

SOCIAL CONTROL AND DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION: THE ROLE OF THE MUNICIPAL HEALTH COUNCIL IN THE CRISIS AND POST-COVID IN THE CONTEXT OF ULTRA-NEOLIBERALISM



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ABSTRACT

The neoliberal dictates and the financial capitalism that took place in the 2000s have been causing significant changes in the environment, in people's lives and in the global order. Added to these changes that permeate the area of industry and automation, technology, politics, economy and culture, we are experiencing a recent pandemic. In Brazil, especially, the second half of the twentieth century was marked by intense struggles for the conquest of rights and democracy and the 2000s have been marked by the loss of the rights that had been conquered. To analyze the guarantee of social control in times of the pandemic and post-pandemic of Covid-19 (2020-2023): an observation from the Municipal Health Council of the Municipality of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana-RJ. It is an exploratory research, with a qualitative approach, epistemologically guided by dialectical historical materialism, where we will carry out a literature review, documentary and field research. Data collection will be done in the Municipality of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana, in Rio de Janeiro, RJ, where we will interview counselors and former counselors of the Municipal Health Council. A questionnaire was applied as a data collection instrument. The study thus seeks to offer an in-depth analysis of social control in a context of the intensification of neoliberalism, especially in the health sector, during the Covid-19 crisis and its subsequent recovery period. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Municipal Health Council of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana-RJ adapted by holding remote meetings, but faced low community participation, which limited the effectiveness of policies. Most of the councilors dedicated between one and three hours a week to the activities, with financial support present.

Keywords: Social Control. Health Councils. Ultraneoliberalism. COVID-19 pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the world has been marked by the growing diffusion of ultra-neoliberal policies, which have brought profound changes in social and economic structures, resulting in the weakening of social protection systems. Brazil, which at the end of the twentieth century had achieved significant advances in social rights and democracy, experienced, in the 2000s, a reversal of these rights due to the adoption of neoliberal measures, which seek to reduce state intervention and promote the free market (Rizzotto, Costa and Lobato, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in 2020, intensified this process, exposing the country's structural weaknesses and deepening existing inequalities.

Ultra-neoliberalism, by prioritizing the deregulation and privatization of essential public services, such as health and education, has widened social and regional inequalities. As Gohn (2019) and Medeiros (2021) argue, the minimization of the role of the State has weakened social protection networks, leaving the population more vulnerable in the face of crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This context of state retraction is directly reflected in the capacity to respond to public health emergencies and in the protection of the social rights of the most fragile population.

During the pandemic, Brazil experienced a double crisis: health and social. The collapse of the health system and the absence of effective centralized coordination were aggravated by austerity policies, which had already been implemented over the last decades (Defina, 2023). The crisis highlighted the disparities in access to health services, highlighting how ultra-neoliberal policies have weakened the State's capacity to respond in emergency situations, compromising the guarantee of social rights, especially for the most vulnerable populations (Rizzotto, Costa, and Lobato, 2022).

In the midst of this scenario, social control and democratic participation have become even more essential. In Brazil, social control in the field of health is guaranteed by municipal, state and federal health councils, which allow civil society to actively participate in the formulation, monitoring and inspection of public policies (Bravo, 2002). The Municipal Health Council of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana-RJ, the object of this study, played an important role during the pandemic in seeking to maintain social control in a context of severe restrictions and challenges (Gohn, 2019). However, the crisis has brought to light new difficulties, such as the digital divide and low community participation in virtual

meetings, compromising the effectiveness of decisions and the inclusion of diverse perspectives.

The pandemic not only restricted the population's ability to participate, but also called into question the effectiveness of social control mechanisms in times of crisis. The absence of broad community participation in the council's deliberations limited the implementation of more inclusive public policies adjusted to local needs (Medeiros, 2021). Although the councils have sought to adapt through remote meetings, the lack of technological infrastructure in many regions and social demobilization have contributed to the reduction of the reach of these initiatives.

In this context, this study aims to analyze how the Municipal Health Council of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana-RJ adapted to the circumstances imposed by the pandemic and the intensification of ultra-neoliberal policies between 2020 and 2023. The research also aims to explore how these changes have impacted citizen participation and the guarantee of social rights, investigating how social control was exercised in a scenario of restrictions and social distancing. This analysis will allow for a broader reflection on the future of social control in Brazil and the need to strengthen these mechanisms to ensure democratic and inclusive governance, especially in times of crisis (Barreto, 2023).

