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Fischer, Sullivan Desirée; Hamerski, Bruna; Pereira, Cléia Demétrio; Secchi, Leonardo
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E-participation: An Analysis of the 13th State Conference on Social Assistance in Santa Catarina, Brazil

E-participação: Uma Análise da 13ª Conferência Estadual de Assistência Social em Santa Catarina, Brasil

Participación electrónica: un análisis de la XIII Conferencia Estatal de Asistencia Social en Santa Catarina, Brasil

Sullivan Desirée Fischer

Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina, Brasil

sullivan.fischer@udesc.br

Bruna Hamerski

Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina, Brasil

bruh_hamerski@hotmail.com

Cléia Demétrio Pereira

Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina, Brasil

cleia.pereira@udesc.br

Leonardo Secchi

Universidade do Estado de Santa Catarina, Brasil

leonardo.secchi@udesc.br

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Abstract

Research objective: To analyze how the practice of e-Participation, applied at the 13th Social Assistance Conference of the State of Santa Catarina, held in 2021, favoured or hindered participation and to what extent it influenced the actors in decision-making.

Theoretical framework: Conferences are spaces for social participation and deliberation to formulate plans for Social Assistance policy and have been held in Brazil since 1995, in person. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the format was changed to virtual. To support these perspectives, we explored the literature on citizen participation in conferences, e-participation during the Covid-19 pandemic, elements that influence the e-participation process and mediation.

Methodology: We analyze the three phases of the conference process: preparation, execution and conclusion. The methodological design is mainly influenced by the work of Coelho, Cunha and Pozzebon (2022) who follow a process-based approach, and consider the actors, design, interaction, mechanisms of influence and mediation, together, lead to the results of the process of e-participation. We used multiple sources for this analysis: bibliographic and documentary research, questionnaire and observation.

Results: The virtual format presents greater objectivity to the discussion of agendas, favours the inclusion of more individuals and requires less investment to hold conferences. However, it requires greater skill from participants, especially in the use of technology, which makes participation difficult, for users of the Unified Social Assistance System.

Originality: Studies on conferences have investigated distinct elements. However, there is a lack of studies on conferences in an online format, specifically in social assistance and during the pandemic period.

Theoretical and practical contributions: We have identified a literature gap regarding the analysis of e-participation in state conferences. The study fills this gap by investigating how this transition occurred and its theoretical and practical implications, and offering prescriptive guidelines for future e-participation scenarios in these tools. One of the contributions is that the virtual format brought greater objectivity to the conference and the debate was more direct, it also increased the chances of including more individuals; but the quality of participation may be harmed by this format, due to low familiarity with the use of technology.

Keywords: public policy; social participation; conference; e-participation

Resumen

Objetivo de la investigación: Analizar cómo la práctica de la e-Participación, aplicada en la 13ª Conferencia de Asistencia Social del Estado de Santa Catarina, realizada en 2021, favoreció o dificultó la participación y en qué medida influyó en los actores en la toma de decisiones.

Marco teórico: Las conferencias son espacios de participación y deliberación social para la formulación de planes de política de Asistencia Social y se realizan en Brasil desde 1995, de manera presencial. Debido a la pandemia de Covid-19, se cambió el

formato a virtual. Para respaldar estas perspectivas, exploramos la literatura sobre participación ciudadana en conferencias, participación electrónica durante la pandemia de Covid-19, elementos que influyen en el proceso de participación electrónica y mediación.

Metodología: Analizamos las tres fases del proceso del congreso: preparación, ejecución y conclusión. El diseño metodológico está influenciado principalmente por el trabajo de Coelho, Cunha y Pozzebon (2022) quienes siguen un enfoque basado en procesos, y consideran que los actores, el diseño, la interacción, los mecanismos de influencia y la mediación, en conjunto, conducen a los resultados del proceso de participación electrónica. Utilizamos múltiples fuentes para este análisis: investigación bibliográfica y documental, cuestionarios y observación.

Resultados: El formato virtual presenta mayor objetividad en la discusión de agendas, favorece la inclusión de más personas y requiere menos inversión para la realización de conferencias. Sin embargo, requiere mayor habilidad de los participantes, especialmente en el uso de la tecnología, lo que dificulta la participación, especialmente de los usuarios del Sistema Único de Asistencia Social.

