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ESPAÇO TEMÁTICO: IMPERIALISMO, REVOLUÇÃO E CONTRARREVOLUÇÃO NA AMÉRICA LATINA

Ordinary Spaces and Extraordinary Transformations: Ação da Cidadania's Fight Against Hunger

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Ordinary Spaces and Extraordinary Transformations: Ação da Cidadania's Fight Against Hunger

Abstract: This article examines the creation and the first year of existence of Ação da Cidadania to comprehend how it established a social justice agenda in Brazil by creating awareness and promoting solidarity. The movement redefined the issue of hunger, previously associated with poorer classes, as a problem that affects all sectors of society. Through an analysis of Betinho's manuscripts and memoirs, promotional material from the organization, and secondary geographical data, this study presents the campaign's role as an intermediary for hunger under a framework of space as a producer of social relations. Ação da Cidadania serves as an example of partnership and solidarity for social change, creating non-state public spaces and inspiring civil organizations and social movements.

Keywords: Ação da Cidadania; social justice; hunger; ordinary space.

Espaços ordinários e transformações extraordinárias: o combate à fome da Ação da Cidadania

Resumo: Este artigo examina a criação e o primeiro ano de existência da Ação da Cidadania para entender como ela estabeleceu uma agenda de justiça social no Brasil, conscientizando e promovendo a solidariedade. O movimento ressignificou a questão da fome, antes associada às classes mais pobres, como um problema que atinge todos os setores da sociedade. Por meio da análise dos manuscritos e memórias de Betinho, do material de divulgação da organização e de dados geográficos secundários, este estudo apresenta o papel da campanha como intermediária da fome no quadro do espaço como produtor de relações sociais. A Ação da Cidadania serve como exemplo de parceria e solidariedade para a mudança social, criando espaços públicos não estatais e inspirando organizações civis e movimentos sociais.

Palavras-chave: Ação de Cidadania; Justiça social; fome; espaço ordinário.

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Introduction

Hunger is exclusion. From the land, from employment, from salary, from education, from economy, from life and citizenship. When a person reaches the point of having nothing to eat, it is because everything else has already been denied to them. It's a kind of modern curtailment or exile. Death in life. And exile from the earth. The soul of hunger is political.

Betinho (1994).

The hungry are in a hurry: with this statement, Betinho put together one of Brazil's longest-lasting social campaigns, which continues to operate today, the "*Ação da Cidadania contra a fome, a miséria, e pela vida*"¹. The movement was a pioneer in bringing the issue of hunger to the Brazilian political agenda and arena of public debate in a period when 32 million people in the country (around 20% of the total population) were below the poverty line (Pelliano, 1993). The campaign consisted of two strategies. The first was adopting emergency actions to donate food to those in need, with the intention to unite "those who give and those who receive" (Heymann; Pandolfi, 2005, p. 181) in a decentralized network of solidarity. The second was to bring together government and civil society to ensure food security for the poorest Brazilian sectors and subsequently implement structural changes through public policies. This strategy culminated in the creation of the *Conselho Nacional de Segurança alimentar* (CONSEA)² in 1993, which a decade later played a central role in formulating one of the most important public policies on confronting hunger in contemporary Brazil, the Zero Hunger program.

Despite the importance of *Ação da Cidadania* in Brazilian history for its long duration and ability to penetrate diverse social sectors, there are relatively few studies on this matter. Most of the work in this field presents a descriptive narrative of the movement's history, with attention to the background of political unrest in the 1990s, especially the call for a civil action and the Movement for ethics in politics that emerged in 1992 from the organized civil society, that was claiming for President Collor's impeachment (Schlaepfer, 1994; Vasconcelos, 2004; Gohn, 1996; Stacciarini, 2003).

A small portion of the literature is concerned with the impacts of the movement, both in social and political spheres. For example, studies such as those conducted by Jacobi (1996) and Magalhães (2002) analyzed the dynamics of the committees, the main form of organization of *Ação da Cidadania*. Both authors point out the movement's capacity to mobilize different social sectors that previously had no engagement with the problem of hunger or misery. More recently, research by (Freire, 2013) presented an interesting study on the political and social view of Betinho as a critic of left-wing elitism in Brazil and how it became the central thought for the movement's implementation. I find it an essential contribution to the literature as Freire's research presents new perspectives to understand the political conditions of that time, which enabled the construction of public policies to fight hunger and misery.

