

# Community Leaders Confronting Inequalities in a Highly Vulnerable Territory in Cubatão, São Paulo: Perceptions and Articulations

Líderes comunitarios enfrentando a las desigualdades en un territorio de muy alta vulnerabilidad en Cubatão, São Paulo: percepciones y articulaciones

Lideranças comunitárias enfrentando as desigualdades em um território de altíssima vulnerabilidade em Cubatão, São Paulo: percepções e articulações

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## Abstract

This article aims to investigate how community leaders think, feel, live, and act in the struggle for better living conditions in a highly vulnerable territory, while reflecting on the articulations that occur within it. The research employed a qualitative documentary method based on a pre-existing database. The information was processed and systematized using Atlas.ti software and analyzed using Thompson's Depth Hermeneutics, along with González-Rey's Qualitative Epistemology. The results showed that, upon arriving in the territory, the

primary concerns were the lack of infrastructure and basic sanitation. Today, the main challenges are issues related to drug trafficking and the future of adolescents. It is concluded that community leaders contribute to the reorganization of the community in response to challenges and difficulties. They serve as a hub for initiatives, demonstrating a strong capacity for articulation and mobilization to foster community development and empowerment.

**Keywords:** socioeconomic factors; social vulnerability; social participation; leadership; sociocultural territory.

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## Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es investigar cómo piensan, sienten, viven y actúan los líderes comunitarios en la realidad de las luchas por mejores condiciones de vida en un territorio de muy alta vulnerabilidad, reflexionando sobre las articulaciones que allí se producen. El método de investigación fue documental de carácter cualitativo sobre una base de datos preexistente. La información fue gestionada y sistematizada mediante el software Atlas.ti y analizada mediante la Hermenéutica de Profundidad de Thompson, asociada a la Epistemología Cualitativa de González-Rey. Los resultados mostraron que, si al llegar al territorio las mayores preocupaciones eran la falta de infraestructura y saneamiento básico, hoy las principales dificultades son los problemas derivados del narcotráfico y el futuro de los adolescentes. Se concluye que los líderes comunitarios contribuyen a la reorganización de la comunidad frente a los problemas y dificultades, actuando como de iniciativas, revelando capacidad de articulación y movilización a favor del desarrollo y fortalecimiento de la comunidad.

*Palabras clave:* factores socioeconómicos; vulnerabilidad social; participación social; liderazgo; territorio sociocultural.

## Resumo

O objetivo deste artigo é investigar como as lideranças comunitárias pensam, sentem, vivem e agem no contexto das lutas por melhores condições de vida em um território de altíssima vulnerabilidade, refletindo sobre as articulações que ocorrem nesse espaço. O método adotado foi o estudo documental qualitativo, realizado a partir de um banco de dados preexistente. As informações foram gerenciadas e sistematizadas com o uso do software Atlas.ti e analisadas por meio da hermenêutica de profundidade de Thompson, em associação com a epistemologia qualitativa de González-Rey. Os resultados indicam que, embora as principais preocupações iniciais no território fossem a falta de infraestrutura e de saneamento básico, atualmente as dificuldades concentram-se nos problemas decorrentes do tráfico de drogas e nas perspectivas futuras dos adolescentes. Conclui-se

que os líderes comunitários contribuem para a reorganização da comunidade diante dos desafios, atuando como núcleos de iniciativas e revelando notável capacidade de articulação e mobilização em favor do desenvolvimento e do fortalecimento comunitário.

*Palavras-chave:* fatores socioeconômicos; vulnerabilidade social; participação social; liderança; território sociocultural.

With efficiency and competition as its pillars, contemporary neoliberal democracy ultimately fosters the pursuit of economic development and wealth accumulation. As a result, inequalities are heightened and directly impact peripheral communities, reinforcing the poverty line (PNUD, 2021) and leading to the breakdown of the social pact, which has further exacerbated poverty.

In this context, the gap between rich and poor has widened even further. As social conditions deteriorate with the precariousness of social rights and the disregard for human rights, 25 % of the country's population now lives below the poverty line. Among them, 13.5 million people are in extreme poverty, with a per capita monthly income of less than USD 1.9 per day (Nery, 2019), making Brazil one of the most unequal countries in the world in terms of income distribution (WSR, 2020).

From the perspective of Social-Historical Psychology proposed by Lane, the experience of inequalities aggravates vulnerabilities and triggers negative affections, such as suffering, fear, sadness, and humiliation, despite carrying the will to be happy and the desire for a new beginning (Sawaia, 2009). With this statement, the author understands the human being as a whole—a fusion of emotion and reason, body and mind—integrating elements such as emotion and intersubjectivity into social analysis. She also highlights the idea that, even in situations of extreme poverty, human beings are not solely reduced to the struggle for biological survival. Instead, they develop psychological subtleties, such as creativity, which

enable them to transcend the causal link between social determination, alienation, and individualism (Sawaia, 2009).