The research documented the impact of the pandemic and neoliberalism on the effectiveness of the council's social control, analyzing its performance before, during and after the health crisis, with the objective of evaluating the social control was guaranteed during the period of the pandemic and post-pandemic of COVID-19 (2020-2023), with an observation focused on the Municipal Health Council of the Municipality of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana-RJ.

METHODOLOGY

This study is a descriptive qualitative research with an exploratory approach, based on the Marxist historical-dialectical materialist method, seeking to understand social structures from material and economic conditions. Focusing on the period from 2018 to 2023, the research contextualizes the impacts of neoliberalism and the COVID-19 pandemic on the democratic participation and performance of the Municipal Health Council of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana-RJ. The analysis includes comparisons with periods prior to the pandemic to highlight changes in social and political dynamics, offering a detailed understanding of the transformations that have occurred.

The participants selected for data collection were 16 councilors and former councilors of the Municipal Health Council. The research used semi-structured questionnaires to explore specific questions and allow spontaneous insights to emerge.

The thematic analysis followed the method of Braun & Clarke (2006), adopting semantic categorization, inferences and deep interpretation of the data, allowing a comprehensive understanding of the meanings and narratives implicit in the material.

The data analysis involved three main categories: the impact of COVID-19 on democratic participation, the effect of neoliberalism on the guarantee of social rights between 2020 and 2023, and the effectiveness of social control by the Council in the period from 2018 to 2023. The research respected all ethical aspects in accordance with Resolution No. 466/2012 of the National Health Council, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality, and was approved by the Ethics Committee on November 28, 2023, under opinion No. 6,538,960.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of health management between 2018 and 2023 is crucial to understand the challenges of the public health system, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. A survey with councilors and former councilors of the Municipal Health Council of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana was conducted to investigate how social control manifested and adapted before, during and after the pandemic. The objective was to gain insights into the evolution of citizen participation and the effectiveness of health policies in this critical period.

Next, we will present a table containing the issues discussed in the plenary sessions of the Municipal Health Council, organized by year and recorded in minutes. We will divide the analysis into the periods 2018 to 2019, 2020 to 2021, and 2022 to 2023 in order to facilitate understanding. Below each table, we will make a parallel between three relevant vectors identified in each period and the results of the survey carried out with the participants. This approach will allow a more detailed analysis of the dynamics and discussions around public health management over the years.

Table 1: Schedule and Main Issues Addressed in Meetings 2018-2019

Date	Meeting Type	Main topics covered
January 8, 2018	Ordinary	Public Competition for Endemic Agents and Community Health Agents; Stricter registration of users in the municipality.
February 5, 2018	Ordinary	Technical Advisory Center (multiprofessional department); Commission to be set up among the counselors for the implementation of the Occupational Health Prevention Program.
February 26, 2018	Extraordinary	Delay in payment to service providers of the Health Department
February 27, 2018	Extraordinary	Quarterly Accountability Report for the third quarter of 2017.
March 26, 2018	Extraordinary	Agreement with the São Vicente Hospital; Need to create the occupational health surveillance sector; Creation of the intersectoral commission on workers' health; Risk scenario for workers' health; Zoonoses surveillance.
April 29, 2018	Ordinary	2018 parliamentary amendments; Selection process of tests and titles for endemic agents and Community Health Agent already started; Humanization and treatment of SUS users.
May 27, 2018	Ordinary	Implementation of digital audio of meetings; blood collection task force in conjunction with the São Vicente Hospital to improve the demand for clinical exams in the municipality.
May 28, 2018	Extraordinary	Work plan for the acquisition of 5 ambulances to meet the exclusive demands of the Basic Health Units.
May 30, 2018	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the first four months of 2018 (Productivity of the Health Department).
July 3, 2018	Ordinary	Administrative preparations for the public exam for AE and ACS; Inspection committee composed of members of the Municipal Health Council, union, technicians from the Department of Health and Administration, and representatives of the Public Prosecutor's Office.