The years prior to the end of the military dictatorship in Brazil were a period of great social upheaval, where several identity groups surged forward to claim civil rights. Unlike many social movements, *Ação da Cidadania* neither promoted polarization between the people and the government nor took action by occupying the streets in the form of protests. Instead, it aimed to create alliances with different actors (Giumbelli, 1994). With that in mind, I argue that *Ação da Cidadania* has altered geographical and social spaces by relocating the problem of hunger and misery, constrained to the poorer classes, to the wealthier sectors of society through a campaign of awareness and solidarity. Firstly, with the physical implementation of committees and the campaign to collect and donate food. Secondly, by advancing issues of hunger and misery within the public discourse, making claims for greater social justice through implementing public policies. In this sense, *Ação da Cidadania* operated as a translator and intermediary between diverse actors. It helped to create the agenda for the fight against hunger in Brazil.

This essay will draw upon Milton Santos's space and citizen geography theories. As Santos pointed out, studies regarding social order often exclude the notion of space (Santos 2021a, 106). Space here is understood as a social structure, an object resulting from the interaction of various elements, such as politics, economy, culture, beliefs, etc. Space is not only the product but also the producer of social relations forged by its past

and present time (Santos 2021b; 2021a). The notion of space that I use to analyze *Ação da Cidadania*, its repertoires, and its social impacts is what Santos called the “ordinary space”, one that is not compartmentalized in epistemological categories but is instead shared by the totality of agents: people, institutions, companies, churches, etc. (Santos n.d.). In this space, corporeity, individuality, and sociability interact and define what citizenship is in everyday life, which is made of a past (what we have been) and a future (what we want to be). It creates a “dual Man” and a “dual every day” where one’s identity and aspirations are in conflict with external factors such as situations and circumstances, which highlight the tension between the need to assert oneself and the belief that change is possible. (Santos, [2021])

By framing *Ação da Cidadania* with Milton Santos’s concept of space, I am engaging with the idea that space, as a social product, shapes the acts of those that produce it. Applying this logic to the movement allows us to observe the spatial identities — the collective subjectivity once produced in space — and its agency materialized and manifested in the geographical territory (Ramos, 2013). In this sense, I aim to examine how the problems, once restrained in a particular space, influence demands and claims in the ordinary space, where multiple social relations coincide. It is not only about economy, politics, or culture, but the entire space/territory interacting simultaneously (Ramos, 2013, p. 117).

Ação da Cidadania here will be interpreted accordingly to the ideas of Marcelo de Souza (2006) and Porto-Gonçalves (1998) as an urban social movement *stricto sensu*. For Souza, activism within that category links strongly with space, particularly with regard to the humanization of urban space, which can lead to an alternative type of relationship between society and space. Porto-Gonçalves sees in this logic the overlapping of geography and sociology, as “the (social) movement is, precisely, a change of (social) place, that always indicates that those who move are refusing the place that was allocated to them in a certain determined signified order” (Porto-Gonçalves, 1998, p. 366).

I analyze the first year of existence of *Ação da Cidadania*, 1993, which was also when the campaign peaked. Then, I look at Betinho’s writings about Brazil’s social and political conditions during his last years of exile to understand his thoughts on Brazil’s current social and political situation. Those documents are organized in two works. One is the book of Heymann and Pandolfi (2005) that retraced Betinho’s political trajectory from his letters to his fellows and family while living in Chile and Canada. The other is a compilation of memoirs from Brazilians that were in exile during the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985) from Cavalcanti and Ramos (1976), which contains a long manuscript by Betinho of his memories. His writings are a valuable source for understanding the founding principles of *Ação da Cidadania* and its values of solidarity and civil action.

To examine the geographic location of the committees and the way they were organized, I consider the data gathered in two studies conducted by Jacobi (1996) and Magalhães (2002), respectively. Their analyses are helpful sources for identifying where the committees were installed, who took part in them, how the participants interpreted their roles in the campaign, and the meaning of the Hunger problem. With this material, I aim to understand better the dissemination of Betinho’s thoughts among Brazilian society and how the campaign acted as an interlocutor for the issue of Hunger.

