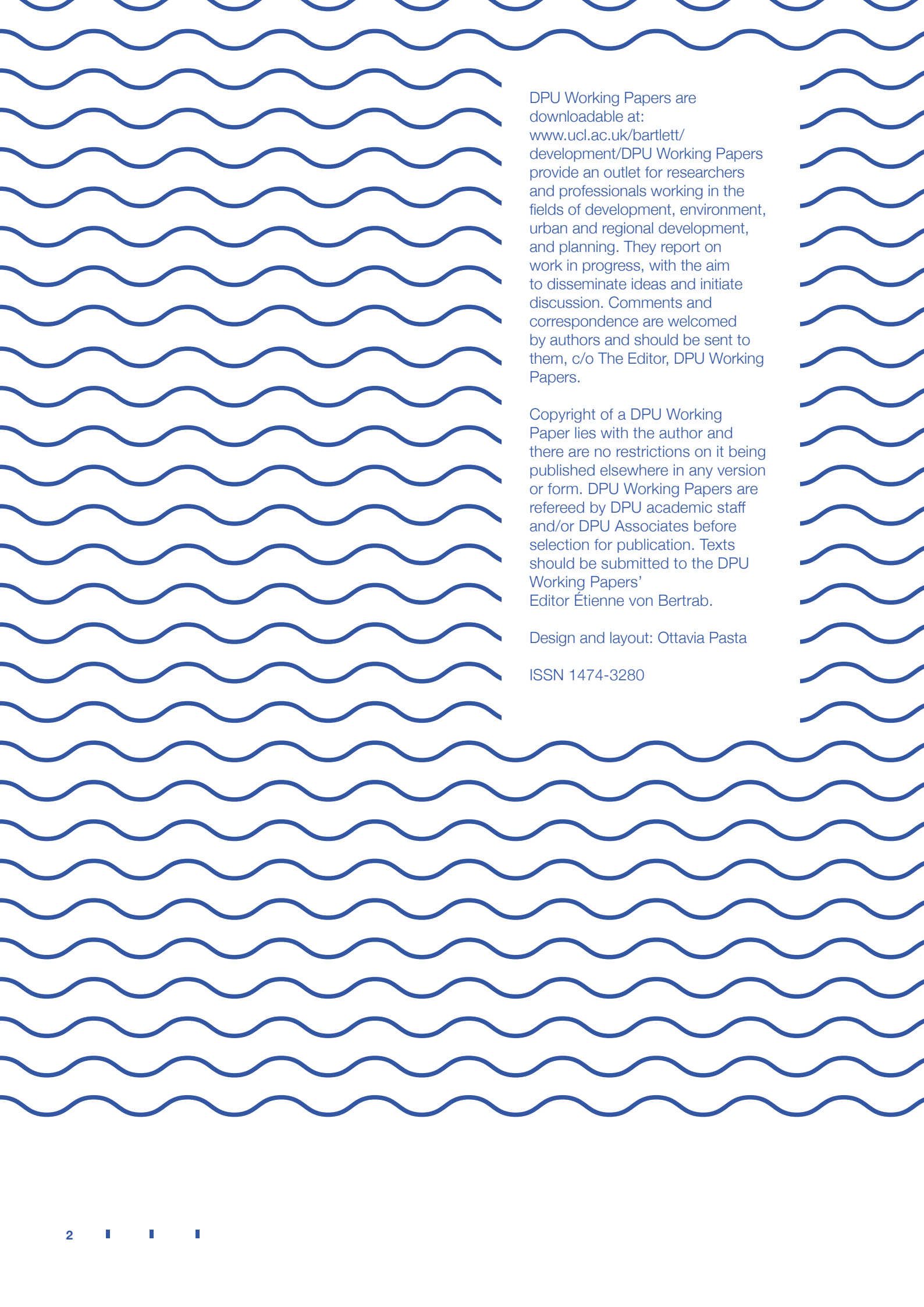


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How the spatial meets the social?
Favelas as urban institutions and
COVID-19 in Brazil

By Juliano Cavalli de Meira



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Abstract

This study looks into the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Its main objective is to enable an understanding of a favela as a capable urban governance institution. This rationale is made possible through the case study of local initiatives that surged in this city during the crisis, by making use of the complexity framework applied to social sciences. In the analysis of this case, three elements are central to the way one understands urban equality throughout the pandemic in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. The first element is the formal government institution's failure which constrains and enables grassroots responses throughout the pandemic. The second element is a widespread condition of inadequate access to health and sanitation for the people living in favelas. The last element comes from the bias and prejudices that portrays favelas as a threat and perceived by formal institutions as something that must be fixed. This understanding leads to a contribution to the academic and societal understanding of urban settings in Brazil. Despite its findings are somewhat limited to the specific context of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, this paper argues for future studies to be developed under the complexity framework to enrich theoretical and societal understanding of favelas and cities.

Content

01

05 Introduction

02

07 Situating knowledge on institutions and practices in the Southern Corner region

- 07 Formal and informal institutions
- 08 Key urban manifestations of informality in South America
- 10 Fragmented cities and urban realities
- 11 Access to health services
- 12 Wealth and income
- 12 Narrowing to the case

03

14 Methodology

- 17 Favelas and the complexity framework
- 17 Filling the gap in data
- 21 The gap beyond data
- 24 Favelas as an institution or institutional response from favelas?

04

26 Conclusion

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.