July 10, 2018	Extraordinary	Opening of bids for the acquisition of permanent material.
July 30, 2018	Extraordinary	Opening of bids for the acquisition of a vehicle to serve primary care, STD/AIDS program, sanitary surveillance and oral health; Amendment to the agreement with the São Vicente de Paulo Hospital.
August 6, 2018	Ordinary	Approval of RENAME unanimously; Presentation of the 1st Health Week project.
September 17, 2018	Ordinary	Public tender for AE and ACS for 2019; Continuing education for service providers of the Health Department; Contingency plan to combat dengue; Occupational health risk scenario.
September 28, 2018	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the second quarter of 2018 (Productivity of the Health Department).
October 22, 2018	Ordinary	2019 Annual Health Programming; CAPS/APAE routine.
December 3, 2018	Ordinary	2019 Annual Health Schedule.
February 06, 2019	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the third quarter of 2018 (Productivity of the Secretary of Health).
March 25, 2019	Extraordinary	Preparations for the 9th Municipal Health Conference.
April 01, 2019	Ordinary	Magnetic Resonance Imaging at HSVP, real verification of confirmed cases of dengue in the municipality, parliamentary amendment for the reform and maintenance of the UBS.
April 29, 2019	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the first four months of 2019 (Productivity of the Secretary of Health).
June 03, 2019	Ordinary	Lack of beds at HSVP and its regulation.
July 01, 2019	Ordinary	Questioning made to the Secretary of Health about the payment of employees made via RPA, SUS financing.

August 05, 2019	Ordinary	Composition of the commission composed of the councilors to integrate the Municipal Council of Basic Sanitation, projected video on the public budget to promote continuing education for the councilors, planning of the PPA, LDO, LOA, Health Plan and annual health schedule.
August 19, 2019	Extraordinary	Work plan for the reallocation of resources received from MAC increments, in the costing modality destined to the APAE of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana.
August 26, 2019	Extraordinary	Presentation of the work plan of the Agreement Management System by the National Health Foundation and the City Hall, with the objective of implementing the water supply system in the communities of Mutum, Serrinha, Santa Maria and Providência (Plan approved unanimously).
September 18, 2019	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the second quarter of 2019 (Productivity of the Secretary of Health).
December 02, 2019	Ordinary	Annual Health Program for the year 2020, delayed financial transfers of medium and high complexity to HSVP.
December 16, 2019	Extraordinary	Medium and high complexity financial transfers to HSVP, approval of the seventh amendment to contract 001/2017 unanimously.

Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

Supported by the survey data, we identified three main vectors that highlight the emphasis on financial transparency, workforce qualification, and the implementation of public policies in the health sector, namely: Financial management and accountability, Public Tenders and Human Resources, Planning and implementation of Health Programs.

VECTOR 1- FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

In this vector, two aspects stood out: a recurring theme in the meetings was the accountability of the four-month periods, evidenced on several occasions (February 27, May 30, September 28, 2018; February 6, April 29, September 18, 2019). In addition, there were debates about financial transfers to the São Vicente de Paulo Hospital (HSVP) and the need to reallocate resources (August 19, December 16, 2019).

VECTOR 2 - PUBLIC TENDERS AND HUMAN RESOURCES

This vector points out that several meetings addressed the need for public tenders for Endemic Disease Agents and Community Health Agents (January 8, April 29, September 17, 2018). In addition, there were debates on the supervision of the competition, permanent education for service providers, and issues related to the payment of employees (July 3, 2018, July 1, 2019).

VECTOR 3 - PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION OF HEALTH PROGRAMS

In this vector, important plans and programs for workers' health, health surveillance and control of zoonoses were discussed, as well as initiatives aimed at primary care and community health (March 26 and October 22, 2018; March 25 and August 26, 2019). The annual health program was treated on a recurring basis (October 22 and December 3, 2018; December 2, 2019). These discussions reinforced the council's alignment with local demands and SUS guidelines, ensuring the continuity of health services and the improvement of the population's living conditions.

Making a parallel between the three vectors and the questions answered by the interviewees, we found that, according to the survey, before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Municipal Health Council had an active and structured functioning. There were regular meetings focused on the planning and implementation of programs that are fundamental to public health. This scenario evidenced the effectiveness of the discussions and proposed actions, with an active and face-to-face participation of the councilors, which contributed to the advancement of public health policies in the municipality. The survey revealed that all participants (100%) stated that there were no difficulties in getting together before the pandemic. This result indicates a good organization and accessibility of board meetings, which is essential to ensure the effective participation of members and efficiency in deliberations. As evidenced by the statement of one interviewee "before the pandemic, there were no difficulties in meeting in the plenary sessions" (interviewee 6), which favored the exchange of information and the collective construction of public policies. The regular holding of these meetings provided a democratic and participatory space, where councilors and the community debated and actively contributed to the development and implementation of health programs. See this statement: "Before the pandemic, meetings were face-to-face with more "heated" discussions, during the pandemic period, meetings were remote and fast" (interviewee 7).