Originalidad: Los estudios sobre congresos han investigado distintos elementos. Sin embargo, faltan estudios sobre conferencias en formato online, específicamente en asistencia social y durante el período de pandemia.

Aportes teóricos y prácticos: Hemos identificado un *gap* en la literatura sobre análisis de la participación electrónica en las conferencias estatales. El estudio llena este vacío investigando cómo ocurrió esta transición y sus implicaciones teóricas y prácticas, y ofreciendo orientación prescriptiva para futuros escenarios de participación electrónica en estas herramientas. Uno de los aportes es que el formato virtual aportó mayor objetividad a la conferencia y el debate fue más directo, además aumentó las posibilidades de incluir a más personas; pero la calidad de la participación puede verse perjudicada por este formato, debido a la baja familiaridad con el uso de la tecnología.

Palabras clave: política pública; participación social; conferencia; participación electrónica

Resumo

Objetivo da pesquisa: Analisar como a prática da e-Participação, aplicada na 13ª Conferência de Assistência Social do Estado de Santa Catarina, realizada em 2021, favoreceu ou dificultou a participação e em que medida influenciou os atores na tomada de decisão.

Enquadramento teórico: As conferências são espaços de participação social e de deliberação para a formulação de planos para a política de Assistência Social e são realizadas no Brasil desde 1995, presencialmente. Devido a pandemia de Covid-19, o formato foi alterado para virtual. Para fundamentar essas perspectivas exploramos a literatura sobre participação cidadã em conferências, e-participação durante a pandemia de Covid-19 e elementos que influenciam o processo de e-participação e mediação.

Metodologia: Analisamos as três fases do processo conferencial: preparatória, execução e conclusão. O desenho metodológico é influenciado principalmente pelo trabalho de Coelho, Cunha e Pozzebon (2022) que seguem uma abordagem baseada em processos, e considera os atores, o *design*, a interação, os mecanismos de influência e mediação, somados, levam aos resultados do processo de e-participação. Utilizamos fontes múltiplas para essa análise: pesquisa bibliográfica e documental, questionário e observação.

Resultados: O formato virtual apresenta maior objetividade à discussão das pautas, favorece a inclusão de mais indivíduos, requer menor investimento à realização das conferências. Contudo, exige maior habilidade dos participantes, principalmente no uso de tecnologias, o que dificulta a participação principalmente dos usuários do Sistema Único de Assistência Social.

Originalidade: Estudos sobre conferências tem investigado elementos distintos. Contudo, observa-se ausência de estudos sobre conferências em formato *on-line*, em específico na Assistência social e no período da pandemia.

Contribuições teóricas e práticas: Identificamos uma lacuna na literatura em relação à análise da participação eletrônica em conferências estaduais. O estudo preenche esta lacuna ao investigar como ocorreu esta transição e as suas implicações teóricas e práticas, e ao oferecer orientações prescritivas para futuros cenários de participação eletrônica nestas ferramentas. Uma das contribuições é que o formato virtual trouxe maior objetividade à conferência e o debate foi mais direto, também aumentou as chances de incluir mais indivíduos; mas a qualidade da participação pode ser prejudicada por este formato, devido à baixa familiaridade com o uso da tecnologia.

Palavras-chave: políticas públicas; participação social; conferência; participação eletrônica

INTRODUCTION

This article aimed to investigate how the practice of e-Participation applied to the 13th State Social Assistance Conference, which was held in Santa Catarina (CEAS/SC), favoured or hindered participation and, to what extent, it influenced the actors in decision-making in deliberations. The Social Assistance Conferences are important instruments in the deliberation process for formulating the Social Assistance policy plan, and have been held in Brazil since 1995. Such instruments are part of the decentralization movement that took place in Brazil in the 1990s and transferred to Brazilian states and municipalities most of the social policy management functions (Arretche, 2002).