01. Introduction

NOTE 01

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)

NOTE 02

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, Cociña 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 inequalities that matter for the case at hand, without implying that only the forms of inequalities discussed are present in urban settings in Brazil or elsewhere in South America.

The third chapter operationalises the analytical framework to answer the main question guiding this study. In this section the concepts of poverty and urban equality are discussed as well as the elements of complexity applied to social sciences and the justification to use this framework to guide this study. Here I also pose a concept of governance and emphasise the importance of Caldeira's (2017) peripheral urbanisation to the perceptions of favelas. The chapter concludes by highlighting the limitations of employing such a framework and what can be done to overcome these limitations.

The fourth chapter discusses the cases used to demonstrate how the responses to COVID-19 pandemic in Rio enable one to see favelas beyond a narrow spatial concept. In this section, I employ secondary data analysis to highlight voices, opinions and perceptions of urban dwellers that portray the aspects of urban inequality. As a result, in the remainder of the chapter, I argue for considering favelas as an urban governance institution.

The paper concludes with some reflections and recommendations. Here, the main question guiding this paper is answered by pointing to the conditions that emerge from the study of this COVID-19 pandemic in Rio. Lastly, these conditions are used to point to limitations of this study that can perhaps be resolved through further investigation.

The responses to the pandemic emerging from a local context allow us to rethink the favela beyond a spatial boundary.

02. Situating knowledge on institutions and practices in South America

The following section provides a critical review of the development of institutions and urban development by highlighting examples from South America countries such as Chile, Colombia and Brazil vis-à-vis the urban inequalities present in the region. Here, the intention is to touch upon themes that help illustrate the socio-economic realities of those living in so-called informal areas, and the entanglements of these realities with urban governance. To do so, the first part of this chapter presents a historical perspective on formal and informal institutions in the region. What follows is a discussion on the classic perception of informality and informal settings. Lastly, the issues of wealth inequality and access to health services are presented as central to the understanding of life in favelas during the COVID-19.

NOTE 03

I have used the term Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) throughout the paper sometimes to refer to specific data points and sometimes to help situate knowledge in institutional and political trends that share similarities and happen in both South and Latin America.

Formal and informal institutions

South America history with democracy is a fragile one and no different from a situation that can be extrapolated to the whole Latin America and the Caribbean region (LAC)³. The political histories of LAC are one of colonialism, clientelism, murder, slavery, violence and rape. No country in the region was spared from the barbarous colonial mindset, which is crucial to consider when discussing institutions. Most countries in LAC declared independence in the early 1800s but would only become democracies almost 100 years later. There were many democratic failures; but it is also true and less talked about that the meddling in LAC political affairs is recurrent, and has hindered countries from achieving autonomy and political stability.

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 Robinson, 2012). Although some countries share similar political systems, e.g. Argentina, Brazil and Chile; they are different in political disfranchising and fragmentation (Stein and Tommasi, 2008). The problem then becomes evident when considering the public policy and the capacity of formal institutions to work on policy delivery. Accordingly, Scartascini, Stein and Tommasi (2012) evaluated a diversity of public policy aims, such as coherence, efficiency and stability in a range between 1 (lowest delivery of public policy) and 4 (better delivery). The authors found out that the levels of public policy efficiency for LAC is equal to that of Sub-Saharan Africa (1.29) and the lowest among the regions studied. Then, it seems that institutions depend on autonomy and stability to achieve efficiency in its policies deliveries.

In South America, the increased capacity of institutions is at the centre of the growing trend of government decentralisation. In this way, local-level governments take control of policymaking and implementation in areas such as education, health, and housing. This trend entails the concept of subsidiarity developed in federalist states such as the USA and vastly applied in the reconstruction of for example Brazilian national government after military dictatorship (Spink et al., 2008). In Brazil, the 1988 constitution represented this change in which government structures would then organise in three levels: Federal, State and Municipal or local— which in turn, affects the division of responsibilities for public service provision and the development of institutions and policies. In other words, the autonomy of institutional development likely increased given the levels of decentralisation in Brazil.

When these institutions fails, there are also safety nets acting as subsidiaries to the formal role of government. To cite a few, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile and Argentina count on a variety of the most diverse and inclusive organisations to influence policy activity and fill the absence of the state (Rico and Segovia, 2018). This is perhaps because of the high levels of informality in the economic sector, housing and jobs market in these countries. For example, even health care was sometimes provided by charity hospitals that had no affiliation to the state or any formal organisation (Cotlear, Gómez-Dantés et al. 2015) . In Brazil, non-governmental organisations in the favelas of Rio have worked to supply water where the state failed to provide the most basic infrastructures (Leite Lessa Chaves, 2019). It is then crucial to understand the role and the importance of local or, so to say, grassroots assistance in South America.

Through the years, those so-called invisible populations provided exceptional qualities to compete with formal responses in an environment where policy delivery often fails. As such, this study considers the role of grassroots responses to COVID-19 in favelas to understand two things. First, how the locals fill the gap of formal governance with the aim of advancing urban equality. Second, what that can tell us about the way we see institutions in the city.

Key urban manifestations of informality in South America

Informality in South America region is widespread and takes different forms such as in aid, households, jobs, settlements, services and workers. Concerned with the consequences of informality, literature has vastly explored the informal economy's role and size across multiple countries (Vuletin, 2008; Chen and Carré, 2020). The informal sector guarantees jobs and income for many people, but the informal sector is also the subject of significant controversies given its workers' lack of social protections (Canagarajah and Sethuraman, 2001; Freije, 2005). For that reason, some actors pushed a formalisation agenda. It was not until recently that development scholars stopped considering the informal sector as a barrier for a country to prosper and

stopped pointing to informality as the leading cause of significant inequalities in societies (Roy, 2009).