However, as Silva (2020) points out, the arrival of the pandemic brought significant changes in the dynamics of the meetings, directly impacting popular participation and the progress of many programs. Even so, the legacy of the previous period highlights the importance of an active and committed council, capable of adapting to challenges and ensuring the continuity of planning and implementation of health policies.

Table 2: Schedule and Main Issues Addressed in 2020-2021 Meetings

Date	Meeting Type	Main topics covered
February 12, 2020	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the third quarter of 2019 (Productivity of the Health Department).
March 02, 2020	Extraordinary	The 2020 Annual Health Program was unanimously approved. Presentation of the accounts of the municipal health fund approved unanimously.
February 24, 2021	Extraordinary	Presentation of the rendering of accounts for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd quarter of the year 2020, especially the COVID-19 accounts.
March 16, 2021	Ordinary	digiSUS system, funding of COVID-19 ICUs between HSVP and the City Hall, increase in incentives for elective surgeries, resources for the payment of the salary floor for AE and ACS.
April 20, 2021	Ordinary	Election of the Municipal Health Council for the 2021/2022 biennium.
April 27, 2021	Extraordinary	Annual Health Program, resources to encourage hospitalization of ICU-COVID beds, adherence to the Stork Network Program of the State Health Department, CAPS routines in relation to the pandemic.
May 26, 2021	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the first four months of 2021 (Productivity of the Health Department).
June 08, 2021	Ordinary	Number of ICU-COVID doctors for each number of beds, opening of beds for an exclusive COVID-19 sector within HSVP.
June 22, 2021	Extraordinary	Budget and financial execution report for the year 2021 of the municipal health fund.
July 06, 2021	Ordinary	Realization and preparation of the Municipal Health Plan 2022/2025, workshops to be offered at CAPS for users.
August 03, 2021	Extraordinary	Presentation of the emergency response plan to the coronavirus of the municipality of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana, an APAE agreement between the municipalities of Bom Jesus do Norte and Bom Jesus do Itabapoana, state financial transfer in support of labor and birth within the scope of the Stork Network.
August 17, 2021	Extraordinary	Presentation of the guidelines, objectives, goals and indicators for the preparation of the Municipal Health Plan 2022/2025.
September 14, 2021	Ordinary	Inclusion of Ordinance GM/MS No. 1,816 of August 3, 2021, which authorizes the qualification of five ICU-COVID beds for the São Vicente de Paulo hospital, establishment of financial resources to the States and Municipalities to face the care demands generated by COVID-19.
September 21, 2021	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the second quarter of 2021 (Productivity of the Secretary of Health).
November 09, 2021	Ordinary	Resources from parliamentary amendments for a temporary increase in the cost of basic health care services.
December 07, 2021	Ordinary	Transfer of resources intended for the control of COVID-19, public call for the provision of services in outpatient physiotherapy, questioning about any action to serve the homeless population, mental health workshop offered by CAPS.

Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

Based on the table above on the meetings of the Municipal Health Council during the pandemic, we highlight three main vectors: accountability related to COVID-19, funding and resources to face the pandemic, and transfer of resources intended for COVID-19 control.

VECTOR 4 - ACCOUNTABILITY RELATED TO COVID-19

It was the agenda of an extraordinary meeting held on February 24, 2021, in which data for the 1st, 2nd and 3rd quarters of 2020 were presented, with emphasis on the COVID-19 accounts.

VECTOR 5- COSTING

Another important vector was the costing and resources to face the pandemic, discussed at an ordinary meeting on March 16, 2021, which had as its main theme the funding of COVID-19 ICUs between HSVP and the City Hall.

VECTOR 6- TRANSFER OF ALLOCATED RESOURCES

Finally, at the ordinary meeting of December 7, 2021, the transfer of resources intended for the control of COVID-19 was discussed.

The survey shows that all respondents (100%) are residents of the municipality, which reinforces the representation and involvement of the local population. According to Fontes et al. (2021), the geographical proximity of representatives is crucial for a deeper and more empathetic understanding of local issues, leading to more appropriate and relevant decisions. It also reveals that 50% of the survey participants are former board members who served in the biennia prior to the pandemic, covering the period from 2017 to 2023. The other half (50%) consists of the current councilors for the 2023 to 2025 biennium. This distribution indicates that half of the survey participants were active during the pandemic, which may suggest an increase in interest in or need for board participation during those years.

