

The periphery of the periphery: civil society organizations navigating inequities in access to water, sanitation, and hygiene in Rio de Janeiro

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The world is experiencing a global water crisis, with increasing water stress, pollution, frequent droughts and flooding, and stark inequities in access to water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH). In its roadmap to COVID-19 recovery, the United Nations recommends that researchers collaborate with local authorities and communities to ensure continuity and quality of water and sanitation services. This research does that by describing the experiences of civil society organizations (CSOs) navigating barriers and facilitators to WASH in Brazil. In partnership with local CSOs, we designed a comparative case study of three communities facing WASH challenges in the state of Rio de Janeiro. In each community, we interviewed CSO representatives (n=3) and conducted focus groups (n=3) with residents (n=18). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent thematic analysis. Emerging themes reveal that communities face similar challenges: recurring water shortages, compromised water quality, complete lack of sewage collection and treatment, and exposure to extreme weather events, such as flooding and landslides. However, communities located near the capital of the state receive more support from CSOs, often relying on them for essential services. Conversely, rural and peri-urban communities configure what participants categorized as the “periphery of the periphery”, lacking support from formal authorities, and the third sector. Data analysis is still being finalized, but participants reported that marginalized communities in the capital receive more attention from humanitarian actors, while those in peripheral municipalities are neglected by more well-funded CSOs. Complicating factors include the presence of criminal groups, militias, and limited social capital.

Primary author: CURTY PEREIRA, Rodrigo (University of Waterloo)

Co-author: Dr ELLIOTT, Susan J.

Presenter: CURTY PEREIRA, Rodrigo (University of Waterloo)

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