Governments such as those of Brazil, Chile and Colombia have long bet on policies aiming to formalise urban settlements and its residents by promising, for example, access to welfare and social protection nets such as unemployment benefits and health insurance (Freije, 2005). Nevertheless, access was often conditional on the terms offered by governments (Segre, 2009), which almost always failed to grasp the realities of those affected by such policies (Fiori and Brandão, 2009). This failure in the policy design intended for the informal sector emerges as an issue and perhaps even as a barrier to the deployment of formal government responses in urban settings (UN Habitat III, 2016). Simultaneously, these failures create an opportunity to develop alternative urban institutions that do not depend on the government (Meagher, 2007). Formalisation policies often overlook the role and merits of informality and provide little assistance to those living in such conditions because the informal is invisible to policymaking.

Here I would argue, the only problem with informality is when social practices, as Fraser (2000) describes, transform some individuals into less deserving of the status of full members of societies. Then, what follows is that some individuals have less power to shape the political processes, especially in urban settings (Cociña et al., 2019). In acknowledging that, initiatives such as the SDG goals and the New Urban Agenda surged to seek equality in urban settings. Equality and inclusion in urban settings are at the forefront of a vision for adequate standards of living, gender equality and increased participatory processes in cities (United Nations, 2017b). Following these initiatives, those often called informal (or the invisible) deserve to be understood as full members of the political process.

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.

Magalhães (2016) poses that inadequate living and urban fragmentation are present in practically all Latin American countries. The region concentrates high levels of urbanisation that accommodated a steady population increase since the 1940s (Magalhães, 2016). The region's rapid urbanisation also created challenges for local and national governments and, even more, for its residents. In 2018 the World Bank estimated that 20% of the total LAC population lived in urban fragmented areas, and only 31% had access to safe water and sanitation facilities (World Bank, 2021). In turn, these processes of fragmentation are perceived by some as a duality – a process that is always about the same formal/informal context (Segre, 2009; de Vries, 2016). Yet, this duality between formal and informal in urban settings is challenged in scholarship and presented as a necessary process of urban formation (Castells, 1992).

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.

Fragmented cities and urban realities

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 competitiveness 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 difficulty accessing public health services and even seeking police protection in these areas (Santiago, Peregrín and Gonçalves, 2017).

Looking specifically in Brazilian cities, while the police rarely find their way to protect women in segregated spaces, they manage well enough to break into *favelas* to perpetuate cycles of violence. This is not to say that the police are mainly responsible for violence alone, considering that other militia groups and drug traffickers are also present in such places. There are accounts of increased police presence in these areas in attempts to pacify favelas and turn them into safe spaces by fighting militias and drug traffickers (Leite, 2012). Yet, violence is ever more present, and many have portrayed the police as targeting the black and the poor (Leite, 2012). In turn, the intensification of police presence in these communities does not mean more access to services or better quality of life for its citizens.

Organised crime is also responsible for attracting police to favelas and perpetuating violence in these settings. Drugs, guns, smuggling and even real estate activities are within the reach of organised crime in favelas. In fact, Benmergui and Gonçalves (2019) posed one of the key activities for organised crime in favelas is real estate. Often, that includes the construction and the selling of buildings, the demarcation of land within the favelas as well as the administration of basic services. These activities are widely spread and gave the origin to the term *urbanismo miliciano* or militia urbanism coined by Benmergui and Gonçalves (2019). Further, "the police are a critical element in the profit and power equation" (Perلمان, 2010, p. 180). The police presence in the favela is generally associated with fear and violence, with many accounts of death squads and violation of human rights given by dwellers of several favelas (Perلمان, 2010).

Another element that aggravates the living conditions of those in favelas is the quality of housing. Marginalised communities tend to have tenure insecurity issues and often settle in hazardous areas (Caldeira, 2017; United

Nations, 2017b). When authors looked in favelas in the northeastern part of Brazil they found that many dwellings are made of recycled materials, just a few have access to clean water or sanitation facilities, while entire families are confined to one single room (Queiroz de Lima and de Oliveira Santos, 2018). Despite the diversity of housing programmes in the whole LAC region; only a few have successfully reduced the population living in these conditions (Magalhães, 2016).

City spaces are essential, and slum areas are a constant target of public policy. Segregation is still an issue in most countries, and as such, it is expected that responses to the pandemic fit within the context of broader housing inequalities by accommodating the needs of the most vulnerable in society, such as those living in slums and especially women.

Access to health services

Studies have pointed out that the LAC region has an average of 2.1 hospital beds per 1,000 people, with a population dependent on low medical technologies and scarce mental health assistance (OECD and The World Bank, 2020). The low numbers of hospital beds are likely the heritage of a prolonged political and democratic deficit that threatened the region until the 1980s. Investments in the public sector were severely curtailed through the 1970s and the 1980s due to the expansion of military rule in for example Argentina, Brazil and Chile, contributing to the social and economic exclusion of the poor (Atun et al., 2015). After the military rule ended, these countries found themselves embroiled in national debt and had to resort to help from the IMF in what was later labelled the Latin American debt crisis. The consequences of this borrowing were felt in the health sectors because countries were made to comply with neoliberal macroeconomic reforms (Atun et al., 2015). By the 1980s, health care became a universal right in most LAC countries, and governments have substantially started to fund their universal health care programmes, with the exception of Chile (De Andrade et al., 2015).