Furtado et al. (2023) highlight that crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, increase social participation and the demand for more efficient management of health services. The significant presence of former counselors who worked during the pandemic indicates that these critical moments stimulate greater involvement and commitment to health governance, highlighting the urgency of facing emerging challenges and improving the response of health services to the community.

The survey revealed that the pandemic led to quick and remote meetings, participation was hampered by access difficulties, which resulted in the formal registration in 2020 of only two extraordinary meetings.

In 2021, the return to the plenary sessions of the Municipal Health Council represented a significant moment of resumption and reaffirmation of the commitment to democratic participation and social control. During the year, the council increased its activities, holding a total of eleven meetings, both remotely and in person, always following preventive measures. In an interview, a counselor shared his experiences during the pandemic:

"The beginning of the pandemic was marked by the use of masks. Then came social isolation, as many cases began to appear, and things got ugly. Many people died. I lost five family members. No one was prepared to live through the pandemic. It was challenging. Schools closed. There was only talk of the virus. The vaccine took a long time to arrive, and we had to wait until our turn. The government made it difficult. The vaccine only arrived a year later" (interviewee 2).

The maintenance of virtual meetings during the stabilization period was essential to ensure the continuity of decisions and the evaluation of the actions implemented. This adaptation enabled the board to adjust its strategies on an ongoing basis. Koupak et al. (2021) highlight the importance of constant review of public health management practices.

The preparation of minutes is crucial to preserve institutional memory, record the topics discussed, the decisions adopted and the commitments made, ensuring the continuity and effectiveness of municipal health policies. Thus, the absence of adequate records of meeting minutes can result in a lack of transparency and accountability, essential elements for public governance and effective citizen participation (Furtado et al., 2023).

During the pandemic, the Municipal Health Board faced serious financial challenges that affected its ability to operate and provide services to the community. The advisors' responses indicated a multi-pronged strategy to address these obstacles, including strict oversight of emergency resources and optimization of spending. However, many participants stressed that these measures were not enough to avoid limitations in the acquisition of medical equipment and supplies, in addition to the maintenance of infrastructure. These obstacles were confirmed by several members of the council, who pointed out the difficulties faced in fully fulfilling their duties during the public health crisis. Here is the speech of an interviewee:

"The challenges arising from the pandemic affected the provision of services, with a limitation on the purchase of medical supplies and equipment. All this was accomplished, but it took time to arrive in the municipality. Even vaccines. First we vaccinate the professionals, then the elderly and then we follow the flow of ages" (interviewee 3).

Table 3: Schedule and Main Issues Addressed in Meetings 2022 to 2023

Date	Meeting Type	Main topics covered
February 01 , 2022	Ordinary	Agreement 001/2022 between the municipality of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana and HSVP
February 22, 2022	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the third quarter of 2021 (Productivity of the Health Department)
March 08 , 2022	Ordinary	Preparation of the first addendum to agreement 001/2022 and its importance. Parliamentary amendment to increase the Primary Care Program. Resource of federal origin to face COVID-19 for Primary Care. Request to the Department of Health about underreporting in COVID cases.
April 05, 2022	Ordinary	Transfer of financial resources to meet the care demands generated by the public health emergency of international importance caused by the new coronavirus. Attendance of the social assistance team to elucidate the actions developed by the assistance department regarding homeless people.
May 24 , 2022	Ordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the first four months of 2022 (Productivity of the Health Department).
June 07, 2022	Ordinary	Participation of the municipality's Mental Health Coordinator to expose the importance of opening a new CAPS I, with priority in welcoming children and adolescents. Participation of the coordinator of Primary Health Care to inform the council about the implementation of the salary floor for the AE and the ACS.
July 05 , 2022	Ordinary	Attention to the dentistry sector. Needing new switchgear
August 2022	Ordinary	Second amendment to agreement 001/2022, to include two resolutions with the purpose of agreeing on the financing program for the maternal and child network and transferring it to elective surgeries, Participation of the Municipal Health Department to inform about the renovations of the UBS and the specialized center in dentistry (CEO).
September 08 , 2022	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the second quarter of 2022 (Productivity of the Health Department).
October 04, 2022	Ordinary	Slow care in the HSVP ophthalmology sector, due to surgeries. Request to the HSVP for the rendering of accounts of the financial execution of the resources of the amendments.
November 08 , 2022	Ordinary	Resource intended for application in the equity promotion support program and to set the guidelines for the year 2022. Request for clarification on the distribution of glasses to meet the demands.
December 14, 2022	Ordinary	2023 Annual Health Program.
January 05, 2023	Ordinary	2023 Annual Health Program. Internal regulations of the tenth Municipal Health Conference.
February 02, 2023	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the third quarter of 2022 (Productivity of the Health Department).
March 28, 2023	Extraordinary	Presentation of the first amendment to agreement 001/2021. Annual Management Report – RAG for the year 2022.
May 04, 2023	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the first four months of 2023 (Productivity of the Health Department).
June 06, 2023	Ordinary	Technical project for structuring, implementation and deleterious sanitary transport for the municipality of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana, election of the Municipal Health Council.
June 20, 2023	Ordinary	Election of the Municipal Health Council for the 2023/2025 biennium.