The article is divided into two sections. The first section provides an overview of Betinho’s life and the establishment of *Ação da Cidadania*. The second section examines the relationship between space and the social movement, highlighting the strategies used by the organization to reach various social strata. The conclusion emphasizes that *Ação da Cidadania* offers a compelling model of how partnership and solidarity can promote social change and establish non-state public spaces that enable citizens to engage directly with and influence different sectors of society, ultimately contributing to the emergence of new forms of civic organization and inspiring contemporary social movements.

In 1992, just two years after the first democratic elections following the end of the military dictatorship in Brazil, the Movement for ethics in politics brought thousands of people to the streets in protest against the corruption of President Fernando Collor de Melo’s government. The popular pressure led to Collor’s impeachment and an awakening of Brazilian society; its reinforcement of the self-esteem of Brazilian citizens and the belief that their actions could make a positive national difference spurred increased active participation in politics and public debate (Gohn, 2019). Betinho played a key role in the movement, and its range and success encouraged him to initiate more civil action, embracing society’s increased mobilization power.

Betinho's fundamental idea, that of active citizen participation in the public dimension, relates to Milton Santos's idea of the impact of behavioral geography on space. Individual behaviors are not only the result of decisions, but they also shape space. A space where "activities" and "men" meet, and the antagonist forces that "give to some and denies to others" are the result of "collective praxis that reproduces social relations." Though subordinate to the collective praxis, individual praxis contributes to changing space by exercising individual liberty (Santos, 2021a, p. 54).

In the wake of the impeachment movement, on 8th March 1993, *Ação da Cidadania* was founded by the sociologist Herbert de Souza, better known as Betinho. He was born in 1935 in the countryside of Minas Gerais, Brazil. From his youth, Betinho played an active role in politics, first as a member of the Young Catholic Students, influenced by the Dominican Fathers, and later as a representative of the National Student Union (UNE) within the group *Ação Popular* (AP), inspired by Maoist doctrine. During the military dictatorship in Brazil (1964–1985), Betinho was a member of the Trade Union Movement against the regime until 1971, when he left for exile in Chile and, after 1973, Mexico and Canada. He would return to Brazil only in 1979 when the Amnesty Law was enacted.

Exile changed Betinho. The idea of revolution no longer meant taking over the state. Instead, after observing and participating in the social movements in Chile, Betinho incorporated a new way of approaching politics: revolution through democracy. He openly criticized the left and the student movement when he classified their attempt to make war on the dictatorship as an adventure, given the lack of popular support in 1968–1969. In a manuscript written after his exile, Betinho reflected on the Brazilian left's mistakes:

[...] forgetting to keep our feet on the ground. I mean, you keep the mystique, you keep the sense of commitment, you keep the team spirit [...] for many, the meaning of an authentic commitment with the resistance. All of this I have seen and perceived in fantastic comrades. However, in the middle of this context, one thing was missing: reality was missing, politics was missing. (Cavalcanti & Ramos, 1976, p. 87).

Betinho felt that leftist organizations discussed the working class without knowing their reality. His criticisms center on the idea that the left had a pre-construed "ideal type" of what the working class meant, an idealized concept that came from a voluntarist, individualist, and elitist view. The period Betinho spent in Chile made him realize that the political movement he had been a part of until then, considered by its members as the Revolutionary party, was a disaster that was leading the masses to collective suicide. In his memoirs, Betinho wrote about his idea of revolution. For him, the revolution was not made by revolutionaries or a revolutionary party:

The Revolution is made by the masses' struggle, by history, and sometimes by the actual bourgeoisie that creates the conditions for Revolution. So, a revolutionary is much more a participant in the existing social process than someone who makes the conditions for that. (Cavalcanti & Ramos, 1976, p. 91).

In a letter to Frei Betto in 1978, a contemporary key figure in Brazilian left political thought, Betinho offered a self-criticism of his political trajectory. For Betinho, his generation was emulating the political strategies learned from the old masters of the dominant class. He criticized the "fascinação com o poder" that would lead them to transform society by interacting with the "intérpretes iluminados e do Estado, onde o povo brasileiro nunca esteve". For him,

loving the people, but considering them incapable of deciding their own destiny, was just an expression of elitism: "the most visible part of a long, profound and strong anti-democratic tradition in the Brazilian political and cultural life" (Heymann & Pandolfi 2005, 89).