In terms of participation, the decentralization process contributed to the spread of public policy councils, conferences and participatory budgets as models of citizen participation. Specifically, the conferences are democratic spaces for social participation, in which government and civil society representatives discuss the current scenario, problems and policy demands. This debate is guided by means of a report issued by the National Social Assistance Council (CNAS), which defines the theme of the Conference, the thematic lines and the structuring of the process for the conferences, in addition to serving as guidance for municipalities, states and the Federal District. Held every 2 years at three government levels: municipal, state, and national, policy conferences are characterized as a bottom-up institutionalized tool for power sharing and citizenship strengthening.

Participation in the conference is open to all interested citizens, with the right to raise issues and discuss proposals, but only the elected delegates have the right to vote in the deliberations. Therefore, the conference includes moments for debate with all participants and moments of discussions among delegates to vote.

There is an important strategy in the process of choosing delegates, whose representation follows the proportionality of government and civil society representatives among the segments of users, workers, and entities. (Brasil, 2021b) This strategy makes it possible to reduce power and knowledge asymmetries between actors. It also gives a voice to service users, such as policy takers and street level bureaucrats.

Since its creation, the Social Assistance Conferences have been held in person format. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, nonetheless, there was a need to adapt to virtual mode, in compliance with health standards recommendations. This change required adjustments in the conference process, mainly due to the use of technology, which changed the format of the Conference and participation, from presential to e-participation. It is worth remembering that Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) were widely used during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic by various formally institutionalized organs and organizations, such as public policy councils, in order to continue with the work, as a synchronous and asynchronous alternative for interaction and dialogue between government and society, for consultations and deliberations (Amâncio & Meneses Neto, 2021; Oliveira & Mendonça, 2022) and not interrupting the processes of social participation in policies.

Faced with this change of the 13th State Social Assistance Conference in Santa Catarina to the virtual format and the end of the Covid-19 pandemic, this study sought to answer the following question: How did the practice of e-participation apply to the 13th State Conference on Social Assistance held in Santa Catarina (CEAS/SC). Did it favor or did it hinder participation and influence the actors in decision-making for the deliberations for the formulation of the Social Assistance policy plan?

We work with the analysis of the three phases of the dynamics of participation in conferences: preparatory, execution and conclusion of the conference. The analysis focuses on power relations, the actors involved, chosen tools, platform design, interactions and mediation mechanisms used.

To support the perspectives analyzed, we explored the literature on citizen participation in conferences, e-participation during the Covid-19 pandemic, elements that influence the e-participation process and mediation mechanisms adopted in this process. The methodological design used by the research and described in the methodological procedures is mainly influenced by the work of Coelho, Cunha and Pozzebon (2022) who follow a process-based approach, which considers the actors, the design, the interaction, the mechanisms of influence and mediation, which added together lead to the results of the e-participation process.

THEORETICAL REFERENCE

Research traditions in democratic theory and the importance of the deliberative lens for conferences

When we talk about democratic theory, it is important to note that there are various currents, the two most predominant and well-known in the literature being representative democracy and deliberative democracy (Almeida, 2014).

The concept of representative democracy has its roots in constitutionalism, since it treats democracy as a method, a mechanism used to achieve a certain end. In this conception of democracy, participation is seen as a procedure for choosing representatives. Here we are talking about many voters, who are called periodically to choose their representatives (Schumpeter, 1943; Dahl, 1956).

For Schumpeter, democracy is a method for achieving a certain end, a type of institutional arrangement used to make a political decision. Thus, participation, for this theory, is not seen as an end in itself, but as a means for decision-making (Schumpeter, 1943).

Deliberative democracy, based on the ideas of Jurgen Habermas, Joshua Cohen and Andrew Arato, relies on debate, divergence and opposing views on the same subject and discussion forums to improve decision-making on issues that are previously brought into the public sphere, the space for conflict and disagreement (Habermas, 1997).

Let's focus on the latter theory, since the conferences were built with the aim of debating ideas and problems that impact politics, even though there are representatives (delegates) elected to this discussion forum. In this context, deliberative democracy gains prominence because it aims to broaden the channels for deliberation and the formation of collective wills, without, however, disregarding the existence and importance of institutions (Habermas, 1999), especially in the case of Brazil and Latin America as a whole, a context in which institutionalization is important because it implies mandatory implementation (Pogrebinschi, 2021).