July 04, 2023	Ordinary	Financial resource of MAC increase for the São Vicente de Paulo Hospital, financial resource of MAC increase for the Municipal Health Department.
August 01, 2023	Ordinary	Resources to finance a hospital unit specialized in health in the cost of inputs, resources to finance the cost of Primary Care.
September 05, 2023	Ordinary	Approval of work plan No. 005/2023 regarding the MAC increment resource for HSVP.
September 26, 2023	Extraordinary	Presentation of the accountability for the second quarter of 2023 (Productivity of the Health Department).
October 03, 2023	Ordinary	Strike of the municipality's dental employees.
November 21, 2023	Ordinary	Presentation of the second addendum to agreement 001/2021 signed between the municipality of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana and APAE.
December 05, 2023	Ordinary	Inclusion of the financial resource for the medium and high complexity block in the agreement 003/1012 signed between the municipality of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana and HSVP.

Source: Prepared by the author (2024).

The analysis of the meetings of the Municipal Health Council over the years 2022-2023 reveals three fundamental vectors that deserve to be highlighted: The main vectors related to the pandemic include: Agreements and Resources to Confront COVID-19, Accountability of the Health Department, and Resource of federal origin to confront COVID-19 for Primary Care. These vectors reflect the importance of financial management, accountability, and ongoing planning during the public health crisis.

The analysis of the main vectors related to the COVID-19 pandemic reveals crucial aspects in the management of public health in Bom Jesus do Itabapoana

VECTOR 7 - AGREEMENTS AND RESOURCES TO FACE COVID-19

It highlights the importance of establishing effective partnerships between the city hall and health institutions, such as the São Vicente de Paulo Hospital (HSVP). The meetings held in February and March 2022, in addition to the extraordinary one in March 2023, highlight the need for adequate allocation of resources to face the pandemic, as well as the adaptation of agreements to respond to emerging demands. This approach not only enables the delivery of essential services but also strengthens transparency and trust in public administration.

The survey reveals significant challenges in health management in Bom Jesus do Itabapoana during and after the pandemic. The meetings in February and March 2022 and the extraordinary meeting in March 2023 highlight the importance of partnerships between the city hall and the São Vicente de Paulo Hospital (HSVP) for the proper allocation of resources. One interviewee stated that "the Municipal Hospital is the greatest example of

the importance of health insurance plans, today several outpatient specialties and high complexity are served, from hospitalizations in wards and a neonatal and pediatric ICU was recently inaugurated" (interviewee10).

However, reports from other counselors highlight the bureaucracy in the health system, such as the difficulty in releasing exams. One counselor noted that "the population often complained about the difficulty of releasing tests, with some taking months to be authorized, resulting in serious consequences for patients: 'There are some that take months. There are cases in which people get better or even die before release'" (Interviewee 1). In addition, the social worker, a member of the council representing the user category, mentioned the lack of critical debates in health policies, stating that "I realize that there is a lot of agreement between 'friends', without ideological debates with different visions focused on the construction of serious policies to serve the population. What happens are agreements of chivalry" (Interviewee 8). Another member highlighted that the service is still precarious, stating that "it often depends on the help of influential people, even politicians, to obtain care" (interviewee 5), characterizing a paternalistic practice. Thus, it is crucial to promote transparency and an open dialogue in the Municipal Health Council to effectively improve the local health system.