In different opportunities, Betinho expressed his concern with the realness, the concrete. In his words, in a confession to Frei Betto in the same letter, his restlessness was over the mobilization of people, the awakening of their energy "to make each man, each worker, a being completely mobilized to the transformation of everyone and everything" (Heymann & Pandolfi, 2005, p. 90). Reflecting on Betinho's thought, it is possible to identify many of those ideals in the *Ação da Cidadania*. It was conceived to be a "citizen's action", not a political party-oriented movement or an identity struggle. Instead, it was intended as a campaign where each person was responsible for the hunger problem.

In 1985, Betinho, a hemophilic, discovered he had contracted HIV in one of his periodic blood transfusions. He died in 1997, at home, in Rio de Janeiro, at the age of 61. The campaign *Ação da Cidadania*, however, continues to exist today.

For Milton Santos, space is a dynamic form that participates in the process of changing social relations by incorporating, adapting, or substituting another form. Although it tends to reproduce the structures from which it originated, space can alter its initial condition when mediating social relations. In this sense, space is a present system shaped by its past. Thus, 'present space is also future space' (Santos, 2021a, 113). We can identify this perception in the guiding principles of *Ação da Cidadania*: solidarity, decentralization, and partnership.

Solidarity was the central value of the campaign to call for the citizens' participation. It was based on the notion of "here and now"; that is to say, solidarity can only be exercised in the present, as it is not possible to postpone people's suffering. Decentralization was the way to build a partnership. The movement did not belong to a political party. It was a movement of civil society.

A partnership could only be achieved by incorporating the most diverse individual and collective social actors: civil society, government officials, and politicians. Betinho believed that social change and the overcoming of misery could only be achieved by the joint action of the people. The transformation of the actual society with the empowerment of active citizens' participation was informed by fundamental values of citizenship and solidarity. This was the political action Betinho understood as democracy (Pereira, 2015, p. 76).

Perhaps more important than decentralization and solidarity was the principle of partnership, aimed at changing the minds of Brazilian people and developing a more personal approach to the mediation of individuals and institutions. As Gohn (1997) pointed out, the concept of a modern civil society inherited from the twentieth century, based on hierarchical, impersonal, and bureaucratic relationships, could no longer explain contemporary society. Instead, the new concept of civil society is built on the notion of mediation between the most diverse institutions, and this space between them is guided by the principles of ethics and solidarity (Gohn, 1997, p. 104).

The campaign rested on the argument of ethics and the power of solidarity. For Betinho, hunger was the ultimate expression of exclusion because "when a person reaches a point where they have nothing to eat, it is because everything else was denied to them" (Souza, 1994, p. 22). To tackle this inequality, a much more intimate understanding of society, with all its aches and pains, would be the first step toward change. The new political action proposed by Betinho was a change of paradigm to tackle structural problems. *Ação da Cidadania* departed from the human level to the political. In this sense, the campaign tried to change the collective mentality of Brazilian society with a simple gesture of donating food to achieve the awareness that passive acceptance of misery as a natural phenomenon should be refused and instead should be confronted as a structural problem of society.

The "Hunger fighting committees" were core to the unity of *Ação da Cidadania*. They held influence both physically across the country and mentally, acting as tools that highlighted the problem of hunger and misery in the everyday lives of people from different social sectors. For Milton Santos, the transformation of human nature resulted from spatial conditions due to its capacity to influence people. It is represented in the ordinary space, "the house, the place of work, meeting points, and the routes that unite these locations are passive elements that condition the activity of men and order their social practice" because space "imposes a set of relations on each thing because each thing occupies a certain place in space" (Santos, 2021a, p. 103).

Formed by unions, universities, churches, NGOs, artists, public employees, and entrepreneurs, the committees contributed to the heterogeneous character of the movement. They were under the coordination of the National Executive Office, organized at the state, municipal, and neighborhood levels. Their members were part of the most important public entities: Ordem dos advogados do Brasil (OAB), Conferência Nacional de Bispos Brasileiros (CNBB), Central Única dos Trabalhadores (CUT), Conselho Federal de Economia (Confecom), Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas (IBASE), Instituto de estudos Sócio-econômicos (Inesc) and Associação Nacional dos Dirigentes das Instituições Federais de Ensino Superior (Andifes) (Vasconcelos, 2004, p. 262).