Deliberative democracy is an important vision of participation that can be applied in the case of conferences because it does not only consider deliberation between different views, nor does it only exercise participation through a tool, but the relationship between these two elements, generating a sum between the will built in the institutional space and informal opinion (Cohen, 1998; Habermas, 1997).

In Brazil, the theory of deliberative democracy began to gain emphasis in the 2000s, when the tools that emerged with the 1988 Federal Constitution began to be studied, especially public policy councils, conferences and participatory budgets (Avritzer, 2000; Horochovski et al., 2019). Since then, various studies on these tools have been carried out.

Citizen participation in Conferences: scope review

To understand what has been researched about conferences, we carried out a scope review in the Scopus, Web of Science and Scielo databases. This review resulted in the selection of 13 articles that deal with the theme of the conferences. The studies presented cover state, municipal and national conferences.

As objectives, studies on conferences have investigated different elements, such as the influence of institutional design on the effectiveness of conferences (Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2018), the meaning of speeches and perceptions of conference participants (Chaves & Egry, 2012; Martelli, Almeida, & Luchmann, 2019; Miranda et al., 2016; Neto & Artmann, 2014), the influence of conferences on the responsiveness of the Legislative Branch (Pogrebinschi & Ventura, 2017) or on the National Congress (Pogrebinschi & Santos, 2011), the participation of specific segments in conferences, such as rural youth, in the study by Silva Júnior and Moura (2021), the insertion and relationship between the council and the conference (Silva & Santos, 2021). Lima, 2019), and studies with analysis, based on descriptive reports of conference experiences (Guizardi et al., 2004; Tofani & Carpintério, 2012).

Regarding the influence of design on the quality of conferences, the literature shows that design alone cannot account for the quality of participation. What actually influences and contributes to the effectiveness of conferences is their effect on legislation or agendas. There is practically no evidence of the influence of design, but when civil society is included, even in a decentralized institutional design, the tools are effective and participatory (Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2018). This element is in line with one of the works that analyzed the perception of conference participants, and showed that conference deliberations are not binding, that is, they do not necessarily become decisions taken by the Public Power (Neto & Artmann, 2014).

In this context, other elements were also observed in relation to the speeches and perceptions of the participants. It is possible to observe that, in this observed case of health, the demands that are generated after the conferences have little influence from the counselors and end up having a great influence on the demands

presented by the Power Public. Furthermore, the demands do not receive analytical treatment so that they can be transformed into actions and strategies to promote change, remaining as expressions of generic demands (Miranda et al., 2016). We also observed, in the case of the health conference, a trend of making individuals responsible and co-responsibility of professionals for the obstacles that appear at the end, with the approval of proposals that do not consider the limits of the public health system, which ends up causing that the demands remain at “stake zero” (Chaves & Egry, 2012).

Still regarding the perception of the participants, it was possible to observe that, for there to be a true diversified inclusion of society in the participation models, it is not enough to think of inclusion as the 'presence of individuals', it is necessary to consider the inclusion of themes, interests, causes and new individuals and groups in the debate arena (Martelli, Almeida, & Luchmann, 2019).

By focusing on the influence of conferences on the legislature and the national congress, we found that the conferences make the National Congress more responsive, since several themes extracted from the conferences were approved as propositions and enacted constitutional amendments (Pogrebinschi & Santos, 2011; Pogrebinschi & Ventura, 2017).

Regarding the works that sought to analyze the participation of specific segments in the conferences, we observed that they were able to achieve achievements in relation to the proposals they sent to the conferences. However, a generalization about this cannot be made, since only one sample study analyzed the participation of specific segments (Silva Junior & Moura, 2021).

Regarding the productions that analyzed the relationship between councils and conferences, we observed the possibility of empowerment and ascension within the conference, for which councilors need to elect portals and policy proposals to state and national assemblies, because the more conferences are expanded territorially, the more representatives will be the counselors (Faria, Silva, & Lins, 2019).

Finally, we found in the works that analyzed and described the experiences of the conferences that the inclusion of councilors as delegates was an important milestone for qualified citizen participation in the debate. However, there are still obstacles present in participation models, even after the institutionalization and quantitative expansion of conferences (Guizardi et al., 2004; Tofani & Carpintério, 2012).

