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## 12 Revisiting social resilience in informal settlements

The strength and the limits of Paraisópolis community action during the COVID-19 pandemic in São Paulo

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### 12.1 Introduction

It is widely known that the COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the social vulnerability of the most vulnerable due to their inability to comply with quarantine rules without losing their livelihoods. In a vast metropolis like São Paulo, this is made worse by the need to travel long distances to work, facing overcrowded public transport with a high risk of contamination. The urban poor also face more significant challenges in maintaining social isolation at home, with crowded dwellings and difficulties following hygiene recommendations in areas lacking access to safe drinking water and sanitation. In Brazil, the Welfare State is embryonic compared to its European counterparts, but considerable social gains have been achieved after re-democratisation in 1986 (Maldonado-Mariscal, 2020). However, at the point where the pandemic struck, far-right populism with a neoliberal streak had ravaged institutions and social programmes. The pandemic found the country exceptionally vulnerable in terms of governance and the health of its institutions. The challenges faced by the poorest are revealed in new levels of inequality, with the intensification of social contradictions characteristic of late peripheral capitalism (Carvalho et al., 2021), accentuated now by an attack on democratic institutions and the erosion of state capacity.

The prevailing mood in Brazil at the outset of the pandemic was one of deep scepticism about the authorities' capacity to face such a massive public health crisis, despite the relevance of SUS (the Portuguese acronym for the Public Unified Health System) and a successful history of eradicating polio, the curbing malaria and hepatitis, and other influential public health actions. Scepticism was even more significant among the poor, accustomed to being overlooked by the authorities. This deep distrust fuelled the rapid appearance of community action, especially in the so-called informal settlements, with varying degrees of organisation according to each community's track record.

In Paraisópolis, the largest slum in São Paulo with over 100,000 residents crammed into approximately 118 hectares (IBGE, 2010), the COVID-19 crisis

initially appeared to have had a lower death toll (0.0217 per cent) than in other parts of the city (an average of 0.0652 per cent) in May 2020 (Instituto Polis, 2020). The area's strong sense of community and the interest of many civil society organisations resulted in numerous community initiatives, and several of those organisations rose to tackle the pandemic. Paraisópolis' initial success in keeping the worst of the pandemic at bay was the object of considerable interest in the press and scrutiny in academia. However, as we have pointed out elsewhere (Rocco et al., 2021), the community's success in containing the pandemic was short-lived. An increase of almost 240% in morbidity rates in late 2020, from 16 deaths/1000 inhabitants in May 2020 to 54 deaths per 1,000 inhabitants in August 2020, indicated the limits of community self-reliance, embedded in a metropolis and a country where the responses to the pandemic were almost unanimously recognised as botched (MSF, 2021).

The case of Paraisópolis was nevertheless widely publicised in the first half of 2020 (Lopes, 2020) as an example of community solidarity and resilience. The community's self-organisation and collective action against the virus were thought to be responsible for the lower-than-expected infection numbers in an informal settlement with exceedingly high densities and irregular drinking water supply. The idea of resilience in Paraisópolis was mediated, with the term resilience being used as a powerful adjective by inhabitants of the favela themselves (G10, 2020, Rede Record, 2020).

## 12.2 What does it mean to be socially resilient?

This section seeks to critically review the concept of social resilience while answering whether Paraisópolis was indeed “resilient” towards the pandemic and what social resilience means in the context of a public health crisis in a segregated and socially vulnerable space.

Meerow et al. (2016) describe how, despite the concept's long history of use in engineering, psychology, and disasters literature, it was ecologist C. S. Holling's seminal paper of 1973 on the resilience of ecological systems (Holling, 1973) that seems to have laid the foundations of modern resilience theory. Meerow et al. found that “Holling's study is the largest node in the co-citation network, confirming its central importance for the urban resilience field” (p. 40). Holling recognised ecosystems as dynamic with multiple stable states, which marked a departure from the idea of ecological stability in vogue then.

Holling used resilience to describe the ability of an ecological system to continue functioning – or to “persist” – when changed, but not necessarily to remain the same. This contrasts with “engineering resilience”, which focuses on a single state of equilibrium or stability to which a resilient system would revert after a disruption (Holling, 1996).

(Meerow et al., 2016, p. 40)

According to Meerow et al.,

non-equilibrium resilience is now paradigmatic in ecology, and Hölling's writing on resilience sparked a rich body of work at the socio-ecological interface (Folke, 2006, Wu & Wu, 2013). Within the socio-ecological systems (SES) framework, resilience is often defined as "the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and reorganise while changing to retain essentially the same function, structure, identity, and feedback" (Walker et al., 2004, p. 1).