This strategy of organization shows us the alternative ways *Ação da Cidadania* occupied various spaces with the issue of hunger. Milton Santos (1997, 272) believed that "the local order establishes the everyday scale, and its parameters are coexistence, neighborhood, intimacy, emotions, cooperation, and socialization".

Official data from the Brazilian National Food and Nutritional Security Council (Consea)³ estimates that more than 5,000 committees were created nationwide. Most of them were founded by employees of *Banco do Brasil* and *Caixa Econômica Federal*, two of the most significant banks in Brazil. Still, almost 30% was based in companies, associations, churches, and communitarian organizations (Vasconcelos, 2004, p. 262). A survey conducted by IBOPE⁴ in December 1993 showed that 68% of the population knew about the campaign. Of those, 32% declared having contributed in some form to the campaign, a total of 26 million people. And among those, 2.8 million people circa, 11% confirmed being part of the *Ação da Cidadania* committee, the fundamental unit of the campaign's organization (Landim & Giumbelli, 1998, p. 242).

The first committee was created in March 1993 in Rio de Janeiro and brought together over 30 entities, such as unions, churches, banks, and business associations. In April, given the significant number of new committees founded in the first month of the campaign, the *Comitê Rio* was launched at a state level (Magalhães, 2002, p. 126). The committees became a space for emergency actions and a binding site for the debate on hunger and misery, primarily due to the diversity of actors involved. Among the repertoires used by *Ação da Cidadania* was the booklet on how to create a committee. It relies heavily on the data presented in the Hunger Map, elaborated on by IPEA⁵. This document was released in March 1993 and estimated 32 million people under the poverty line in Brazil. The study was conducted after Betinho's request.

After contextualizing Brazil's present structural hunger situation, the handbook outlined the required action in two steps. The first entailed a rupture of social apathy described as a negative trait of the Brazilian culture. This condition could be modified by understanding that hunger was a problem for everyone, not only for those experiencing it. From this point, the mission was to assemble a group disregarding "prejudice, political, cultural, economic, ethnic or religious view" (*Ação da Cidadania* 1993). Once the committee was set, up in a decentralized and autonomous way, the second step was disseminating the campaign and articulating actions. To publicize the issue of hunger was to denounce the reality and inform people of the cause. In addition, one of the committees' responsibilities was to articulate emergency actions and mobilize public pressure to demand more responsive policies.

Another movement's strategy was to use mass media to garner social support. Leading national television networks, such as *Rede Globo* and *TV Bandeirantes*, placed free advertisements for the campaign. In addition, advertising executives participated by creating television ads, slogans, and brand logos that became a fundamental part of the movement. The most famous image is the iconic design of an empty metal plate with the name *Ação* on it, and the subtitle: "who is hungry is in a hurry." Artists' commitment was another campaign high point that contributed to greater public participation. In September 1993, a major event known as "Semana da arte contra a fome"⁶ took place in the City Theater of Rio de Janeiro. Over one hundred artists performed, among them Fernanda Montenegro and Grande Otelo. The tickets were sold by "1 kilo of non-perishable food" (Rodrigues, 2007, p. 210).

The campaign received widespread acceptance among the most diverse sectors, what Betinho saw as the prefiguration of social change in contemporary Brazil — "the first sign of change with the finding, unprecedented in Brazil, that it is possible to act from the society, not from the State. It was a change in the political view and in the political way" (Souza, 1994, p. 62). A study of the letters sent to Betinho during the first years of the campaign by Pereira (2015) allows us to have an idea of this experience's impact. According to Pereira, the 248 letters he analyzed consisted mainly of praise about the initiative and testimonies of how the campaign raised their awareness. Many showed eagerness to help and presented suggestions or solutions to solve national problems. Many of the people interested in taking action in *Ação da Cidadania* had no previous participation in social movements (Pereira, 2015, p. 107).