By highlighting social inequalities and vulnerabilities, social participation movements—acting as a democratic and collective force that unites people and communities around everyday issues to fight injustices and promote a more egalitarian society—can update public policies, making them a crucial subject for reflection.

When addressing the issue of participation, Sawaia (2001) introduces the concept of subjectivity as a central issue for analysis. With this, she prioritizes human needs over economic or political ones. From this perspective, it is essential to move beyond the understanding that the social influences subjectivity and that subjectivity, in turn, impacts the social, and instead recognize the psychological aspect as a social issue. For this author, participation is intrinsic to the human condition—it is not external to the individual but a necessity. Thus, the aim is to overcome the view of participation as a civic duty or the right attitude, as it becomes a matter of striving for the desire to be free.

The efficiency of participation would be marked, according to Sawaia (2001), by the concept of action potency, the ability of bodies to affect, to be affected in their emotions and feelings by social experiences and inequalities, and to be able to act, think, and desire (Sawaia, 1995).

Regarding social vulnerability, it is important to highlight that it does not affect individuals in isolation but the entire community (Lima, 2016). It has a multidimensional nature and is not solely limited to poverty. It is characterized by a combination of factors, such as the idiosyncrasies of the territory, the needs of individuals or groups, and difficulties in accessing the public policies offered (BRASIL, 2013). Vulnerability is represented by an index derived from the combination of demographic and socioeconomic dimensions, which reflect a social reality with varying degrees of exclusion.

In the state of São Paulo, the *Sistema Estadual de Análise de Dados* (SEADE: State Data Analysis System) created the *Índice Paulista de Vulnerabilidade Social* (IPVS: São Paulo Social Vulnerability Index), which, considering a set of variables, provides a detailed view of the specificities that cause the worsening of living conditions in a given community. This indicator is composed of seven vulnerability categories: extremely low; very low; low; medium; high in urban areas; very high (formed by urban subnormal settlements) and high in rural areas (SEADE, 2012).

According to Lima (2016) social inequalities are always associated with the territory, characterizing as vulnerable those who show the worst social indicators, in which the rates of supply and access to public services are low.

In the words of Sawaia and Purin (2018b), the adoption of neoliberalism has led to one of its major challenges: the depoliticization of public spaces by transforming them into business-oriented spaces. In response, they argue that spaces characterized by poverty and inequality should be politicized, transforming them into communal spaces that foster and strengthen collective action and participation. The authors move beyond the idea that territory merely influences people's lives, introducing a dynamic perspective that incorporates the dialectics of identification and disidentification, politics, and affection as means to confront inequalities.

As reported by Montero (2006), democratic participation is promoted by the leaders, who, when guiding the actions of a community, are committed to building the common welfare. According to the author, community leadership is a phenomenon resulting from the interrelation of several social system agents, an intricate process of “[...] active, participative, and democratic nature, which strengthens the commitment to the community and generates ways and models of action, being assumed as a service” (Montero, 2006, p. 141).

The documentary review by Andrade (2013) points out that, around two decades ago, community leadership began to be perceived as belonging more to the community as a whole rather than to a single individual. It is not something done by the leader for the community, nor a set of individual contributions for collective goals, but something distributed, assumed by different leaders according to the competencies and the moment the community is living. In this sense, leaders who represent the community emerge, and the personification of the community is what makes a leader truly communitarian.

As stated by Reyes and Maceres (2011), community leaders are distinguished by their ability to influence their surroundings, listen to criticism, advice, and ideas, and productively incorporate them into their actions.

Considering these issues, this article discusses some results of the dissertation of one of the authors and aims to investigate how community leaders think, feel, live, and act in the struggle for better living conditions in a highly vulnerable territory, reflecting on the articulations that occur within it, while observing psychosocial aspects related to coexistence and their performance in the territory, pointing out weaknesses, potential and challenges in a community organization to face and reduce the consequences of inequalities.

## Method

Since 2012, the *Laboratório de Estudo sobre a Desigualdade Social – Martin Baró* (LEDS-Unifesp-BS: Laboratory for the Study of Social Inequality – Martin Baró), following the Political-Pedagogical Project of the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP-BS), has implemented the principle of inseparability among teaching, research, and community engagement through projects developed in vulnerable communities across the Baixada Santista – a region located on

the coast of the State of São Paulo. Initially, extension activities focused on the hills of Santos – SP, a region characterized by high social vulnerability. These efforts targeted *Agentes Comunitários de Saúde* (ACS: Community Health Workers), to provide psychosocial support, addressing stress stemming from their roles in the *Estratégia Saúde da Família* (ESF: Family's Health Strategy). In 2012, a research project sponsored by the *Conselho Nacional de Desenvolvimento Científico e Tecnológico* (CNPq: National Council for Scientific and Technological Development), and conducted in partnership with the *Secretaria Municipal da Saúde de Cubatão* (SMS: Municipal Health Secretariat), was launched in Vila dos Pescadores, Cubatão-SP. The study focused on the *Unidade de Saúde da Família* (USF: Family's Health Unity) as its primary locus for analyzing territorial dynamics, conflicts, and needs. During this period, academic investigations—including undergraduate research, master's dissertations and doctoral theses—were initiated. Since 2015, extension activities have shifted toward addressing everyday community dilemmas.