(Meerow et al., 2016, p. 40)

For the authors, however, the definition of urban resilience is by no means in consensus, with a large chunk of existing definitions still faithful to engineering "static" resilience, in opposition to dynamic and adaptive resilience.

In any of its many forms, resilience seems to assume adaptable systems that can withstand shocks and "bounce back". While some definitions accept a return to stability, others adopt a more dynamic state in which the system will "bounce back better" and assume new configurations. Muñoz-Erickson et al. (2021) mention the Rockefeller Foundation's 100 Resilient Cities (Rockefeller Foundation, 2019), for whom urban resilience is the capacity for cities to adapt and transform in the face of stresses or shocks. The authors also mention Bizzoto et al. (2019) from ICLEI (Local Governments for Sustainability), for whom resilience is not only about recovering but improving future responses, and the Kresge Foundation (2015), for whom resilience is about "bouncing forward and prospering in the face of climate change". For Muñoz-Erickson et al., "The idea of building urban resilience to promote change resonates with the conceptualisation that many scholars and policymakers have about cities as sites of innovation and experimentation for climate action" (van der Heijden, 2019). Practical examples of this bouncing-back better or bouncing-back forward (Grinberger & Felsenstein, 2014) include climate-resilient reconstruction or the adoption of nature-based solutions (as opposed to hard engineering solutions) after climate-related disasters.

We wonder whether resilience adequately addresses urban precariousness, characterised by spatial and social segregation and significant social vulnerability, as the commonly adopted engineering definition of resilience does not sufficiently challenge the status quo. In precarious territories, the new post-pandemic urban reality tends to assert itself as an intensification of social vulnerability, especially where there is no robust official response or articulation. However, "bouncing back" in this context is not enough, as the original state was undesirable in the first place. We argue that the use of the term resilience in peripheral territories demands an adequate contextualisation and a re-signification of the term to challenge established patterns of segregation, exclusion, and denial of civil rights.

To do so, it is worth taking a closer look at the actions of the actors involved in Paraisópolis' initially successful response to the pandemic and its subsequent debacle. To what extent do successful community actions result from some form of intrinsic resilience found in that particular community's constituent elements, or can external factors explain local social resilience? Most importantly, can we reconceptualise resilience towards "bouncing back forward", as several authors suggest, or is social resilience merely the withstanding of intolerable conditions that will inevitably subside? In our particular case, we also explore how articulation between the community and the public authorities played a role, either through direct community articulation resulting from the shock itself or through a combination of actions extended over the last decades of slum urbanisation (including land regularisation, infrastructure, educational and health facilities provision, as well as social housing construction) and anchored in the community's history. This hopefully gives us a sense of social resilience as dynamically constructed over time. In the Brazilian case, this reflection also invites us to recognise the historical contribution of the social struggles of previous generations of social movements claiming citizens' rights since before the end of the military dictatorship that governed Brazil from 1964 to 1986.

### 12.3 Methodology

This analysis is anchored mainly on ten in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted from 2020 to 2021 with key actors in Paraisópolis, including social organisers and local movement leaders, members of local associations, NGO members, city government officials, academics and residents, shopkeepers, and young architects who are original inhabitants of the slum. This is enriched by desk research connected to official statistics and responses to the pandemic, as well as literature research linked to the conceptualisation of social resilience and previous research done in Paraisópolis. This chapter is also based on the long engagement by the authors with Paraisópolis over the years and across several different research projects, which gives us insight into the community's long-term development. We contrast this knowledge with the debate on resilience and seek to critically reflect on the concept to make it more instrumental for real positive socio-spatial change.

In the following section, we question whether community resilience is a suitable framework to assess community responses to the pandemic and explore the relevance of the term community itself in a public health crisis context. In the third section, we revisit the history of popular struggles for positive rights in São Paulo. We search for a "genealogy" of community articulation that may explain the current state of community organisation and aspects of its response to the pandemic. In the fourth section, we describe the community's response to the pandemic and discuss the limits of this response in the face of structural national failure to address the pandemic effectively. We find an alternative hypothesis for the community's initial success and seek an explanation

for its subsequent collapse in containing the pandemic. We conclude by pleading for a reconceptualisation of community resilience that includes trajectories of socio-spatial struggles for citizens' rights and contemplates the role of the State as a provider of public goods. Finally, we advance the idea that notions of socio-spatial justice must inform dynamic adaptive resilience.

