthier individuals living in privileged locations have better access to, for example, public transport (Oviedo Hernandez and Dávila, 2016). Even more concerning, in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the lack of access to facilities and quality health care seems to be a long standing issue (Castiglione, Lovasi and Carvalho, 2018), giving rise to the existence of two different health care systems, one for the rich and one for the poor (Cotlear et al., 2015).

Because the manifestations of informality such as lack of health care in less privileged areas of cities have social and economic consequences that cannot be discussed separately, it is necessary to investigate the political processes that shape these spaces together with the socio and economic realities of those living in them.

It is estimated that 80% of the total population in LAC lives in cities that are a mix of highly developed modern areas and slums (Magalhães, 2016). According to the United Nations, these are highly dense cities; in the past 20 years, there was a two-fold increase in the number of cities between 300,000 to 500,000 inhabitants (2017a). Further, the United Nations portray the region as known for high levels of GDP production that, together with population sizes, contributed to the development of larger urban areas. Conversely, that means economic growth that improved quality of life for some (United Nations, 2017a). Yet, the growth and development of cities have numerous consequences for LAC citizens especially women. In a study into women violence in Brazilian favelas, authors found that the women have difficulties accessing health care services. Moreover, women are the most vulnerable to violence in the city.

associated with a higher GINI coefficient (Titelman, Cetrángolo and Acosta, 2015). Further, only a few countries have managed to successfully integrate their health system through general taxation (Titelman, Cetrángolo and Acosta, 2015). Even in these countries, the persistence of vast inequalities mean that the poor figure among those with a high diabetes mortality rate, infant mortality and under 5 mortality (De Andrade et al., 2015). In other words, these inequalities translated in health segmentation which in turn contributed to more social segregation in certain countries (Cotlear et al., 2015).

The pandemic, without a doubt, puts extra pressure on already fragile health infrastructures in the region. Given that the segregated health system or "*medical apartheid*" happens especially in Brazil, it is crucial to consider the elements of such a system that affects the poor in cities.

According to data collected by the Socio-Economic Database for LAC, on average, the wealthiest 10% of the region's population earns 22 times more than the bottom 10%, while the average Gini coefficient in 2017 is 0.46 (Busso and Messina, 2020). These income disparities potentially affect future generations, severely impacting the chances of people to create a different future for themselves (Atkinson, 2015). Alternatively, income inequality seems to contribute to perpetuating poverty in the region. The results of such concentration limits the social mobility of those affected by unequal income and wealth distributions (Amarante, Galván and Mancero, 2016).

To date, there are conditional cash transfer programmes intended to support women and poor populations. To name but a few there is Brazil (*Bolsa Família*), Chile (*Chile Solidario* and *Ingreso Etico Familiar*), and Colombia (*Oportunidades*) (Atun et al., 2015). Yet, even with such policies in place, there are still concerns about the impact on intergenerational mobility (Busso and Messina, 2020). It is also essential to note that in LAC, the GINI coefficients dropped significantly since the 2010s (Amarante, Galván and Mancero, 2016). However, those living in poverty (33%) and extreme poverty (12.5%) in 2020 are higher in comparison to 2010 (31.6%) and (8.7%), respectively (ECLAC, 2020). The issue lies in people being pushed across economic boundaries and the effects of income inequality itself.

One of the main consequences of the pandemic has been the consistent loss of income, especially among informal and low skilled workers. In Y H a P S, this situation is no different, with estimations pointing to more individuals at the risk of extreme poverty now (Ribeiro-Silva et al., 2020), where a steep decline in income took a particular toll on black and poor women (Barroso and Gama, 2020). It's worth examining [O L financial help offered through the pandemic [U n d e r s t a n d h o w [O a i m e d t o c o m p l e m e n t, s u p p o r t a n d m i t i g a t e t h e e f f e c t s o n i n c o m e i n e q u a l i t y i n L A C d u r i n g t h e c r i s i s a n d w h o c o u l d c l a i m s u c h b e n e f i t s.

The critical discussion of these themes helps illustrate the central issues of housing, income and access to health, that happens in most countries P U [O L : V \ [O H U K Latin America. Further, it helps understand the historical processes that shapes the very existence of fragmented urban institutions, as is the case in the surge of social safety nets given the levels of informality in urban settings in for example Brazil.