## Place, Context, and Participants

Vila dos Pescadores is part of the municipality of Cubatão-SP, a coastal region in the State of São Paulo, where the main economic activity is the petrochemical industry, established in the 1950s. According to a survey by the *Observatório de Informação Municipal* (OIM: Municipal Information Observatory) (Bremaeker, 2019), Cubatão is among the wealthiest municipalities in the country, with an annual revenue exceeding R\$ 1 billion (Carro, 2020). Contradictorily 54.02 % of its population lives and resides in precarious or risky conditions (Anhas, 2019).

Based on the IPVS (Ferreira et al., 2006), 21.2 % of the municipality population is in the High Vulnerability group and 21.0 % in the Very High Vulnerability group, that is, 42.2 % of its population

exhibits low socioeconomic status, and the heads of household have, on average, low income and education. The last census of the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE: Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) (IBGE, 2010) indicated an estimated population of 128,748 inhabitants, with 48.8% identifying as mixed-race and 7.7% as Black. The average household income of R\$ 1.844 was concentrated in 19.1% of households, where per capita income was below half the minimum wage (SEADE, 2018). Demographic data also indicated that household heads had an average age of 40 years, with 24.1% of female heads being under 30 years old (Anhas, 2019).

Located between the Casqueiro River and the Anchieta Highway, Vila dos Pescadores is currently the second-largest slum in the municipality. It is built over a mangrove forest and most of the houses are of stilt type very close to each other. The community faces a lack of basic sanitation, drug trafficking organizations violence, limited access to recreational or social spaces, and an alarming rate of adolescent pregnancies (Anhas & Castro-Silva, 2017). The territory has minimal State presence, represented by a *Unidade de Saúde da Família* (USF: Family's Health Unity), which operates under a mixed-model with three family health teams. The Salvation Army, the Neighborhood Residents' Association, the *Instituto Socio Ambiental e Cultural da Vila dos Pescadores* (ISAC: Socio-Environmental Cultural Institute), a nursery school and a church are all present in the area.

The database consulted in this study consists of 29 documents, distributed as follows: four interviews (I), five workshops (W), and twenty field diaries (FD) which come from the integrated project "Social Inequality and Subjectivity: Life Trajectories and Struggles for Better Living and Health Conditions in the Vulnerable Territory of Baixada Santista" that was developed in Vila dos Pescadores, a mangrove community in Cubatão-SP, between August 2017 and January 2020.

Representing the UNIFESP-BS in the integrated project were professors, students from the extension and/or Scientific Initiation Programs across various courses—forming an interdisciplinary team—as well as postgraduate researchers. The community was represented by leaders, residents, and professionals from the USF.

The integrated project adopted participant research as a reference, and the fieldwork consisted of participant observation; meetings and workshops to form the research management group; semi-structured and in-depth interviews; and thematic workshops held as the discussions unfolded. UNIFESP-BS post-graduate researchers documented their observations and reflections in field diaries during their on-site research activities. These diaries served as comprehensive records of their fieldwork experiences.

All interviews were conducted by the same pair of post-graduate researchers from the integrated project, while the workshops were organized and supervised by the research management group linked to the project. Each workshop was structured around health and care themes, following a script aligned with the research objectives. Workshops were conducted within the area itself and involved community leaders and local health professionals. The thematic workshops aimed to deepen our knowledge of the living conditions and health of the residents and to discuss processes for building social participation and ways of producing care.

Interviews and workshops were recorded and transcribed following the determinations of Law 196/96 (BRASIL, 2008), which regulates research with human beings according to the *Termo de Consentimento Livre e Esclarecido* (TCLE: Informed Consent Form) approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of São Paulo (CEP-UNIFESP) under number 2.176.355.

To gather basic information about the trajectory in the community, forms of social participation, and involvement with health care issues, four community leaders were interviewed: three



women and one man, all chosen together by the community residents, professionals, and post-graduate researchers.

To preserve their identities, participants were assigned fictitious names. Among women, Kauane is in her 60s, separated, has lived in the community for 30 years, has incomplete high school education, is an evangelical, and works at a philanthropic institution in the community. Jandira is 66 years old, has lived in the community for about 40 years, is married, has incomplete high school, is an evangelical, and is retired, supplementing her income through a grocery store in the community. Yara is 62 years old, has lived in the community for about 40 years, is separated, has incomplete University education, is an evangelical, and is retired. Ubiratan is 36 years old, has lived in the community for 16 years, is married, has completed High School, and works in fishing activities, besides doing some part-time jobs.