From this survey of productions and the aforementioned results, we consider two important inferences. The first concerns participation from an individual perspective. It was observed that uncoerced individual involvement can have causal effects, which is in line with most existing studies in the field of participatory democracy, which argue about small-scale "mini publics". The “ordinary citizen”, that individual who, in theory, is not linked to a council or does not have a representation mandate in any entity can also participate and this can have positive effects on those who have power to deliberate (Pogrebinschi & Samuels, 2014). It helps to highlight an aspect that we consider relevant, in the context of the works, which is linked to the time period of the conferences. This fact gains resonance in the work of Silva and Lima (2019), who identified a weakness in the studies in relation to the Pluriannual Plan (PPA), due to the fact that the planning time and the holding of the conference are not aligned, the deliberations/ the results of the Conference end up not being contemplated in this planning.

The e-participation process during the Covid-19 pandemic

Considering the constant changes provided by technological development and its close relationship with the e-participation tool, it is possible to state that this is still a diffuse concept and under construction. However, a consensus in the literature says that most of the works present a direct relationship with the concept of electronic government (e-gov) (Macintosh, 2004; O'donnell et al., 2007; Tambouris, Liotas, & Tarabanis, 2007; Possamai, 2011; Fan & Luo, 2014; Dwivedi, 2017; Pina, Torres, & Royo, 2017).

Based on these premises and the literature on the subject, we define e-participation as initiatives to involve citizens in consultation and decision-making processes mediated by Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), carried out by both government and civil society. They can cover different phases, from simple consultations to the incorporation of citizens' demands into decisions. A crucial consideration in e-participation research is the need to consider the specificity of each context, since it is not feasible to analyze it in the same way in different situations. This is due to a number of specific elements, such as culture, social inequality, digital exclusion, individuals' lack of interest in participating and, above all, existing institutional arrangements (Dalakiouridou et al., 2011; Dwivedi, 2017; Pina, Torres e Royo, 2017; Freitas e Teixeira, 2019; Steinbach, Wilker e Schöttle, 2019; Pogrebinschi, 2021).

The recent pandemic scenario, at a global level, caused by Covid-19, affected many countries, including Brazil, consequently, leveraged the use of various e-participation tools, many of them known as democratic innovations, but also contributed to the migration of existing participation models for the virtual format (Amâncio & Meneses Neto, 2021; Fonseca, 2021; Oliveira, 2021; Oliveira & Mendonça, 2022).

The intensification of virtual meetings stimulated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, 2022), also gave visibility to the power of online tools, which started to gain importance central to citizen participation in public policies (Pogrebinschi, 2021; Oliveira; Mendonça, 2022; Fonseca, 2021; Amâncio & Meneses Neto, 2021; Pietila et al., 2021).

When we researched literature on acting in the online format, within the scope of state conferences, we found a lack of studies that analyzed the theme of conferences during the pandemic period. In a search carried out in the Google Scholar databases, we found some works that indirectly mention. However, these productions do not show analyzes regarding conferences in this pandemic scenario, nor about the dynamics of e-participation within the scope of state conferences (Izepão; Celeste, 2022; Maccari, 2022; Silva, Pinheiro, & Santos, 2022; Ferraz, Borrego & Rocha, 2023; Peixoto & Silva, 2024).

Elements that influence the effectiveness of e-participation

When observing the elements that influence citizen participation, Fung's theory (2006) gains prominence, based on three dimensions that exert a direct influence on the participation of individuals, namely: who participates, how they participate and influence of participation in government decisions. Coelho, Cunha and Pozzebon (2022) expand the possibilities of influences by adding three dimensions: the role of institutional conditions, the skills of stakeholders and the way in which experiences are integrated into broader networks to become sustainable.

The study carried out by Pina, Torres, & Royo (2017) signals the potential of technology to inform, educate and empower and corroborates with e-participation in the context of political participation in models of participatory democracy that fall within this context. Thus, the use of technology is an element that characterizes e-participation (Steinbach, Wilker, & Schöttle, 2019).