Now, it is crucial to consider these institutions in countering the absence of formal responses to crises such as the COVID-19 in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. The reason for this focus is twofold. First, favelas are the spaces in which urban inequality, such as unequal access to health, lack of income

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that compose the understanding of a favela beyond a spatial limit in the city.

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challenge this simplistic and purely spatial approach

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government. That comparison is done through the case of local responses for
COVID-19 that manifest the relationship of the invisible and the city they live in
through governance.

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numbers. In some instances, the test available was not the more reliable PCR, and even some tested cases that reported negative would later die without being counted (Angelo, Leandro and Perisse, 2020). It would happen that after a person arrived at one of the *Unidades Básicas de Saúde* (UBS) or primary health care units in favelas would not even be offered a test (Gracie and Scofano, 2020). The situation was made worse when these units started to get busier, and only those with severe covid symptoms would be allowed inside (Valente, 2020). Despite of cial government census claimed that the majority of Brazilian informal settlements are located within 2km of a health service unit (Gracie and Scofano, 2020), the population living in these settlements could not access adequate health treatment even during the height of the pandemic.

The inadequacy of government policy responses and a strained health system triggered the emergence of grassroots responses to counter the pandemic in favelas. To deal with such issues, local community groups created a community covid data panel at *Complexo da Maré, e do Morro do Borel*. These panels served two purposes. First, the panel challenged the of cial – or the lack of – counting by promoting a counter-narrative about the pandemic in favelas (Menezes, Magalhães and Silva, 2021). Second, it fills the gap of of cial data by supplying these communities with accurate numbers that help them plan and develop ef cient actions to counter the pandemic (Gracie and Scofano, 2020).

These panels emerged in the context of a lack of of cial information and widespread misinformation in the country. Here, by analysing a series of roundtables and interviews live-streamed on YouTube, Menezes, Magalhães and Silva (2021) collected some opinions that help put this misinformation in context. The following quote was extracted from one of these panels:

“Soon after, here at Borel (Favela do Borel), in the organisation of data production, we noticed that something was happening, as many residents were K`PUN ;OLYL ^LYL THU` YLWVY[Z VM YLZPKLU[Z ^ access to the tests, we did not know what it actually was, but we were already suspicious of coronaviruses. So we did not have a policy of transparency in disclosing data. When we had access to this data and found out that they were grouped by neighbourhood (Borel and Tijuca), and as there was no Borel on the panel, we decided to create CoronaZap.”

- Igor Soares, resident of Morro do Borel as in Menezes, Magalhães and Silva, 2021: p.117).

The project entitled *CoronaZap* was one of the many that emerged in Rio's favelas. At least six other panels have emerged in the main favelas, some using a website and others only social media pages (Menezes, Magalhães and Silva, 2021). In the case of *Complexo da Maré*, a collective of 16 favelas, the panel entitled *Painel dos Invisíveis* or The Invisibles' Panel initiated together with an epidemiological bulletin. Here, the initiative collected data on self-reported and

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official counting to create the bulletin *de Olho no Corona*, which later integrated *Painel dos Invisíveis* as the official counting for the whole *Complexo da Maré* (Fabrício and Melo, 2020). *Redes da Maré*, a civil society organisation that represents the interests of *Maré* people, organised both the panel and the

and Scofano, 2020). It is important to make clear that this notification method through volunteers is not new, it has been part of the history of favelas and used in various other initiatives (Gracie and Scofano, 2020; Menezes, Magalhães and Silva, 2021). It is even more interesting to contemplate that the interaction

; OPZ neglected no different during the pandemic, for example a financial aid compensation scheme only started a month after the pandemic took over in the country (Fleury and Menezes, 2020). The programme intended to help informal and daily wage workers to have some form of financial aid during the pandemic, but some of these workers could not access this help (Barreto, 2021). Accounts from community organisations in Rio reveal that daily wage workers would often not have access to the internet, not have a phone or even documents necessary to enrol in the programme (Firmino, Pio and Vieira, 2020). Again, an evidence of the so-called "informal" been a victim of the inequalities that haunt the most vulnerable.