### **Construction and Analysis of Qualitative Information**

Since this study investigated primary sources structured as a database, we adopted the documental research model and the qualitative approach because of the quality of information that can be extracted and to make it possible to systematize the knowledge about how people think, feel, live, and act.

The authors were responsible for reading all documents and coding them, as well as analyzing and interpreting the extracted information. Coding involved the following steps: 1) exploratory, attentive and repeated reading of documents in the following order: field diaries, interviews and workshops, highlighting relevant excerpts and assigning codes to them; 2) after reading and coding all the documents, grouping the codes into thematic categories; 3) reviewing the categories according to the research objective, disregarding redundancies and/or codes that are not very relevant. When necessary,

the return to a previously coded source was guided by the research question, respecting the same order in which the documents were initially read.

To ensure consistency and reliability of the codification, the following methodology was adopted: first, the authors attended a joint training session to align their understanding of the coding system and the objectives of the research, then each of the authors carried out the analysis and coding of the documents independently. After this individual stage, the authors met to compare the results and discuss any differences. Once a consensus had been reached, the final coding was carried out, incorporating the insights and adjustments identified during the discussions. The 29 documents were organized and managed using Atlas.ti software (Forte et al., 2017).

The information was analyzed based on Depth Hermeneutics (Thompson, 2000), a theoretical and methodological framework composed of three interrelated stages: 1) socio-historical analysis, which researches the socio-historical and cultural context; 2) formal analysis, which examines symbolic forms and narratives; and 3) interpretation/reinterpretation, which interprets narratives based on concepts and theories, being a reinterpretation for the interpretations already made in the previous stages. We chose this method as it enables us to understand the processes involved in comprehending and interpreting the meanings of the social world, by understanding the social and historical contexts of everyday life and how symbolic forms are interpreted by individuals.

The second stage, the formal analysis, was complemented by the Qualitative Epistemology (González-Rey, 2011), a constructive-interpretative perspective formed by three steps: 1) selection of the “qualitative indicators”, which are words, gestures, or intonations perceived by the researcher and constitute the first interpretative elements and acquire importance not because of what they represent, but because of the way the researcher will use them in the knowledge construction process;

2) the grouping of qualitative indicators by affinity or similarity producing the “zones of meaning”, which are spaces of understanding produced during the investigation and are characterized by being an interpretative unit, through which the researcher can expand his hypotheses or even formulate others; and 3) the stage in which the zones of meaning will contribute to the construction of the participant’s subjective configuration.

The constructive-interpretive perspective (González-Rey, 2011) was chosen because it allows for an understanding of reality as a dynamic and complex field, of which a partial approximation is possible through research methods. In other words, knowledge is a reconstruction of reality rather than a full appropriation of its totality, thereby breaking with the notion of research as means of achieving definitive results. Thus, the results we obtain are subject to new interpretations.

This study adopts Socio-historical Psychology, grounded in Marxist theory as proposed by Silvia Lane (Sawaia & Purin, 2018a), as its theoretical framework. This approach was chosen for its emphasis on affectivity—defined as people’s deep engagement with others and their environment (Heller, 2013)—and its capacity to bridge theory with lived experiences. By grounding analysis in concrete experience, this Socio-historical Psychology positions coexistence and life narratives as critical indicators of the transformative potential inherent in individual and collective practices (Sawaia, 2014).

## Results and Discussion

Below, we present the findings derived from an analytical process based on Qualitative Epistemology, a constructive-interpretative framework (González-Rey, 2011). Following the three stages of this perspective, we arrived at four zones of meaning that synthesize the interplay of cogni-

tive, affective, and behavioral dimensions among community leaders. These zones, contextualized within sociohistorical, subjective, and collective conditions are the beginnings of the territory’s development; the milestones in the leaders’ life histories; the leaders’ actions regarding vulnerabilities; and the conquests, potentialities, and current challenges of the leaders.

### The Beginning of the Territory's Development

In the 1950s, with the arrival of the first petrochemical and steel industries in the private and national capital, an industrial center was formed in the city of Cubatão. Industrialization led to a distinctive form of urbanization characterized by spatial segregation, driven by the proliferation of slums and impoverished settlements. This phenomenon was driven by the land valuation dictated by the industries, which led to rising prices for the remaining areas—often challenging to occupy due to the investments needed for their development. Additionally, the increasing poverty rate was exacerbated by unemployment in the construction sector, which had temporarily absorbed unskilled workers, primarily migrants from the Northeast seeking job opportunities during the industrial center’s development (Damiani, 1986).

This phenomenon reflects the production of urban spaces in Brazil, shaped by the interests of various sectors within the capitalist accumulation model. On one hand, it gives rise to the commodity city, driven by real estate speculation, while on the other hand, it leads to increasing concentrations of poverty in the peripheries (Couto, 2008).