E-participation is also part of the context of electronic government (Fan & Luo, 2014) and can provide a number of benefits in relation to the inclusion of citizens in government decision-making (Dwivedi, 2017). In this way, Steinbach, Wilker, & Schöttle (2019) emphasize the need to leave the scope of the mere addition of technology and the observation of the stage in which practices are inserted in the cycle of public policies (Pogrebinschi, 2021), with emphasis on the dimension 'how they participate' and 'institutional conditions'. That is, the context in which the practices are inserted and the design of the tools (Abreu, 2016; Kitanova, 2020; Pietila et al., 2021).

Although e-participation, within the scope of conferences, is a state initiative, a recent movement has been the growth of digital initiatives promoted by civil society, especially after the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also interesting, therefore, to investigate the actors, seeking to identify who participates in the conferences, and to understand, on the other hand, the lack of interest in engaging on the part of individuals (Alarabiat, Soares, & Estevez, 2021) towards the dimension - "who participates" (Fung, 2006; Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, 2022).

The dimension 'how they participate' was also observed in studies that investigated the level of participation, seeking to understand whether, in fact, these models are deliberative or if they end up being merely consultative (Sampaio, 2016). We found studies that sought to investigate how practices are inserted in the cycle of public policies, revealing the importance of the dimension "influence of participation in government decisions" (Pogrebinschi, 2021).

An element that has been extensively investigated in recent literature has focused on the interest, conditions and skills of participants in the scope of practices (Fonseca, 2021; Amâncio & Meneses Neto, 2021; Oliveira & Mendonça, 2022), directed to the dimension 'stakeholder skills'.

Finally, it is worth highlighting the importance of some elements that meet the dimension "how experiences are integrated into broader networks", namely: the contexts in which e-participation is inserted and its decision-making processes, the relationship between individual participation and the democratic maturity of the country (Steinbach, Wilker, & Schöttle, 2019; Kitanova, 2020), the digital divide, characteristic of underdeveloped countries (Gohn, 2019), the influence of the type of political system (Ladinho, Junior, & Dunfloth, 2020; Fonseca, 2021), as well as the level of awareness of society in relation to politics (Ladinho, Junior, & Dunfloth, 2020).

METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

This research is characterized as a case study, of a qualitative and descriptive nature (Vergara, 2011) and sought to analyze whether the practice of e-participation favored or hindered participation and to what extent it influenced the actors in decision-making during the 13th Conference State of Social Assistance of Santa Catarina, carried out in 2021, in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is important to highlight that this Conference has been taking place in Brazil since 1995, in a presential format, but, due to social restrictions enacted, there was a need to change to a virtual format. Despite the change in format, the organizational structure of the Conference was maintained. The change was in the number of days dedicated to the Conference's activities, which normally lasts five days.

The state of Santa Catarina has 295 municipalities, a population of approximately seven million inhabitants and has institutionalized Social Assistance Councils in the 295 municipalities. All held the municipal conference, but only 270 municipalities presented deliberations, which were debated at the state conference, between November 24 and 26, 2021. On the three days of the conference, 583 actors, government representatives and civil society participated, distributed by segments of users, workers and entities and actors without representation.

Data collection was organized from multiple sources: 1) documents; 2) questionnaire; and 3) observation. Document analysis included documents published by CNAS, CEAS, State Secretariat for Social Development, responsible for policy in the State, reports of the results of the Conferences municipalities and the report of the state conference. The questionnaire included a set of questions, organized into two blocks: the first to reveal: a) who are the actors who participated in the 13th State Conference on Social Assistance in Santa Catarina and the second based on dimensions brought by Fung, (2006) and Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, (2022), which were distributed in the three phases of the conference process: preparatory, execution and conclusion. 68 participants answered the questionnaire.

Direct observation was carried out through the participation of part of the authors in the reporting team at the 13th State Conference, which proved to be essential to understand the dynamics of the Conference. The use of multiple sources allowed the triangulation of the data, providing an understanding of the investigated case (Stake, 2005).

The conference process

The Federal Constitution of 1988 (Brazil, 1988) establishes Social Assistance (arts. 203 and 204) as part of the social security policy, along with social security and health; classified as a redistributive policy (Theodore Lowi), non-contributory in Brazil, a right of every citizen who needs it.