#### 12.4 Resilience for whom?

In the context described above, it is worth asking ourselves: resilience for whom? Who takes part in resilience actions, and who harvests the benefits of such resilience? In the case of precarious settlements in Brazil, there is a clear boundary between the formal and informal cities. Inhabitants of the informal are recognised as being part of a ghettoised separate community, which is also reflected in the way inhabitants of the favela refer to themselves and their spaces: *a comunidade*, “the community” (this is markedly different from Rio de Janeiro and other parts of Brazil, where the term *favela and favelados* – *the inhabitants of the favela* – are used as badges of honour). Nevertheless, as separate as these communities may be, they exist in the context of larger cities. Here we ask, how can we define the community of citizens invested in creating resilience about the pandemic? Given the pandemic's universal nature, does it make sense to represent a community based on a favela's soft borders?

Moreover, the “border conditions” that characterise favelas in São Paulo segregate groups of people into ghettos of exclusion. There is a conundrum to be solved between historic socio-spatial exclusion and the romanticisation of excluded communities as resilient, which is often a euphemism for letting people “fend for themselves” without the support provided by the State in the form of positive citizens' rights. This romanticisation was visible in the media attention given to the initial success of Paraisópolis in tackling the pandemic, which we explore further in the text.

In this regard, Friend and Moench (2013) conclude that:

The analytical concept of resilience alone is inadequate to address the challenge of developing equitable responses to climate change in socially and economically differentiated urban areas. The concept of resilience, as it has evolved from the study of ecological, infrastructure and psychological systems, focuses on the system characteristics that recover from disruption. It does not address the social “values” implicit in the way systems are organised or respond to disruption. As a result, contested values such as poverty, social justice and equity are not the primary focus of attention in systems and resilience theory. For these issues to be addressed, it is essential to draw on additional theoretical frameworks beyond resilience.

(p. 98)

For Meerow et al. (2016), despite the insights of a group of authors into the political dimensions of resilience, “just a small minority of the urban resilience literature explicitly acknowledges the socially constructed and contested nature of resilience” (p. 44).

### 12.5 Precarious housing in São Paulo: the exception, the rule, and the birth of urban popular resistance

So-called precarious settlements are no exception in Brazilian cities. As a result of unequal access to urbanised land, these settlements, generally informal and lacking basic sanitation and other infrastructure, emerge as an alternative for populations seeking affordable housing, which is usually offered by swindlers in all kinds of illegal or quasi-legal arrangements, far from more privileged central areas of Brazilian cities. Favelas express the ongoing housing deficit in the country, which is technically defined as a lack of adequate housing due to precarious construction, family cohabitation, overcrowding, or high rent costs (Brazil Federal Government, 2022).

The most recent data on the housing deficit in Brazil shows that it went from 5.657 million units in 2016 to 5.877 million in 2019. These “missing homes” represent 8% of the existing number of households in the country, and 87.7% of this deficit is in urban areas. In addition, around 34 million Brazilian homes (49.2% of the country’s total households) do not have access to basic sanitation, and another 9.6 million do not have access to running water (João Pinheiro Foundation, 2021). In 2020 and 2021, the pandemic



*Figure 12.1* Paraisópolis overview, 2014

*Photo's author:* Roberto Rocco

and the resulting intensification of an ongoing economic crisis with marked unemployment increased extreme poverty and hunger in Brazil (World Bank, 2021). The absence of sanitation and drinking water and the inability of vulnerable pay-check-to-pay-check citizens to shelter in place due to their need to leave the house to work contributed to higher-than-normal COVID-19 contamination rates. This was mainly the case in favelas and other precarious forms of habitation, like overcrowded tenement houses (FIOCRUZ, 2021).

Favelas are not homogenous spaces. Even within specific favelas, there are essential differences between areas, and these differences are reflected in the existence of different social groups within the favela itself. Paraisópolis also stands out for its economic dynamism (Zuquim et al., 2018), the high number of civil society organisations operating there (Zanchetta, 2010), the organisation of its residents, the media attention it usually attracts, its location within otherwise elite residential neighbourhoods, and its proximity to São Paulo's new internationalised financial centre in the wealthy southwest side of the city.

It also distinguishes itself from other more recently settled favelas due to the accumulation of State actions along its long history. Initially urbanised in 1921 (Souza & Barifouse, 2019), the area saw its first informal settlers in the late 1960s (Castilho, 2013). Paraisópolis grew significantly due to the proximity of jobs in the city's wealthy west side, where the most dynamic economic activities are located.