In this community, the situation was no different. The first inhabitants arrived in search of housing: “... I couldn’t afford to pay rent. My husband was a truck driver, earning little, and sometimes he was unemployed. I had to leave school, and he didn’t have a good education either, so our purchasing

power was low” (Yara).<sup>1</sup> The leaders and residents had to begin organizing participatory movements to secure basic housing conditions: “There was no water. And the water truck would come so we could fill the buckets and bring them home” (Kauane). “This started to change with the movement of people. Until we reached this stage of having electricity, this improvement, there was a whole process of participation” (Yara).

Since their arrival in the territory, the leaders’ narratives show the struggle against structural violence, which is related to how the spaces are organized, reproducing the class conflict, naturalizing violence, and making its residents invisible.

With the passage of time and the unmet demands, the residents became aware of the lack of commitment from the State and the authorities, leaving unattended this population already victimized by inequality: “[...] this is how the neighborhood developed. Only close to the elections. It’s still like that. When elections approach, the improvements begin. After the election, everything stops. Everyone forgets” (Kauane).

To remove the categories of exclusion and marginality from the references for the social analysis of these contexts, Sawaia (2016) proposes the concept of “perverse inclusion”, to show that the meaning of the social order in these territories is inclusion through exclusion, based on the idea that inequality is fair or natural, situations in which subcitizenship (Souza, 2006) is used not as an exception, but as a norm to maintain the *status quo*. With this, the author aims to replace the notion of a harmonious society with one characterized by contradictions and conflicts of interest among its social classes.

During this period, the strong presence of the religious field contributed to the development of the community. The evangelicals, through The Salvation Army, provided for the basic rights of

children and adolescents while maintaining religious education groups, whereas the Catholic Church encouraged the residents to fight for their rights, fostering an awareness of the political nature of their vulnerability: “[...] Father Antônio brought the social workers from the town hall, who came to talk, offer advice, but there was always a limitation on public servants speaking out against the mayor’s interests, so we organized ourselves” (Yara).

Another contributing factor was the emergence of a sense of solidarity—an emotional bond that fostered a network, mobilizing individuals and small groups: “[...] there was a group that took care of the generator, another that took care of issues... Someone did do a little work, invaded someone else’s yard? These men would step in to restore order” (Yara).

In the interpretation of Leite (2000), in a scenario of an absence of social and political pacts like this one, the network formed by fraternal relations among citizens, mediated by a civic spirit, gives rise to the feeling of solidarity, offering some support to face social conflicts and feelings of injustice and suffering. However, for solidarity not to turn into pity for the underprivileged, the author states that it is fundamental to articulate it politically, debating, in the public sphere, the needs and problems of the community, and points in which the community received important assistance from the Catholic Church.

### **The Milestones in the Life History of the Leaders**

The following testimonies reflect pivotal memories in the leaders’ life histories, illustrating how necessity led them to begin fighting for better living conditions even in childhood. This narrative depicts a family that was fragmented, leaving the mother with the role of provider for her five children: “My mother worked for the family, while he [father] spent the money, so she sent him away” (Jandira).

<sup>1</sup> The testimonies are kept as they were given, without any linguistic adjustments.



“[...] I studied with the teacher until fifth grade, then my mother didn’t let me anymore... [I started working when I was] nine years old” (Jandira).

In this other case, there was a more structured family, “[...] my stepfather, who raised me since I was little, taught me how to manage things, after I turned, 9 I started working” (Ubiratan). “[...] I remember some flashes of living on the street, in the countryside, and at the train station [...]” (Ubiratan). “[...] I stayed at the shelter for a while, before we lived on the street... I remember begging for food on the street, begging for work too” (Ubiratan).

These reports depict a situation in which the bonds are fragile and temporary, making it impossible to create a sense of belonging. When migrating in search of work, the family ended up living on the street—a visible aspect of vulnerability—reaching a state of extreme fragility, as the lack of a home led to exclusion from the labor market, leaving the family as the only source of attachment. “No matter how little you have, there’s always a way to help... it’s not always with money that you help your family members. There are other ways to help. My mother knows, when she needs me, I’ll be there” (Ubiratan).

To translate the effects of the precariousness of people’s social condition that places them in a situation of subcitizenship, Sawaia (2014) coined the term “ethical-political suffering”, suffering from the experience of being treated as inferior, useless, when not invisible in their daily lives, experiences that provoke feelings such as fear, shame, and humiliation. To consider ethical-political suffering is to investigate how the neoliberal system dispossesses people under the guise of social integration or development. In this way, it is understood that exclusion is a complex dialectical process composed of thoughts, feelings, and actions mediated by social determinations such as race, class, and gender, and not a condition that one arrives at or departs from.