However, the universal right to health assistance was insufficient to avoid “*medical apartheid*” (Frenk 1988 cited in Atun et al., 2015: p.1234). The called apartheid resulted from a historical trajectory of the region’s health care system and development agencies, which can be conceived in four phases, from the independence of LAC countries, the creation of Ministries of Public Health, followed by a merger of social security agencies and finally the integration of these agencies with the ministries of health by creating Ministries of Health and social security (Cotlear et al., 2015).

These phases set the stage for high political contestation. For example, the creation of a Ministry of Public Health in many countries translated in an increase in life expectancy through the overtaking of charity hospitals which coincided with a growth in employment and manufacturing (Cotlear et al., 2015). The third phase of health benefits in LAC aimed to include the poor and non-salaried populations. While central governments tried to decentralise their health systems and make them more inclusive, what occurred was a deepening social segmentation. This is an important point because it helps understand how access to health became segregated in certain areas. As a result, three separated segments for health care in LAC surged, one for poor people served by the Health Ministry, one for workers served by security agencies and one for private hospitals (Cotlear et al., 2015). The last phase of this transformation, described by authors as a quest for equity, was the implementation of reforms that ended in the creation of unified systems cementing the national health systems in Chile (the 1950s), Cuba (1960), Brazil (1988), and Colombia (1993) (Cotlear et al., 2015).

The creation and later integration of ministries and social security agencies did not translate into more access to health care. Accordingly, in LAC countries, 45% of the total health spending comes from private spending, a trend

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.

Wealth and income

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 Brazil, 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 is worth examining the financial help offered through the pandemic to understand how they aimed to complement, support and mitigate the effects on income inequality in LAC during the crisis and who could claim such benefits.

Narrowing to the case

The critical discussion of these themes helps illustrate the central issues of housing, income and access to health, that happens in most countries in the South and 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

and formal institution negligence, happen the most – while these are also the spaces more severely affected by the pandemic. Second, scholars pointed to the need to develop institutional capacity in favelas (Simpson, 2013; UN-Habitat, 2017). If favelas are perceived as a threat, we want to eradicate them (Simpson and Silva, 2020), but if one could perceive these communities, or favelas, or slums beyond a spatial boundary as holding the most significant inequalities in the city, perhaps then we could also make it easier to achieve urban equality for all.

The responses to the pandemic emerging from a local context allow us to rethink the favela beyond a spatial boundary. Now, it is vital to understand how urban institutions dealt with a lack of health and essential services, loss of income, housing and poverty during a health emergency crisis and what lessons one could take for the future of governance in cities.

If favelas are perceived as a threat, we want to eradicate them, but if one could perceive these communities, or favelas, or slums beyond a spatial boundary as holding the most significant inequalities in the city, perhaps then we could also make it easier to achieve urban equality for all.

We cannot decouple a favela from the urban inequalities present in that space, but that space itself does not create these inequalities.

03. Methodology

The key evaluative questions for this study are centred upon conditions that allow me to narrow the scope of this investigation to Rio de Janeiro - Brazil, given its institutional consolidation through democratic history and government decentralisation that shaped urban governance across the country. The development of a dualist sets of institutions (formal and informal) in Rio de Janeiro is perhaps a determinant factor to the main inequalities present in the urban environment. For this matter, this qualitative study looks into the entanglement of responses for COVID-19 in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro.

My reflection focuses specifically on those processes and mechanisms emerging from the responses to COVID-19 in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro which in my view are self-governed, self-selected and autonomous institutions. To be able to understand these elements and the constituency of a governance institution, this study employs complexity applied to social sciences which is a 'framework for understanding which asserts the ontological position that much of the world and most of the social world consists of complex systems and if we want to understand it we have to understand it in those terms' (Byrne and Callaghan, 2013, p. 8)

To specify the terms in which one can understand favelas as an urban institution I compiled (Cilliers, 1995) list of ten essential elements of complex systems. These elements provide me an essential scheme to understand the main responses to COVID-19 in the favelas of Rio without resorting to the inference of causal mechanisms in these processes. In other words, these elements permit to capture the essence of favelas response to COVID-19 while allowing to understand them as an urban institution that's complex in nature. According to (Cilliers, 1995) a complex system is formed of: 1) a large number of elements; 2) these large number of elements interact with each other; 3) these elements influence, and are influenced by, quite a few other ones; 4) the interactions are not linear; 5) the interactions usually have a short range, i.e., information is received primarily from immediate neighbours; 6) there are loops in the interactions forming recurrency and feedback mechanisms; 7) complex systems are usually open systems that interact with their environment.; 8) complex systems operate under conditions far from equilibrium; 9) complex systems have a history that is essential for a complex system to exist; 10) each element in the system is ignorant of the behaviour of the system as a whole, it responds only to information that is available to it locally.

These elements constitute the basis for my argument to understand favelas as an urban institution. This is a fitting framework for this analysis as it was for Cielo (2010) when analysing institutions and peripheries in Bolivia because I share some of Cielo (2010) assumptions in terms of being able to understand the micro and macro structures that compose urban institutions through 'the

shared creation of social practices and discourses as a focal point' (p. 44). The main implication of using complexity framework is that it allows me to link the understanding of urban institutions, urban inequality, and favelas without pointing to causation or linearity between the social practices and the elements that compose the understanding of a favela beyond a spatial limit in the city.