VECTOR 8 - ACCOUNTABILITY OF THE HEALTH DEPARTMENT

It is essential to ensure accountability and transparency in government actions. The extraordinary and ordinary meetings, which addressed accountability in different quarters, show a continuous effort to keep the population informed about the use of resources and the results achieved. This aspect is vital, as effective accountability contributes to the legitimacy of the decisions of the Municipal Health Council and promotes citizen participation, which is essential for democratic governance.

At the end of the pandemic, the return to face-to-face meetings helped mitigate some access challenges, but the transition does not erase the lessons about the importance of broader access to digital technologies. The pandemic has highlighted, as pointed out by Gomes and Orfão (2021), the need to integrate digital solutions with face-to-face practices to ensure public participation in crises. During this period, the Municipal Health Council of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana-RJ faced serious difficulties in ensuring democratic participation. Participants reported significant barriers related to access and use of technology, restricted mobility, and maintaining transparency and dialogue with the community. The difficulty of

accessing technology for virtual meetings was the main limitation, with counselors less familiar with digital tools facing challenges in using devices such as cell phones and computers, especially in a context of social distancing that made face-to-face meetings impossible. As evidenced by the following statement: "I almost didn't participate because I didn't know how to use my cell phone to enter the meeting" (Interviewee 2).

Social distancing posed a significant challenge, forcing a quick adaptation to digital platforms to avoid physical meetings. However, this transition was not equally successful for all board members, who had to learn how to use new communication channels. Many had the help of younger people familiar with technology, as reported by one of the participants. "To participate in the online meetings, I needed my daughter's help" (interviewee 4).

VECTOR 9 - IMPORTANCE OF FEDERAL RESOURCES ALLOCATED TO PRIMARY CARE

In the fight against COVID-19, allowing health units to adapt their operations to meet the new demands of the pandemic. These resources were fundamental for the acquisition of supplies, training of professionals and implementation of care protocols. However, its application required careful management. One interviewee pointed out:

"Federal resources were essential to keep Primary Care active during the pandemic. Without them, many health units would not have been able to provide the necessary support to the population, yet the population complains." (Interviewee 5).

This statement highlights the significant impact of financial resources on the health system's responsiveness.

The research indicated that the Municipal Health Council of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana needed to adjust its strategies to ensure its effective functioning as a social control body. This adaptation was essential to maintain the functioning of the council.

In short, the interrelationship between these vectors — agreements and resources, accountability and annual health programming — is essential for an effective confrontation of the pandemic. Together, they promote a more responsive management that is committed to the needs of the population, ensuring that the lessons learned during the crisis are incorporated into future public health practices.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Municipal Health Council of Bom Jesus do Itabapoana-RJ demonstrated a remarkable capacity for adaptation by holding remote meetings, maintaining its role of social control and implementing important measures. However, the survey revealed that the absence of community participation in board meetings limited the effectiveness of policies and the inclusion of diverse perspectives. Despite the continuous dedication of the directors and the adaptation of operations, the lack of engagement of the population reduced the scope of the discussions and the effectiveness of the decisions.

The survey data show a diverse configuration of the council, reflecting a democratic and participatory governance model. Half of the members represent health workers' entities, government and private non-profit service providers, while the other half represent users, ensuring a balance between different sectors and groups. In addition, half of the participants are former councilors from the biennium prior to the pandemic (2017-2023), and the other half is composed of current councilors from the 2023-2025 biennium. All respondents are local residents, with a predominance of counselors over 41 years of age (93.9%) and high academic qualification.

The professions of counselors show a significant presence of health professionals, such as nurses (18.8%) and doctors (12.5%), and all are currently employed. Most dedicate between one and three hours a week to the council's activities (87.5%). Although all participants stated that the monthly plenary sessions took place normally, there was an absence of records between March 2020 and February 2021, with a division between face-to-face (56.3%) and remote (43.8%) meetings.

Financial support was indicated by 93.8% of the participants as present during the analyzed period, and 68.8% highlighted the orientation work as the main strategy adopted to maintain engagement. All participants confirmed that they did not face difficulties in meeting before the pandemic.

These data show the continuity and adaptation of the Council during the pandemic. However, it is essential to promote more robust and diverse community engagement to strengthen the effectiveness of health policies and ensure that the needs and perspectives of the population are effectively represented and met.

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