The following narratives show attention to collective and social issues of inequalities, in this

case, inspired by a religious background: “[...] I have always been a member of The Salvation Army since I was a little girl... I grew up, went through my adolescence, got married and came to live here...” (Kauane). “[...] I saw that the children were in a highly risky situation, besides poverty, health precarious situation... Walking around naked because they had no clothes... Since I knew The Salvation Army, I invited the coordinator to come and start this work” (Kauane).

Other reports show the influence received from the family: “[...] my story is simple; I am the daughter of a Northeasterner... My father was an activist... He was a communist and my mother was an evangelical...” (Yara). “[...] I identified myself with the social causes of the underprivileged, so as I had this vision, I wanted people to have it too... To see that it wasn’t bad that you fight for your goal...” (Yara). In difficult situations, this leader reports that “[...] I looked to my father for strength. His little voice inside my mind, ‘Dad how am I going to do this?’, ‘Do it, you can do it, go do it,’ and I would go and do it” (Yara).

Some aspects of the leader’s life history are highlighted to illustrate some experiences that contributed to their personal and social formation. The hypothesis is that, by revealing aspects of experiences, privations, and the affective dimension, the experiences are relevant for understanding the particularities that led these people to play an important role in the community.

### **The Leader's Actions Regarding Vulnerabilities**

For Filgueiras (2006), the peripheral neoliberal project relies on the continuous maintenance of the State’s fragilities and vulnerabilities as a condition for its reproduction. In other words, the reforms proposed by the dominant classes have and will have their interests focused on the market, to the detriment of democratic interests, a reality illustrated by the following notes: “[...]”

the residential neighborhoods of Cubatão and its inhabitants live in the backyard of the industries, entirely colonized yet not belonging. Cubatão is a colony within another larger colony that is Brazil” (FD. 28.3.2018). “[...] scenarios of degradation. Garbage in the mangrove. Open sewage. Insects are galore. Houses without the slightest housing conditions... The deteriorated green of the mangrove opposite the wealth produced by industries whose chimneys are seen in the distance...” (FD. 19.04.2018).

Contexts that reveal the contradiction of Cubatão, one of the richest municipalities in the country and where the wealth produced does not revert into reinvestment or better income distribution, and almost half of its population lives and exists in precarious conditions. This peripheral condition, a product of the contradictions of capitalism, serves as the engine of its development and modernizes a form of domination no longer through labor, but through precarization (Canettieri, 2019).

The situation of deprivation and lack of rights made the leaders mobilize the residents to improve the place conditions: “[...] each one fighting for their part. Some fighting for education, some fighting for health. It was thanks to the people who were more committed to health that they fought. For this to be here today” (Ubiratan). For this, seeking the support of some companies from the industrial complex, whose partnerships boosted the improvements in the community: “[...] the best part was the participation of the companies in helping with the construction of the health center and the renovation of the daycare center...” (Ubiratan).

With the development of the territory, new migrants were arriving, creating internal divisions and hierarchical relations that translate to the occupation of space, demanding an adaptation of the community to the new characters,

[...] it's as if you find the slum within the slum. There is a noble area that belongs to the first residents, and another that is more impoverished that

arrived afterward, they are another level of people that came here because they couldn't afford to live anywhere else (Yara).

However, the greater the vulnerabilities, the greater the problems and difficulties for the community and its leaders, whose participation needs to be active for the organization, mobilization, and creation of strategies to achieve the desired improvements. “[...] my participation has always been very active. We saw the development, other leaders emerged, and also the more criminal part of the community. So, we had to adapt to all of these” (Yara).

The process of leadership emergence is elucidated by Andrade (2013), when he says that this happens at times of crisis in the community or due to its development, which, by strengthening its residents, ends up creating opportunities. Montero (2006) adds that they arise when planning and organizing actions, or when faced with circumstances that make urgent action necessary.

As time went by, the experiences and affinities determined the areas of action. Kauane, because of her involvement with The Salvation Army, became a reference for children, teenagers, and their mothers. Yara, because she was a Health Agent, has a wide insertion and greater ability for action in the community, currently representing the social movements. Jandira and Ubiratan are more active with the fishermen.

Drug trafficking organizations, which are part of the community's history, today have a strong presence and influence, even dictating the rules, and judging affective relationships, especially those involving its members: “[...] the PCC [the largest Brazilian criminal organization] is responsible for organizing the neighborhood... the conflicts are resolved by the trafficking” (FD. 22.11.2019).

One thing they did, that I asked a lot, and they stopped doing, was beating people in public. They would beat people and others would see them getting beaten. So, they beat people to break them, break their arms, break their legs... (Yara).

In this context, the intervention of the leaders has the intention of ensuring a civilized coexistence, having to negotiate with the heads of the organization, because the violence of their actions to solve the problems slips into barbarism. These narratives reinforce the argument of Andrade (2013), for whom the leaders should follow the needs of the community and not the opposite, and this is one of the challenges to be faced because they are inserted into a culture that encourages the superimposition of individual interests over collective ones.