It is established that we can understand the favela as a spatial boundary, but the complexities of favelas cannot be captured through this epistemological perspective alone (Simpson, 2013). The complexity framework permits to challenge this simplistic and purely spatial approach by looking into favelas from an epistemological and ontological standpoint (i.e., questioning concepts, theories, perspectives and assumptions). Complexity theory is necessary to better understand the inner-workings of favelas, to situate their peculiarities through the 'mutual production of both the individual and social structures' (Cielo, 2010, p. 43). Analysing the collective responses to the pandemic that emerged in the favelas of Rio through the complexity framework is also an exercise that enriches the literature on the field of urban institutions.

This methodological choice is important because it challenges the dualist perspective of formal and informal neighbourhoods (*favela* vs. *bairro*) which is often accompanied with a highly simplistic and shallow understanding on favelas. A case study of the collective response of a favela to COVID-19 reveals the processes and mechanisms in which the social, economic, and political dimensions of a favela exist, which in turn can inform policies targeting favelas as well as political processes that shape and define cities. In other words, by better understanding favelas we can better understand cities with favelas.

We cannot decouple a favela from the urban inequalities present in that space, but that space itself does not create these inequalities. Paradoxically, favelas can be considered the spaces that fight these inequalities while dwellers endure the fundamental failures of public policies that create them. Using the complexity framework also allows to focus on the entanglements of policy and urban manifestations produced by the development and the relationships between the subjects of policy that are capable of constantly recreating the spaces they live in (Caldeira, 2017).

For this matter, I propose to look into governance in favelas as the central element that allows the design, organisation and dissemination of initiatives to improve the livelihood of the population. This form of seeing governance allows to portray governance in favelas as the 'life strategy adopted by actors who did not have the capacity to imagine endgames' (Maringanti, 2020, p. 40).

Scholars defined urban governance as the processes organisation and pursue of collective goals in the local level that are instituted and exist in conjunction with the formal institutions of governance (John, Mossberger and Clarke, 2012). To grasp the complexity of favelas responses for COVID-19 vis-à-vis that of formal institutions of government, and because the logics of formal and informal in the city is blurred (Caldeira, 2017), I propose to understand favelas as an urban governance institution. This understanding is needed if one wishes to go beyond the elements that defines favelas as more than a spatial boundary in the city. In fact, favelas seen as institutions of urban governance seem highly relevant to the theory of urban governance as they contain the organisations and processes that are necessary to pursue collective goals of *favelados*⁴ in the political system.

NOTE 04

The term might have been associated to a socio-economic prejudice term (Simpson, 2013), but many have proudly claimed to be *favelados* when referring to themselves as those living in favelas (da Silva Mello, 2012). I wish to use the term *favelado* as a term of political positioning that recognizes *favelado* not as something pejorative but a form of empowerment.)

Furthermore, I embrace Caldeira's (2017) notion peripheral urbanisation and refer to a favela as a result – or maybe even the process – of producing a space that is not bounded by physical location. I employ peripheral urbanisation because such concept surges from studies of São Paulo's peripheries which share similar conditions to the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Also, because Caldeira's (2017) work is a rich balance of the spatial and social practices that occur in favelas. By understanding a favela not as a physical location but a place that shapes politics as well.

Because this paper builds on the history of inequalities in favelas, I believe is important to define urban equality *or the lack of it* through the definition given by Frediani, Cociña and Acuto (2019) that portray urban equality as a multidimensional experience of those living in urban settings, their access to income and services, the recognition of a diversity of social identities and inclusion in decision-making processes; a definition built upon the works of Fraser (1995) and Young (1990). Similarly, poverty is considered as a multidimensional experience meaning not only absolute terms such as income deprivation but also the relative dimensions in which individuals are deprived of access to essential services, education, democratic participation, and housing (Wratten, 1995) as discussed earlier in this paper.

This study examines the responses given to the pandemic within favelas through institutional governance. As such, there is a focus on these responses vis-à-vis government responses in these areas because the complexity framework requires forms of comparison. By no means I intend to compare favelas to formal government. Here, I compare only the responses to the pandemic emerging from favelas to the responses *or lack of* from the 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.

This case study builds from data acquired from a selection of publicly available material. This material comes from various sources, including communities' organisations, policy papers, reports, and interviews. The primary data comes from different grassroots organisations in favelas such as Frente Maré, Central Única de Favelas (CUFA), Instituto Marielle Franco, Favela em Pauta and several newspapers articles. This data is sometimes used in published papers containing interviews or analysed interviews from those living in these communities. This secondary data is a selection of materials provided by Fiocruz, one of Brazil's leading public health foundations. These are a set of epidemiological bulletins that focus only on favelas and their citizens. What follows is a collection of voices and knowledge that challenges official accounts of the pandemic in Brazil.

I believe it is necessary to give more attention to what happens in favelas through the account of favelados. Then, the most appropriate way to do that is by using material produced by them.

I decisively focused on Rio de Janeiro because I am familiar with the many organisations that operate in the informal settings within the city. The advantages of focusing on a single case stem from an opportunity of voice and space in which I can employ the rich material produced by those most affected by the tragedy of the pandemic. As Maringanti (2020) poses, I aim to situate knowledge by understanding the practices of people that cannot be captured in formal politics. I believe it is necessary to give more attention to what happens in favelas through the account of favelados. Then, the most appropriate way to do that is – to let the subaltern speak (Spivak, 1988) – by using material produced by them. By doing so, the aim here is to elevate the practices of the so-called informal institutions to illustrate how governance emerges from these practices.