The lockdown in Favelas was a different experience than the lockdown in the neighbourhoods

Given the mediatic attention of sanitation of alleys in Santa Marta and the other initiatives such as data panels ongoing in other places, communities came together to develop a unified response to coronavirus in Rio's favelas (Fleury and Menezes, 2020). Yet, these responses depend heavily on resources that are sometimes not available to all of these communities. The problem seems to vary from the lack of support from the government, lack of resources and even lack of volunteers to make these initiatives happen as Firmino explains:

"we were training people from other favelas, articulating and trying to encourage groups to gather together to encourage"

However, to close the gap left by formal government responses, community action needs more support from outside the favelas; they need external finance to survive. Accordingly, *Observatório das Favelas* estimates that 83% of these initiatives depend on private funding to maintain their existence (Braga et al., 2020). This trend indicates that these initiatives alone cannot account for the lack of formal government assistance. On a comparison to formal government response, this lack is also not to be closed by the narrow perception of these place into something to be converted into formal cities as it is the case in neighbourhoods upgrade programmes that discount residents' living forms and turn them into less deserving members of society (Segre, 2009).

We cannot fully consider favelas without addressing the complexities of the issues surrounding and composing favelas. Favelas are the key urban manifestation of informality; a dense space in which the invisible suffer from conflict, gang violence and structural violence. Furthermore, a space in which access to health care is precarious, and many died during the pandemic without even having access to a COVID-19 test. These issues are part of the inequalities that stem from a long history of public policy failure.

We should look at the favelas as a governance institution because they increased capacity to fight inequalities in the city and organise collective responses to represent favelados in the political system. A capacity that is perhaps the result of a space that Caldeira (2017) argues is not bounded by physical location. In fact, it could not be bounded by physical location if one considers the multidimensional poverty and inequalities present in cities. Yet, to fight these inequalities in a city become what Maringanti (2020) called a life strategy that was rightly adopted by the initiatives in Rio's communities during the pandemic.

The organisation of data panels and the safety nets that arose during the pandemic in Rio are a paradox of urban institutions. While working to save lives in favelas by a primal example of institutional governance, it also represents a failure of formal institutional government. Alternatively, although perceived by dwellers as efficient methods of governance, it illustrates that the capacity for policy delivery from the formal government is still a problem in Brazil even after the decentralisation trends advanced in the constitution of 1988. There is a particular role to local organisations in urban governance, but that role cannot substitute for government policy.

From the complexity perspective, the interaction between favelas and formal governance also allows for us to perceive them as an institution of urban governance. From the present case, there are several feedback loops present in favelas given the lack of government support during the pandemic. Yet, the favela operates in a condition that is far from equilibrium, their dwellers are constant adapting and changing, responding to the threats caused by the external environment by incorporating such practices in their life strategies.

In sum, this case helps illustrate the progression of favelas from an ontological and epistemological perspective. It helps to elevate the perceptions of favelas not as a threat and not as a spatial boundary. In turn, this discussion makes the case to add favela an important governance actor to the theory of urban institutions.

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This paper argued for a new understanding of favelas as an institution of urban governance that surges from the entanglement of formal and informal institutions and inequalities in the city. This understanding was only possible by reflecting on the complexities of politics and socio-economic realities of urban dwellers; realities that are part of a historical processes that resulted in the social and spatial configurations forming and shaping the existence of institutions in Brazil.

Through this paper the case of local responses to the pandemic in the informal settings of Rio de Janeiro illustrated how one should leave behind the idea of a favela as a manifestation of informality and start considering them as an institution of its own. Specifically, favelas must be understood from a spatial boundary (Magalhães, 2016) to a capable institution aiming for urban equality through the design and implementation of solutions given the constraints imposed by the absence of formal government. This understanding is reaffirmed by the examples of self-governance and self-organisation that surged in Rio's favelas during the pandemic. However, it is important to understand that these initiatives are not new and that favelas demonstrated these governance capacities in a variety of occasions in the past.

The answer to the main question guiding this research stems from precisely the constraints that allowed local organisations to advance urban equality throughout the pandemic. First, formal government institution's failure to deliver policy to urban dwellers and informal settings. Second, a historical constraint of inadequate access to health and sanitation facilities that now push dwellers to create a parallel control over numbers and narratives regarding the pandemic in favelas. Third, a structural inequality that portray favelas as a threat to be perceived by formal institutions as something that must be fixed.

This answer leads to a contribution to the academic and societal understanding of urban institutions in Brazil. Academically, it challenges a dualist perspective

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