The circumstances that contribute to the emergence of drug trafficking organizations are listed by Couto (2008): the limited participation of the State in the territory, poverty, unemployment, and the precariousness of labor insertion conditions. By benefiting from this context, the organizations take over these territories, controlling them according to their interests, creating a parallel power. They begin to offer adolescents the possibility of inclusion in the consumer market, by offering them an income from drug sales: “they get paid per week. And it pays well. What I earn in a month they receive in a week” (Kauane). As for girl adolescents, they prostitute themselves: “They are girlfriends, they do programs, sex, they do... program with them” (Kauane).

Gender violence is present in the territory, especially in the coercion of husbands against women: “[...] we only participated during the day, in the afternoon, before the husbands arrived. Then we would discuss, do everything we had to do, because at night when the husband arrived, we were all saintly inside the house” (Yara). However, some situations extrapolate to public health, as a consequence of the degree of violence: “They get tired of being beaten, some take medicine to kill themselves because of their husband. We had an employee... [her husband] would tell her to take off her clothes and she would get beaten with a belt” (Kauane).

This reality is elucidated by Tenório (2016) when stating that *machismo* is supported by an

ideology that is historically preserved in the political, economic, social, and cultural spheres and that the patriarchal structure of our society continues to form subjectivities, marking interpersonal relationships, perpetuating the relations of inferiorization, submission, appropriation, and domination of women. Vasquez and Falcão (2019) make the relations of domination explicit when they state that, when the tasks related to the care of children and their education, the elderly or the disabled are left solely to the woman, under the mask of housewife, a family model is naturalized, oppression is internalized, gender domination is maintained and the culture of *machismo* is reinforced, in addition to stereotyping these tasks as a female function.

Cases of physical violence against women and children and cases of sexual abuse are delicate situations for the leaders because they cannot refer the cases to legal channels, since it is the drug trafficking organization that resolves the conflicts. In these circumstances, women and leaders are forced to create strategies to deal with *machismo* and authoritarianism.

However, in facing the difficulties, it was the women who revealed themselves as the protagonists in the community: “They closed the lane to get improvements. The plumbing that they didn’t have. But [who] went to the street, it was a group of women!” (W. 07.06.2018). “[...] these women of the Mother’s Club were the ones who changed the history of the Fishermen’s Village” (Yara).

It can be deduced that, by living their daily lives fully in the territory, the women felt the precariousness more intensely, thus mobilizing themselves to overcome it. Social injustices, by triggering a process of awareness, combined with personal and collective resources, can produce new forms of confrontation, resulting in the gain of power of action. Sawaia (2016) clarifies that this is not a state one reaches, but a process that takes place in social relations. The struggle is not individual, it is within the collective that people discover that the strength for action grows, being increased

by the emergence of the affections of friendship, generosity, and solidarity.

### **The Conquests, Potentialities, and Current Challenges of Leaders**

Regarding the territory's greatest shortcomings, notes from a workshop and field diaries give an idea of its dimension, "[...] lack of leisure options, culture, education, health, transportation/mobility, housing, basic sanitation, job opportunities" (W. 14.04.2018). The following records detail the precariousness still present: "[...] the strong humidity can cause respiratory problems, the large population of rats and cats contributes to the proliferation of leptospirosis, the food, when present, does not supply the needs" (FD. 07.06.2018).

Besides facing these difficulties that portray the minimal presence of the State, the leaders are concerned about the future of adolescents and drug trafficking. The following narrative points to the feeling of lack of perspective for young people: "[...] the business is to live in a slum, study for what? My father sold crab so I can also do the same" (Kauane). Also, showing their indignation at these circumstances highlights the consequence of a high rate of juvenile pregnancy in the community: "[...] to use drugs, and premature sexuality. If you pass by a party like that, you see girls having sex openly in the midst of the crowd" (Kauane). "It is very difficult to educate a human being because at home they show what is right and the community only shows what is wrong..." (Ubiratan).

In this context, the population, deprived of opportunities to escape poverty due to limited resources and job opportunities, are also victims of the appeals for consumption, which lead adolescents to be seduced by what provides them an opportunity to enter the drug trafficking organization. "Pay good money, get a lot of women, because the girls go crazy... and it's no use you talking because they go crazy" (Kauane).

Another challenge of the leaders is to make the population take ownership of the territory and get involved in the participatory movements: "[...] the population doesn't participate much... if there were more people present there would be more thinking heads, there would be more opinions... the other part [the companies], they are interested in doing it, but where are the people?" (Ubiratan).

The speech by Yara was quite moving. She said that people need to care, and it is challenging the issue of participation. For Yara, people don't feel as if the city is theirs. She said that people need to feel they belong to the city to start fighting for these environmental and health issues, which are so important (FD. 28.03.2018).