The regulation of the Social Assistance System (SUAS) took place in 1993, based on the Organic Law of Social Assistance (LOAS), which institutionalizes a democratic, decentralized and participatory management model for the execution of the policy in the three instances of the federation - União, States, Federal District and Municipalities. From LOAS, the National Social Assistance Council is also institutionalized (Law nº 8.742/93) and councils are created in all federative units. The Councils are spaces for participation to discuss the demands of the social assistance policy, define guidelines for its improvement and social control. This model has been one of main instruments of decentralized and participatory management in the social assistance system (Raichelis, 2000). CNAS is the social representation body for social assistance policy in the country and one of its functions is to convene the Social Assistance Conference, issuing resolutions and guidance reports. Specifically, the CNAS issued reports 1,2,3 and 4, with guidelines and calling for the 2021 Conference. Thus, CEAS called for the 13th State Social Assistance Conference in Santa Catarina.

The conference process is staggered, with municipal conferences taking place first, followed by state conferences and then the national conference. The normative acts issued by the CNAS interfere directly in the organization of the conference stages, defining the theme, the topics for debate, the parameters for conducting the work, the structure of the conference process, the percentage of representation of actors by segment, the number and criteria for choosing delegates for the national round.

In 2021, the theme was "Social Assistance: the People's Right and the State's Duty, with public funding, to tackle inequalities and guarantee social protection".

Five thematic topics were defined to guide the debate:

"THEME 1 - Non-contributory social protection and the principle of equity as a paradigm for the management of social assistance rights in the fight against inequalities; THEME 2 - Financing and budgeting as an instrument for the management of commitments and co-responsibilities of the federative entities to guarantee social assistance

rights; THEME 3 - Social control: the place of civil society in SUAS and the importance of user participation; THEME 4 - Management and access to social assistance security and the articulation among services, benefits and income transfer as guarantees of social assistance rights and social protection; THEME 5 - SUAS action in situations of public calamity and emergencies (Brasil, 2021d).

Among the guidelines that entities must observe is the parity of representation and the stages of the conference process divided into: preparatory, execution and conclusion. The representation regulates 50% government representatives and 50% of civil society, distributed by segments of users, workers.

The preparatory phase is considered technical-political and includes the systematization of reports from municipal conferences, held in the state, and deliberations. There is nothing to prevent the state and national stages from taking place in case of absence of any given municipality's conference.

In this phase, debates are also held on the stage of implementation of the Decennial Social Assistance Plan and the Decennial State Plan for reflection and assessment of advances and challenges of the policy. The preparatory phase has the potential to mobilize actors to get involved in the debate on the reality of the territory, to qualify participation. The execution phase is the moment when the works themselves are developed, including moments of lectures, with thematic panels on the theme of the conference and the deliberations.

The debate and discussion of the problems, challenges and demands were carried out in working groups by them.

The proposals are analyzed in the working groups, which, after discussion, are voted for by the delegates. In the conclusion phase, the voted proposals are ranked and in until up to 10 proposals for the State and 10 for the Union.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The presentation of the results is organized in two blocks. The first brings together questions from: a) profile of respondents who participated in the 13th State Conference, held in 2021, in the virtual format. The second block was organized in order to understand: b) how these actors participated (Fung, 2006); c) the influence of participation in government decisions (Fung, 2006); d) the role of institutional context/conditions (Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, 2022); e) the skills of stakeholders (Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, 2022); and f) how experiences are integrated into broader networks (Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, 2022).

In characterizing “who participates”, we sought to identify the segment that the participant represented, the type of involvement they had in the Conference, if they work in social assistance and how long they have worked in this area, how many times they participated in conferences (municipal, state and national), age group, gender, color/race, schooling and income. Figures 1 and 2 show panel data. This characterization is important for the correlation with the second block of research questions.

