

v. 18 n. 31 São Paulo Dec. 2021



international journal  
on human rights

issue **31**

# A TIDE OF HOPE

**Eliana Souza Silva**

- *Redes da Maré's response to the pandemic in Rio de Janeiro* •

By Sara Batista

In years like 2020 and 2021, when the problems brought on by the Covid-19 pandemic were particularly severe in Brazil, Redes da Maré managed to minimize the impacts on the 16 *favelas* of the Maré Complex in the northern zone of Rio de Janeiro. Through its “Maré says NO to the Coronavirus” campaign, the institution guaranteed that 69,542 people had the minimum they needed for survival.

The loss of more than 600,000 lives in Brazil is the most tragic result of the combination between a virtually unknown disease and an inefficient and omissive government administration. Specialists believe however that in addition to the mourning of the dead, the country will feel the economic and social impacts of this crisis for many years. And the main reason for this is the deep inequality plaguing the country.

In Brazil, economic, gender, racial and territorial issues had major impacts on society. In this context, it became crucial to mobilize the necessary networks to protect the rights of the residents of the Maré. Faced with the inertia of the state, civil society and a few companies took the lead in the attempt to help the most vulnerable groups.

As early as March 2020, Redes da Maré began to seek inspiration in what was being done in Brazil and especially in other countries to help people who were unable to work to sustain themselves during the period of social isolation. Based on these references and with the necessary support, the organization created a campaign with six lines of action.

All the work done in the region was later recognized through the Social Entrepreneur Award from the Folha de S. Paulo and the Carolina Maria de Jesus Human Rights Award from the Human Rights Commission of the Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro (Alerj).

Eliana Sousa Silva, the director of Redes da Maré, attributes the campaign's success to the process of organization that already existed in the region: "It is my understanding that the success of the campaign's different fronts of action has to do with the way we were already working or taking action here at Redes da Maré. Our organization uses an approach where we really think of strategies that produce responses that structure the reality we live in".

## 1 • A group of *favelas* that is bigger than 96% of municipalities in Brazil

Organizing a social campaign in the 16 *favelas* of Maré is not an easy task, as more than 140,000 people live in the region. If Maré was a city, it would be larger than 96.4% of the 5,570 municipalities in Brazil.

To properly assist residents, Redes da Maré relied on information from the Maré census,<sup>1</sup> which the organization has been conducting since 2010 to produce knowledge on the population's way of life. Based on this data, the organization initially identified 6,000 households in situations of greater vulnerability which were to be given priority in the campaign. However, already in the first month, in April 2020, the demand for assistance exceeded this number. Over the course of the campaign, support was provided to 18,000 families.

Redes da Maré described the experience of taking action in a place with such unique dimensions in a report on the campaign it published in 2020:<sup>2</sup> "We have mixed feelings about having managed to mobilize a range of possibilities and partnerships at such a difficult time. On one hand, we recognize the importance of attending to the urgent needs of many families, but on the other, we observed something sad: the almost complete abandonment and the lack of social protection policies for a significant part of the Brazilian population".

## 2 • Six fronts against the virus

Only a week after the pandemic was declared, in March 2020, Redes da Maré met with the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) to understand the scenario at hand. "This was very decisive for the responses we gave. We wanted to respond in a way that was coherent with our history and with everything we had built until then", Silva explained in relation to the partnership with Fiocruz. This partnership involved things ranging from practical measures such as mass testing and vaccination<sup>3</sup> to studies in the field of health and on the effects of the vaccine produced by the Foundation. Within a six-day period, 37,000 people

over the age of 18 received the first dose of the vaccine and close to 20,000 vaccines were administered in the second dose vaccination round.

The organization's director summarizes this by saying, "The state's response [to the pandemic in the Maré] was delivered by Fiocruz. They began to give and create protocols for us so we could work on the streets as health agents".

However, when preparing the campaign, the organization realized that the problems affecting the families in the Maré went well beyond health issues. This is why the organization defined six lines of action: food and nutritional security; assistance to the population on the street; work and income generation; access to rights, health care and prevention; production and dissemination of information and safe content, and support for local artists, producers and cultural groups.

The response on the first front – food and nutritional security – consisted of delivering baskets filled with basic food, personal hygiene and cleaning items. Later, a new method was used: voucher cards containing credit that was the equivalent of the cost of each basket were distributed to give the families greater autonomy and to support local businesses. Between 2020 and 2021, baskets were distributed to 22,433 families.

Meals were distributed to the population on the street. Over 75,000 meals were handed out over the duration of the campaign by a team specialized in harm reduction, which provides support for persons with drug dependence, makes referrals and coordinates with other organizations and public institutions.<sup>4</sup> It is important to highlight that since these people are in even more vulnerable situations, they were tested weekly. None of them died.

In addition to receiving meals, the street population also engaged with the campaign by working on other fronts. For some of these people, this was a turning point in their lives because their involvement in the campaign made it possible for them to not only survive, but to organize themselves financially in order to get off the street.

On the work and income generation front, Redes da Maré mobilized 20 women with ties to Casa das Mulheres da Maré (Maré Women's House), another one of the organization's projects, who prepared the daily meals distributed to the population on the street. It also got 53 seamstresses involved in the production of around 300,000 masks, which were delivered to people's homes. Furthermore, 20 drivers worked to deliver food baskets and hygiene kits to families experiencing food insecurity.

In the absence of the state, the organization guaranteed that residents had access to online assistance every day to answer questions related to health, violations and doubts about how to enforce their rights.