*Figure 12.2* Infrastructure, soil containment, social housing projects, and informal housing in Paraisópolis, 2014

*Photo's author:* Roberto Rocco

Several state-led interventions were carried out over decades of informal occupation, including the application of a unique zoning mechanism (ZEIS), which allows for future regularisation and infrastructure works. The City of São Paulo has carried out notable public works, with 1,656 housing units built and numerous infrastructure works (HABITA SAMPA, 2022), though insufficient. Implemented infrastructure was funded with resources from the Municipality of São Paulo, the State of São Paulo, and the Ministry of Cities. The city's Secretariat of Urban Development indicates that more than 38,000 metres of paved roads, 35,000 metres of water pipes, and 40,000 metres of sewage pipes were installed in Paraisópolis in the last decades (SEHAB, 2013 in Maziviero & Silva, 2018).

Despite advances, Paraisópolis has suffered severely from discontinued programmes and projects due to the nature of urban municipal governance in Brazil, which relies heavily on the figure of elected mayors. An elected mayor from a different political party will often discontinue and disavow projects from their predecessor, significantly affecting citizens' access to urban services and facilities (Maziviero & Silva, 2018). Nevertheless, the presence of the State in infrastructure and service provision in Paraisópolis is undeniable. The continuous mobilisation and struggle of its residents for their citizens' rights over time is recognised by several interviewees. Hence, it is inevitable to recognise the importance of historic public investment in accomplishing those rights and as a fundamental component for the potential success of responses to the pandemic alongside community organisation.



*Figure 12.3* A street in Paraisópolis

*Photo's author:* Roberto Rocco

In 1987, amidst the country's re-democratisation process after the military dictatorship (1964 to 1986), social leaders from all over the country and from various sectors of social struggle formed the National Forum for Urban Reform, demanding the implementation of policies addressing public health, sanitation, public transport, decent housing, land reform, and education. This process resulted in several social achievements, such as the beginning of public investments in precarious settlements (favelas and others).

Today, if Paraisópolis has some urban qualities that distinguish it from other favelas (paved streets, social housing, schools, access to electricity and water, public transport), this is primarily due to the powerful combination of community social struggles over more than half a century of informal occupation and a new awareness by the State towards creating public goods and improving the quality of life of the poorest, deriving from a long and bumpy process of democratisation.

Upon this foundation of intense and long-standing community organisation and state intervention, Paraisópolis could mount a formidable resistance to the COVID-19 virus and initially achieve admirable results, even considering a botched Federal response to the virus.

## 12.6 Community action in Paraisópolis during the pandemic: strengths, contradictions, and limitations

The history of community organisation must be considered when analysing community resilience in Paraisópolis. The number of community associations, NGOs, and voluntary work groups that operate there is impressive, with at least 60 NGOs working within the confines of the favela as reported to us by interviewees and confirmed by previous studies (Castro, 2009). As verified via interviews, there are several fronts of community action, with diverse and often antagonistic political arrangements. The existing NGOs do social work independently in different sectors, as do the Catholic and Evangelical churches. However, there is little articulation between the various associations operating in Paraisópolis. According to interviewees, the *União dos Moradores e do Comércio de Paraisópolis* (the Paraisópolis Community Association, often presented outside Paraisópolis and abroad as “the” instance of community action and creativity in the area) fails to play an articulating role, given the several power struggles among its leaders. On the other hand, the existing diversity in organisations operating in Paraisópolis is consistent with its size. The social inequality in the Brazilian cities is also mirrored inside the favela (Kowarick, 2009).

Alongside the actions carried out by those associations during the pandemic, the community mentioned above association selected a number of “street presidents”, volunteers who were tasked with monitoring about 50 households each, identifying suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19, and helping residents with different aspects connected to the pandemic. The association also organised training events to capacitate those volunteers,

arranged the transfer of residents who tested positive for COVID-19 to temporary shelters, and hired ambulances made available to infected residents. It also organised food banks and the preparation of hundreds of meals for families in need (Lopes, 2020). Those interviewed stated that this significant mobilisation occurred mainly in the first weeks of the pandemic in São Paulo, being discontinued in the following months.

Fumbled policy at the federal level meant that the vaccination campaign was delayed. It only started in mid-January 2021 when 56 other countries had already begun vaccinating their populations. This delay, combined with the slowness in the vaccination process, caused the pandemic in Brazil to reach unimaginable levels, with the country ranking second in the total number of deaths after the United States (Statista, 2022). In this scenario of a seriously protracted health emergency and botched official response, community organisations against the pandemic started to crumble, with the demobilisation of volunteers and an increasing number of infections and deaths.

Polis Institute concludes that community initiatives most likely contributed to reducing the transmission of COVID-19 inside the favela during the first months of the pandemic (Instituto Polis, 2020) by helping people access places to isolate themselves, guaranteeing access to food and personal hygiene products, and other measures.