Lastly, there are considerable limitations of approaching these themes through a single case study analysis. Issues of generalisability stem from this study, given that every single favela is different and that informal urban settings around the world would come with their particular trajectories. Here, it seems relevant to take this single case from a southern urbanist stance and understand this limitation as valuable; precisely because it potentially permits an explicit and implicit understanding of these places' particular trajectories. This choice might be limiting the comparison needed to approach this study from the complexity framework as Byrne (2005) suggests. As such, the best way forward would be to include in further studies a much higher number of cases that share similar historical, political and social trajectories as those from the favelas in Rio.

Favelas and the complexity framework

In Brazilian cities, favelas are home to individuals who compose the informal sector and represent the most salient urban inequalities. Favelas are crowded spaces, and they certainly host many inhabitants. While Rio de Janeiro has a population density of 5,161 per km², *Favela da Maré* and *Rocinha* have 48,000/km² and 56,000/km² respectively (Observatório Sebrae cited in Souza, 2020). In relation to health care, spatial segregation has an enormous consequence on the life and wellbeing of women and men living in favelas (Barroso and Gama, 2020). For example, the incidence of the Zika Virus that affects women and newborns is higher in low-income areas than in other neighbourhoods in the city (Cunha et al., 2020). Even if 65% of informal settlements in Brazil are located within 2 km of a health facility (Gracie and Scofano, 2020), it seems that these places are far from becoming what resembles a neighbourhood as many slum upgrading programmes intended. For instance, a neighbourhood would have sanitation facilities in most of its domiciles, which is not the case in favelas. Instead, the majority of favelas have no access to clean water facilities, and the whole sewage runs through the houses themselves (Kleiman, 1995, 2011). In these spaces, health and sanitation issues coupled with spatial segregation made difficult for slum upgrading programmes to succeed in filling the most essential needs of those living in favelas (Becerril, 2015).

The analysis is presented in two sections. First, a section named filling the gap in data in which I illustrate how communities created a way to counteract the government's intent to hide pandemic numbers in Brazil. Across this section I mainly focus on the elements of complexity such as the influences (2), interaction (3), non-linearity (4), and short-range information (5) distributed within these systems as well as the feedback mechanism created in these information exchange (6). The second section is called the gap beyond data discussing safety net practices that emerged in the favelas during the pandemic. This section focuses on the remaining elements of the complexity framework mainly looking into the interaction of favela as a system with the outside environment (7) such as other urban institutions as well as the conditions in which this interaction happen (8).⁵

NOTE 05

I would not be detailing the elements (1) and aspect (9) about the history of the system. It seems for me that the introduction of this paper has already provided enough background into the number of individuals living in favelas as well as it provided a good background on the history of favelas

Filling the gap in data

One example of formal institutions' response failures during the pandemic happened when the federal government stopped publicly displaying the country's official count of COVID-19 cases. Instead, the government arbitrarily focused on showing the number of those "recovered" from COVID-19 (Sacramento, 2020). This decision represented one of the primary spectacles in the political circus created by the Brazilian president during the pandemic. Reliable data about cases and deaths became unavailable, and it was challenging to navigate the myriad of other data sources coming from the municipal and state levels as well as from the press (Fleury and Menezes, 2020).

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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 official 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 official – 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 official data by supplying these communities with accurate numbers that help them plan and develop efficient actions to counter the pandemic (Gracie and Scofano, 2020).

These panels emerged in the context of a lack of official 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 dying. There were many reports of residents with the flu, but with the lack of 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

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 bulletin. In a Facebook live stream, Camila Barros, who coordinates the project, explained that:

“The objective is to understand the size of the cases of Coronavirus in Maré... We start from some sources, one of them the official municipal data Rio Covid... there is an on-site data collection from the distribution of food parcels ... the Maré network is working [in] several actions and several fronts, one of them is “de olho no corona” and the other is [the] food security. Every day there is a team in the field to distribute food parcels, which is one of the ways we have to collect [coronavirus] data. And we have what we call a group of collaborators... who are residents of several favelas in Maré, community leaders, [and] institutions that work in Maré... These people have been reporting ... suspected cases or deaths ... Then this information is placed in a database after being validated and from this database we build the numbers that we present in the weekly epidemiological bulletin. We start with official cases, which are the cases notified by the municipality, which we call confirmed cases, that is, people who had access to the test and suspected cases are cases that we identify through this direct channel of communication with residents.”

- Camila Barros in *Redes da Maré*, 2020

Here, what Camila Barros conveys explaining the development of such tools and responses is a form of governance structure that surged to fill the lack of formal government assistance in favelas. In filling these gaps, these initiatives are challenging the narrative of the coronavirus situation in favelas while fostering what Menezes, Magalhães and Silva (2021) called a ‘social and political exchange between favelas’ (p.122). Perhaps this exchange comes to cement a new form of institution and governance relationship between these communities. They are giving structure to a self-governed, self-selected and autonomous urban institution, which has existed for some time and that we can simply call favela. These actions taken during the pandemic by *favelados* and for *favelados* seem to portray that favela is no longer a term for the urban poor but an urban institution of governance.