In fact, both Landim and Giumbelli (1998) and Jacobi (1996) pointed out that most of the volunteers acting in the committees were driven by spontaneity, with no historical record of similar action. Landim and Giumbelli (1998) identified a significant affiliation with middle-class sectors, mainly professors, public servants, housewives, and self-employees. Although a great number of women took part in the committees, more men participated in predominantly middle-class areas, with different occupational profiles, from professors to police officers. In the first year of the campaign, most of the committees were installed in the wealthier neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro, although this trend shifted after 1994, with a displacement to more popular areas (Magalhães, 2002, p. 128).

The interviews conducted by Landim and Giumbelli (1998) with the volunteers showed their different perceptions of poverty and hunger. Many volunteers agreed that there is always a solution to not going hungry. In a general sense, poverty meant something broader than the state of hunger, associated with other deprivations that could not be reduced to one problem. At the same time, the volunteers understood that debates about access to employment, education, health, and housing were more complex issues that could not be solved through solidarity or within an inter-class dimension (Landim & Giumbelli, 1998).

Conclusion

When Milton Santos returned to Brazil from exile in 1978, he published his book, “For a new geography,” where he consolidated the concept of space largely used in this essay. In that book, Santos emphasized that space is a product of history and that humankind makes history. Thus, the present is always an opportunity to create a different future (Santos 2021a). Betinho’s thought was consonant with that of Milton Santos. He believed in the power of every citizen’s action to create a new way of engaging with politics through action, here (space) and now (time). From this idea, Betinho created the most famous slogans of the Campaign: “The hungry are in a hurry” and “Eating is a right” (Ação da Cidadania, ([19--?])).

Ação da Cidadania made possible the emergence of non-state public spaces and the direct agency of citizens in distinct sectors of society, especially through the principles of partnership and solidarity. The movement was anchored in the logic of changing mentalities to eliminate inequalities and create a new social space where different interests could appear and converge for the collective benefit. It contributed to making new forms of civil organization without the figure of a leader, helping us to think about today’s social movements.

It is interesting to see the movement’s success among the middle class, at least in its first year, with the participation of professors, bank employees, independent workers, and housewives, with the majority of the committees being created in the wealthier neighborhoods of Rio de Janeiro. This trend was present until 1994, when the composition of the committees changed, with the increased predominance of lower-class members. From 1994, the geographical profile also shifted, with more committees being created in the poorest regions of important Brazilian cities. Studies on the reason for those changes are still lacking, but some scholars pointed to greater economic stability and a weaker presence of *Ação da Cidadania* in the media.

Overall, it is possible to say that in its first year, *Ação da Cidadania* promoted some changes in the Brazilian social space. The campaign exposed civil society to the problems of hunger and misery, presenting the depth of these issues in Brazil. Furthermore, the movement successfully mobilized different social actors that were very far from the reality of the 32 million Brazilians in a state of hunger, creating new “activists.” However, the movement’s achievements in the first two years were concentrated on food donation and emergency actions, which had a limited impact on effective public policies that address the foundations of inequalities in Brazil, with the potential to cause a profound change in the social structure.

As pointed out by Paniago (1997), *Ação da Cidadania* represented the euphoria of Brazilian society with the discovery of a new path to social change through civil action and democracy. However, it failed in the debate over the structural causes of hunger and misery, a product of the capitalist conditions of its own existence. Therefore, to move beyond automatic validation of the movement (due to its undeniable moral qualities) and instead critically analyze *Ação da Cidadania* may be an interesting approach to understanding its decline after 1994. This examination may then lead to identifying the challenges of long-lasting social policies in favor of a more equitable world.

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Notas

- ¹ Action of Citizenship Against Hunger, Misery, and for Life.
- ² The National Council for Food Security. It was created in 1993 by President Itamar Franco and operated as an advisory board for the presidency. In 1994, the President Fernando Henrique Cardoso revoked the body. It was then reinstated by President Lula in 2003. In 2019, CONSEA was abolished by President Jair Bolsonaro.
- ³ Created in 1993, it was extinct in 2019 by Bolsonaro's government. Consea was a collegiate advisory board to the Presidency, responsible for maintaining a dialogue with the civil society and to coordinate federal policies on food security.
- ⁴ Brazilian Institute of Public Opinion and Statistics
- ⁵ The Institute for Applied Economic Research. A public research body that provides technical analyses to the Federal government.
- ⁶ Art Week Against Hunger.

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