However, according to interviewees, no amount of community organisation would ever be capable of responding to the economic and medical needs of more than 100,000 people. The inhabitants of Paraisópolis and most of those involved in community action did not dispose of any surpluses (financial, spatial, temporal, or otherwise) that would have allowed them to bear the brunt of a public health crisis. Although collective action indeed delayed the worst effects of the pandemic initially, State action was crucial to protect the lives of citizens.

In this context, our initial concerns about a discourse that romanticises community resilience, taking the State “off the hook” on positive rights provision, seem justified. Community action was effective in the initial phase of the pandemic thanks to a historic amalgamation of different social movements, which triggered the rise of a variety of community leaders and associations, a culture of community cooperation, and the emergence of several public goods that set Paraisópolis apart from other slums in São Paulo and around the world. Those public goods were created along a long history of social struggles combined with State action.

## 12.7 Discussion

Social resilience in Paraisópolis has been built historically upon decades of community action for citizens’ rights in the wake of re-democratisation and the enactment of a progressive constitution, primarily based on the demands and inputs of social movements in the country. This social resilience is not necessarily inherent to the inhabitants of Paraisópolis only but is the result of

decades of community action supported both by civil society associations and the actions of the State itself, especially in the wake of progressive municipal administrations (but not only), which provided Paraisópolis with increasing public goods, increasing its inhabitants' life chances and fuelling the notion that "favelados" are, in fact, also citizens. This is compounded by the fact that inhabitants themselves are progressively more and more aware of this process of "insurgent citizenship" in the words of Holston (2009); that is, citizens are gradually more aware of their place in the spaces of citizenship afforded by the Brazilian State and, in fact, help create these spaces through their actions. On the other hand, the State has also extended its notion of who citizens are, beyond the recognition of formal citizenship through a birth certificate or (in the Brazilian case) a national ID card, towards the recognition that citizens have positive rights, including the right to public goods collectively created (i.e., public health).

Another factor contributing to social resilience in the slum is its very spatial condition, with clear boundaries between the formal and informal city. As we have discussed elsewhere (Newton & Rocco, 2022), this very border condition helps create a sense of community, fostering the creation of urban commons: spaces and resources that the community appropriates. Examples include the (scarce) public spaces and the very socio-spatial configuration of the slum, which is conducive to social interaction. The collection of public goods, public infrastructures, and commons forms the base for the community's resilience.

A third factor concerns the variety of social, institutional, and commercial institutions operating in the favela, which allows for resilience towards the social reproduction of life, even when the slum is struck by a pandemic that leaves it relatively isolated from the rest of the city. This is also true for the diversity in leadership, which includes an extensive array of actors with different interests (including criminal ones), leading to a diversification of strategies and a somewhat polycentric style of governance, with decisions, sometimes contradictory, coming from a multitude of different actors. Instead of weakening the community's response to the pandemic, this seems to have helped form an arsenal of other responses that go far beyond mere assistencialism and include quite a good dose of local entrepreneurship. All these issues make Paraisópolis very different from favelas with a shorter settlement history, where inhabitants have not had the time and the experience for self-organisation and where the state is not so present.

These and other issues discussed in this text lead us to believe that social resilience is constructed over time and that space plays a role in how the community sees and defines itself. This allows for the mobilisation of its constituents, who see themselves in a community of interest. Finally, the experience in Paraisópolis leads us to believe that resilience cannot be constructed by a community alone: it is the product of its interactions with space, the State, and civil society.

## 12.8 Conclusions

Decolonising the view on cities in the so-called Global South involves rethinking theories on good urban management, and re-conceptualising resilience in this context is crucial. The concept of dynamic resilience and “build-back better” that becomes the new paradigm in resilience studies helps us instil resilience with social and elements of spatial justice.

We believe that socio-spatial justice must inform conceptualisations of resilience, in which systems affected by structural shocks “bounce back forward” and avoid internalising the unwanted states that characterise deprivation in the Global South. The idea of intergenerational justice must be accompanied by intragenerational justice, and community resilience does not take the State off the hook for creating public goods that reinforce and underscore community resilience.

Recognising the role of the State and the overarching collective action that it brings forward, as well as its historical part in the construction of public goods and shared urban environments, is essential to this endeavour.

This does not diminish or de-emphasise the role of community struggles in achieving the recognition of positive rights, or as Holston (2009) calls them, the right to have rights (to education, health care, sustainable mobility, decent housing, and so on). This historic struggle has helped shape the community (Paraisópolis) and the State and its understanding of its own role vis-à-vis citizens’ rights, ultimately giving Paraisópolis a fighting chance against the pandemic despite its deprivation.

## Notes

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