This is an interesting argument to consider if looking into the aspects of peripheral urbanisation by Caldeira (2017), particularly that favelas are a space for urban transformation in which residents shape their spaces through a process of constant making that signifies a transformation in social mobility. Here, we can apply Caldeira (2017) traversal logics of complexity to understand the complexities in periphery during the pandemic. Caldeira (2017) argues in a sense of informal construction and urban land; Instead, I propose to see these logics from a social and governance perspective as well. Accordingly, Caldeira (2017) poses that we cannot abide to the dual formal or informal logics when looking in the social aspects in such spaces. Then, when Camila Barros *Maré’s* project coordinator poses “*We start with official cases*” meaning the initiative depart from official counting in the city of Rio de Janeiro that also demonstrates the logics and complexities of peripheries.

Further, these logics, from a social governance perspective seems to demonstrate several elements of Cillieris (1995) complex systems. With no doubt the interaction between numerous individuals and organisations created a relationship of trust and responsibility. Each initiative influenced one another and on July 9th, 2020 the *Painel Unificador Covid-19 nas Favelas do Rio de Janeiro* or Covid-19 (Unified Panel in Rio de Janeiro’ Favelas) emerged. The lack of formal government responses permitted that short range information initiatives such as the *Painel dos Invisíveis* to be aggregated and later incorporated through the volunteer geographic information (VIG) method (Gracie

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 with the external environment such as the federal government permitted that scattered collectives came together under a central organisation to overcome their invisibility through data.

Comunidades Catalisadoras or ComCat was the organisation responsible for unifying the data collected in the whole of communities. In a press release, the organisation informed that this panel emerged not only to fight such invisibility but to aid community members to have more understanding about the COVID-19 situation and solidify a network of neighbours on fighting the virus (ComCat, 2020; Fleury and Menezes, 2020).

Aurecelia, a resident of Bangu, emphasised that

“we don’t have data, so we created our own register to know our reality. To have a voice and a turn. To help us, the leaders came together.”

- Angelo, Leandro and Perisse, 2020, p. 5

In turn, the work of ComCat with these communities portrays a unique method of a community organisation – and gives significance to the expression ‘*Nós por Nós*’: ‘us for ourselves’ (Fleury and Menezes, 2020).

Those in favelas perceive the local responses to the pandemic as efficient methods of subsidiarity addressing the lack of formal governance. In a social media post, one of these collectives mentioned that their initiatives have no connection to government; on the contrary, “*in the absence of the State, our Cabinet has been working much better than many political institutions. This is a fact*” (Fleury and Menezes, 2020, p. 275). What also looks like a fact is that the capacity of these organisations for self-governance helped initiatives such as the panel to transcend the space of unique or localised responses to become a major unified initiative between favelas in Rio.

Initiatives such as the covid panels happening in the favelas of Rio might place a new significance on the understanding of favelas – a new meaning to the term that is given through the processes of organisation and pursue of collective goals of favelados in the political system.

Initiatives such as the covid panels happening in the favelas of Rio might place a new significance on the understanding of favelas – a new meaning to the term that is given through the processes of organisation and pursue of collective goals of *favelados* in the political system. Through these processes a favela now become a capable urban institution of governance that is able to meet the social realities of *favelados*. I believe it is possible to think in these terms considered what Caldeira (2017) argued as the entanglement of agents and the relationship between residents and institutions of urban governance. In this terms, Holston (2009) posed that unique conditions in the periphery create new democratic practices and shape new approaches to social policy and citizen participation (cited in Caldeira, 2017). Lastly, the possibility to understand a favela as an institution of urban governance also stems from the inadequacy of formal institutional responses that portray favelas as a place in need of transformation (Fleury and Menezes, 2020).

Even more interesting is that this transformation occurs through the use of data for *favelados* about *favelados*. This data constructs a tale of urban development representing the complex entanglement of the city's formal and informal institutions. An entanglement already perceived by Caldeira (2017) and Holston (2009) in such spaces. Now, the evidence from the creation of COVID-19 data panels in favelas can help one understand how inequalities, solidarity and governance capacity glue the social aspects of favelas to the realities endured by its inhabitants through a quest to make themselves visible. This is precisely the moment in which the spatial meets the social. It is a moment in which conditions far from equilibrium permitted urban transformation to occur through collective action and organisation; which resulted in a set of new rules and narratives about favelas (Firmino, Pio and Vieira, 2020).

The evidence from the creation of COVID-19 data panels in favelas can help one understand how inequalities, solidarity and governance capacity glue the social aspects of favelas to the realities endured by its inhabitants through a quest to make themselves visible.

The gap beyond data

The trajectory of the coronavirus in Brazil paints the ugly portrait of a historic and distinct socio-economic class division in the country. The first official cases of COVID-19 surged within the middle class, by individuals that travelled abroad during February and March 2020. In Rio de Janeiro, accounts of covid infection started in the city's wealthier areas (Miranda et al., 2020). Also in Rio, the first victims of the COVID-19 were among low skilled workers, namely a domestic worker and a janitor (Valim and Rasga, 2020; Barreto, 2021). A family from Leblon, one of the most expensive postal codes in Brazil, did not release the domestic worker from her obligations after suspecting they had COVID upon return from a trip to Italy. Cleonice, a black, elder, poor woman, was the first confirmed death of COVID-19 in Rio de Janeiro (Vilarinho, 2020).

Cleonice, as many other favela residents, was part of the low-skilled and informal working class in Brazil. The black, the poor, the women and the informal workers compose this class of citizens often neglected by formal policy.