The campaign collected personal protection equipment (PPE), such as masks and gloves, for the public health clinics in the region. "The Maré has seven family clinics, and they were

completely out of PPE”, Silva reported. Masks and hand sanitizer were also distributed to the population. The organization also disinfected close to 900,000 streets, alleys and lanes in the 16 *favelas* of the Maré by applying specific products that make it difficult for the coronavirus to stick to things.

Also, in this fourth line of action, projects on testing, online medical assistance and safe home isolation were implemented. When someone tested positive for the virus, Redes da Maré took them an oximeter so that they could monitor their blood oxygen saturation levels and delivered two meals a day to them so that they could remain in isolation. This was done through the project called “Safe Isolation”.<sup>5</sup>

In times of fake news and what became known as “infodemic” (the pandemic of misinformation), there was also a need to work on the production and dissemination of accurate information and content. Thus, the campaign disseminated content to inform residents of the situation in the *favelas* and peripheral areas in relation to the pandemic and to instruct them on how to protect themselves. The “Guia de Isolamento Domiciliar” (Guide to Home Isolation) and the “De Olho no Corona!” (Keeping an eye on Corona!) are worth highlighting here.

Finally, Redes da Maré worked to support the production of journalistic content on the pandemic and develop projects that aimed to give recognition to and strengthen local artists who were strongly affected, as the pandemic made it impossible for them to engage in their artistic activities.<sup>6</sup>

It was obvious from the start that there was a broad acceptance of the campaign due to the high level of participation of the residents. “Many people from the Maré got involved in the campaign. People who had never participated in any group and community activity began to come every day to be with us”, Silva said.

### 3 • Beyond the campaign

As the difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic continued, the campaign was extended to 2021. It also gave rise to two other projects: “Impact on Life” and “Health Connection”.<sup>7</sup>

“Impact on Life” currently provides support to 300 families. The goal is to take various forms of action regularly to help families gain access to their rights. It provides basic food baskets, tablets and internet plans to school-aged youth, as well as psychosocial support.

The project also offers support to people who test positive for Covid-19 and are in home isolation, as well as legal and psychosocial assistance. The Impact on Life project aims to reach 2,000 families in 2022.

Another outcome of the “Maré says NO to the Coronavirus” is the “Health Connection” campaign. This partnership with six organizations, including Fiocruz, seeks to offer support for mass testing, telehealth services, home isolation and communications activities.

In addition to these projects, Redes da Maré used the knowledge it had acquired on the communities to work intensively to support mass vaccination in July in the group of *favelas*. The action was developed through a partnership between the Municipal Health Department with Fiocruz and Redes da Maré.

Obviously, in the context of a public calamity, the efforts of civil society institutions and their partners alone were not enough to completely shield the Maré from the horrors of the pandemic. To pay tribute to the lives lost, Redes da Maré put up a memorial. “This work is carried out with the families to redefine the significance of this pain, this suffering,” Silva explains.

The 20 m<sup>2</sup> panel made of tiles bears the names of 72 victims and it is on display in the Bittencourt Sampaio Street in the Nova Holanda *favela*. At the time of the writing of this article, 388 residents of the Maré *favelas* have died from Covid-19. They will all be honoured on a larger panel that will be installed in the Fiocruz offices.

#### 4 • A new Redes da Maré

As for Redes da Maré itself, the organization expanded its viewpoint and, as a result, the way it operates. Up until then, the NGO’s work had been focused mainly on the most obvious violations in the *favelas* – the ones resulting from police operations. During this experience, Redes da Maré created new channels – including via WhatsApp – for receiving complaints, reports and questions about other problems the population in the region was experiencing.

However, the impacts of the campaign went well beyond this and, as Silva herself argues, the deepest changes may not be noticeable yet. The fact is that the residents were not the only ones affected. The organization as a whole, and its members individually, have been transformed by this experience. “There is the immediate impact of being able to truly make a difference, but I think that from an institutional point of view, we are still trying to understand just how much the pandemic has changed us, just how much it has forced us out of the place we were in – which was even a comfortable one at times – institutionally. We won’t be the same after this experience”, explained the director of Redes da Maré.

In the end, it is clear that all the work carried out over the course of the “Maré says NO to the Coronavirus” campaign was the direct result of knowledge accumulated over time and a long history, and the impacts it generated were much bigger than expected.

When asked about the personal impact of this work, Silva summarized it by saying, “I know we did a lot, but this was only possible thanks to this sensitivity, this care. It is as though I prepared my whole life to experience this”.

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*This text was elaborated based on an interview granted by Eliana Sousa Silva (Director of Redes da Maré) to the Sur Journal team in November 2021, the report on the “Maré says NO to the Coronavirus” campaign and other materials produced by the Redes da Maré on its actions before and during the pandemic, which are available on the organization’s webpage.<sup>8</sup>*  
*Original in Portuguese. Translated by Karen Lang.*

## NOTES

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2 • “Campanha Maré Diz NÃO ao Coronavírus: Relatório de Atividades da Campanha 2020”, Redes da Maré, 2020, accessed December 14, 2021, [https://www.redesdamare.org.br/media/downloads/arquivos/RdM\\_Relatorio\\_campanha.pdf](https://www.redesdamare.org.br/media/downloads/arquivos/RdM_Relatorio_campanha.pdf), p. 6.

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8 • Redes da Maré, Homepage, 2021, accessed December 14, 2021, <https://www.redesdamare.org.br>.



Eliana Sousa Silva.  
Photo by Douglas Lopes



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