Yara's convocation points to reclaiming the sense of social belonging and recognizing oneself as part of society, because to participate is not only to produce effective action. For Sawaia (1996), participation manifests itself as the potency of action and the subjective legitimacy, that is, the right to be heard and recognized as a participant in a collective involved with the interests of the common good.

This context corroborates the study by Andrade (2013), who points out that the leaders must overcome the challenges of lack of participation, absence of critical awareness of reality, hopelessness regarding transformations, and the culture of paternalism, in which the residents expect the leaders to provide everything without making any effort.

In the past, Cubatão had already been victimized by violent aggressions by petrochemical industries. Currently an environmental crisis is alarming residents and community leaders: the excavation of an Underwater Disposal Pit (UDP) in the navigable channel of the Piaçaguera River, adjacent to the community. This industrial intervention, carried out by a private company, has resulted in a 25-meter-deep, 400-meter-diameter crater within the mangrove ecosystem, intended for the deposition of dredged toxic sediments (Colodro, 2019). The project has raised significant ecological and

public health concerns, given the risk of contaminant dispersion into surrounding habitats. “Yara told a bit of her story as a chairwoman in ISAC fighting the environmental impacts that the company is causing through contamination of mangroves and beaches by depositing heavy metal waste in pits” (FD. 01.03.2018).

With The Salvation Army and a hip-hop group of teenagers, the female leaders are one of the potentialities of the territory, managing to mobilize the community for important improvements, such as the arrival of electricity, water, and paving, and the reduction of violence from drug trafficking organizations. With this, she received the community’s recognition:

For a long time I have been facing this enormous potential of women. It was women who fought to open the *Posto de Atendimento Médico e Odontológico* (PAMOS: Medical and Dental Service Station) ... The Salvation Army... The Neighborhood Residents’ Association... The ISAC to defend the interests of fishermen” (FD. 19.04.2018).

In this scenario, we identify the production of knowledge that Santos (2019) calls “epistemology of the South”, which comes from the struggles against oppression and materializes in individual or collective bodies. With that, this author identifies the body—the place where injustices and oppressions fall, triggering emotions, affections, and sensations—as a producer of knowledge, meaning that it is not mobilized only by rational processes. Thus, we can identify the knowledge coming from the confrontation of daily difficulties for the improvement of living conditions in the mangroves and on stilts, and from the fishermen’s struggles for their rights and against the pollution of the river,

If I live on stilts, why would I make the place even dirtier than it already is? Why would I leave the garbage lying around? We know that here, the sewage runs in the open. And it can accumulate a lot, and depending on the month or the year, it gets worse... (Ubiratan).

In this way, individual or collective experiences, by incorporating the specificities of the territory, generate unique knowledge, representing a specific conquest that legitimizes and sustains struggles, fostering cohesion among residents and mobilizing forces capable of driving social transformations.

Other reports, which have not been exposed here, reveal that school, work, and religion continue to be recognized as institutions, serving as guiding references. It can be inferred that, because they are linked to inclusion in life, in society, by transmitting values that convey an idea of citizenship, they are valued in the community. However, it is noteworthy that the distrust towards politics is due to corruption, “[...] the money has to come here, but along the way the money disappears. And we know that this is part of the culture, right?” (Ubiratan).

The narrative above shows the contemporary nature of Filgueiras’ (2009) interpretation that there is a contradiction in Brazil between the norms that regulate policies and practices in the public sphere. He asserts that democratization must affect values that sustain an equitable political practice, otherwise, we will continue to see this “[...] distrust and indifference syndrome” (Filgueiras, 2009, p. 417) on the part of citizens when it comes to public institutions.

## Final Considerations

In this article, we sought to present the perceptions of community leaders in their struggle for better living conditions in a highly vulnerable territory, reflecting on the articulations that occur within it. The narratives revealed a context of extreme inequality and poverty, in which the population is deprived of social rights and rendered invisible. They are surrounded by violence of all kinds—from socio-environmental vulnerabilities to domestic violence, from drug trafficking organizations to gender-based violence—and the lack of prospects for young people.



In this context, the narratives revealed that the leaders demonstrated the ability to mobilize the community, promoting the necessary transformations to overcome difficulties and minimize the effects of inequalities. In the face of adversities and limitations, or ethical-political suffering, they emerged as a center of initiatives, uniting, organizing, mediating, fostering articulations, or sensitizing institutions to implement social projects. It is also understood that the intervention of the leaders contributes to a form of collective reorganization in the territory, constituting powerful actions in the struggles for the improvement of living conditions and the strengthening of the community.

In the course of this research, questions arose that became gaps in this work: the participation of leaders in overcoming welfarism and social policies; the influences of the religious field on the forms of action of leaders and their training. Questions that remain as topics for desirable future research.

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