This neglect was 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. Those living in favelas were not able to properly self-isolate or practice social distancing and other preventive measures, as was being done in more affluent neighbourhoods (de Albuquerque and Ribeiro, 2020). In her account of the situation, Simone Rodrigues, a community leader, portrays that:

“Entire families are victims of structural inequality. They are forced to live in cramped rooms that barely have a bedroom separated from the living room”

- Angelo, Leandro and Perisse, 2020, p. 22

With families confined inside these spaces, access to food and basic hygiene products became difficult. Daily and informal workers did not make any money during the pandemic, and the situation was much worse for those that could not access the *Auxílio Emergencial*⁶, as it was the case for Cristina Maia, a resident of *Parque Uniao* that got her benefits approved after a long three months wait from when she first applied (Angelo, Leandro and Perisse, 2020). In such a situation, again, the communities of Rio de Janeiro organised responses to tackle the lack of public response on a diversity of fronts. On different occasions, the population in favelas counted only on donations for food and money, free judicial consultation, psychological assistance, and even community sanitation initiatives that mostly developed without formal government support (Barbosa et al., 2020).

One of the main sanitation initiatives occurred in Santa Marta with the Sanitation Action in the Santa Marta Favela. This initiative started on the 5th of April 2020 with an equipment donation intended to sanitise the alleys in Santa Marta led by the brothers Thiago & Tandy Firmino (Mano, 2020). Thiago is a known active member of Santa Marta and is the head of another initiative called *Alerta Santa Marta*, a WhatsApp group that serves as a species of ombudsman for the locals and aggregates public services and neighbourhoods complaints (Mano and Freire-Medeiros, 2020). Thiago drove much mediatic attention to its initiative in Santa Marta yet counted with no municipal or state government support (Mano, 2020).

No formal aid from the government did not stop these initiatives to evolve and multiply across other communities. In turn, this initiative sheds light again on the immense capacities of articulation among these communities. As Firmino poses:

“The favela is always forgotten. Anything that happens in the city, the favela is always the last to receive any benefit. Healthcare is precarious and the question of public hygiene and trash is also precarious.”

- Moraes, 2020

NOTE 06
The emergency aid approved by the National Congress which is a benefit to guarantee a minimum income to Brazilians in a more vulnerable situation during the Covid-19 (Ministério da Cidadania, 2021)

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city, the favela is always the
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trash is also precarious.**

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 buy equipment and do it in each other's favela."

- Mano and Freire-Medeiros, 2020

Despite the novelty of Firmino's initiative, community coordination and safety nets are not a new phenomenon in most favelas in Rio. In fact, these initiatives occurred throughout the years and intensified during the pandemic (De Araujo, 2020). That was the case with the collective organisation called *As Comadres*; before the pandemic, the group worked on several initiatives supporting girls in favelas and now they gather to distribute food parcels (Peres, 2020). In turn, this capacity of organisation and articulation demonstrates how recurrency and the feedback mechanism (Cilliers, 1995) happens in favelas. It becomes evident that the readiness and preparedness, the autonomy and stability achieved in these organisations is greatly influenced by the historical lack of formal government initiatives in favelas. Here, it is interesting to consider what McFarlane (2008) called a relation between urban fabric and social change – or, the social agency that surge in these places given the capacity and abilities of favela residents. It seems for me that initiatives such as the cleaning action organised by Firmino in *Santa Marta* and the food parcels given by *As Comadres* share the same capacity of community organisation that allows us to understand safety nets in favelas as primal example of governance in these places.

Safety nets are essential for the survival and development of those living in favelas. Valim and Rasga (2020) posed that there was no specific government strategy to tackle hunger during the pandemic. In such a situation, dwellers united their resources to gather essential food parcels and other basic hygiene supplies. This was the case in *Realengo*, where an initiative called *Funk Solidário* gathered around 1.5k food parcels for the community (Barbosa et al., 2020). *Realengo* is not alone in fighting hunger during the pandemic. An estimate from *Observatório das Favelas*, a local group, counted around 113 food security initiatives that happened in favelas by December 2020 (Braga et al., 2020). The development of such social safety nets are only made possible through local knowledge and community participation (Fleury and Menezes, 2020)

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).

**To close the gap left
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Favelas as an institution or institutional response from favelas?

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.

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.

Favelas must be understood from a spatial boundary 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.

04. Conclusion

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 of the role of formal or informal institutions in the city by considering the spatial and social dimensions in which these roles develop. For example, the historical responses given by the strong capacity of coordination and leadership shown in favelas. Societally, this answer enables one to see how the experience of poverty and inequality twists the roles of organisations and institutions of the urban into a complex relationship; a relationship that is constant changing through the interaction of actors and institutions alike.

This case analysis is subject to at least three important limitations to consider. This study is limited to Rio de Janeiro; therefore, it is difficult to aim for a generalisation of these arguments of perceiving a favelas as an institution for the whole of favelas in Brazil. The major limitation of this study stems from the fact that it was done through secondary data analysis. As such, no input from these organisations or dwellers could be considered when discussing these findings. In this sense, the element of confirmation of the findings, triangulation or member check is missing from the results of this analysis. That entails the question, would *favelados* perceive a favela as an institution of governance? Perhaps this question can be explored in a future study.

Lastly, as the case study highlights there are several organisations that can represent the interest of urban dwellers in favelas. In the future, studies could aggregate the perspectives of these different organisations by capturing their uniqueness, because as the case shows, not all of these organisations that appear in the favela context are interconnected. Furthermore, from a methodological stance it would be interesting to engage further work with Byrne's (2005) complexity when studying these organisations to be able to capture the many facets of the experience of *favelados* in cities.

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