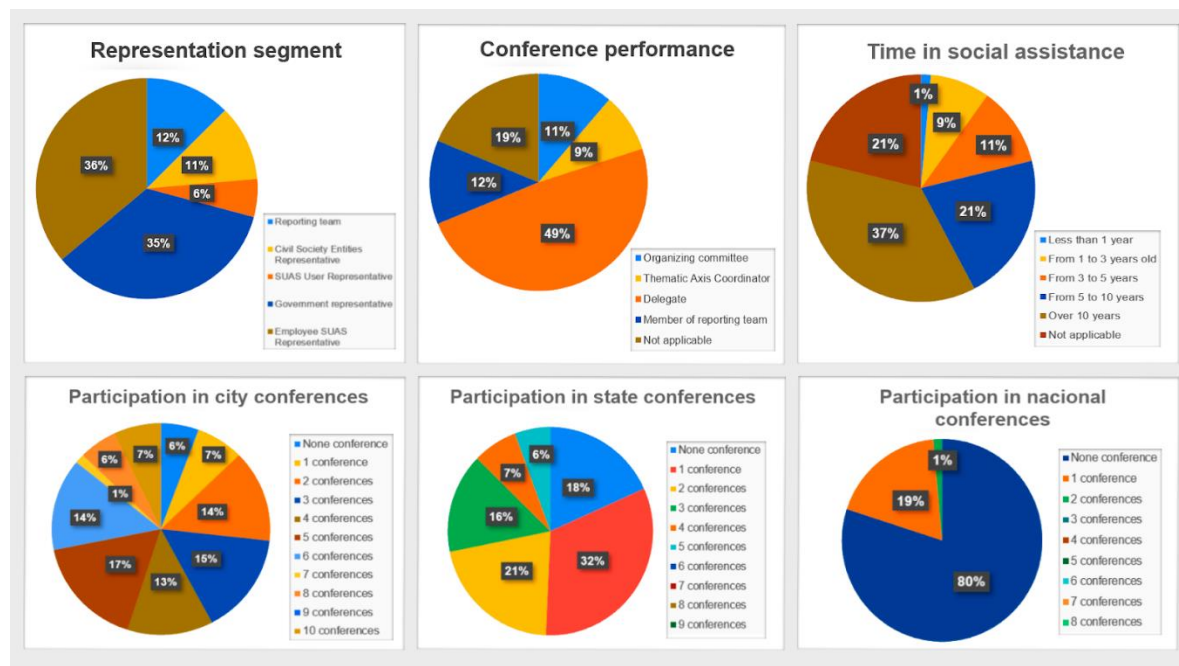


Figure 1 Panel Segment representation, type of involvement, time acting and participation in Conferences

Based on the data shown in the Figure 1, it was possible to identify that 33.8% of respondents are from the government sector and 54.5% represent civil society (36.8% SUAS workers, 11.8% civil society, 5.9% SUAS users) and 13.2% represent the reporting team. It is important to remember that the Conference is an open space for participation, but only elected delegates have the power to decide on proposals. This participation in the deliberations must be equal, 50% from the government segment and 50% from civil society, formally elected in Forums for this representation. In this sense, the percentage of respondents from the civil society segment is greater and, considering the diversity of this group, we perceive that the contributions are more reliable about the facilities or difficulties encountered in e-participation, when compared to government representatives, who in principle are more prepared for the use of ICT's.

The research included in the identification "who participates" the Conference's reporting team, considering that these actors also have contributions to the understanding of the factors that facilitated or hindered the e-participation in the conference, for their involvement with and in the working groups, as support to conference participants and delegates during deliberations and as observers of this process. Also, part of the reporting team is made up of social assistance professionals who work in municipalities in this area.

We also observed that, of the respondents to the survey, 55.9% participated as delegates, actors considered active in the process, regardless of the representative segment, and 36.8% have been working for more than 10 years in social assistance. When we analyze participation in conferences, it is observed that 86.9% of respondents participated in 2 to 10 municipal conferences, which demonstrates previous experiences in this process in a presencial format. All previous conferences were carried out with the physical presence of the participants and this experience, at first, is used by the respondent as a comparison to his perception of the facilities or difficulties encountered in e-participation. On the other hand, when we analyze the participation of respondents in a state conference, we observe that 50.1% participated in an average of 2 to 5 state conferences, but, on the other hand, 30.9% of respondents participated in 2021 for the first time in a state conference. For these participants, it is possible that the comparison takes place in relation to the municipal experience(s). We also observed that 79.4% of respondents had never participated in a national conference.

In addition, figure 2 presents data on age group, gender, color/race, schooling, and income.

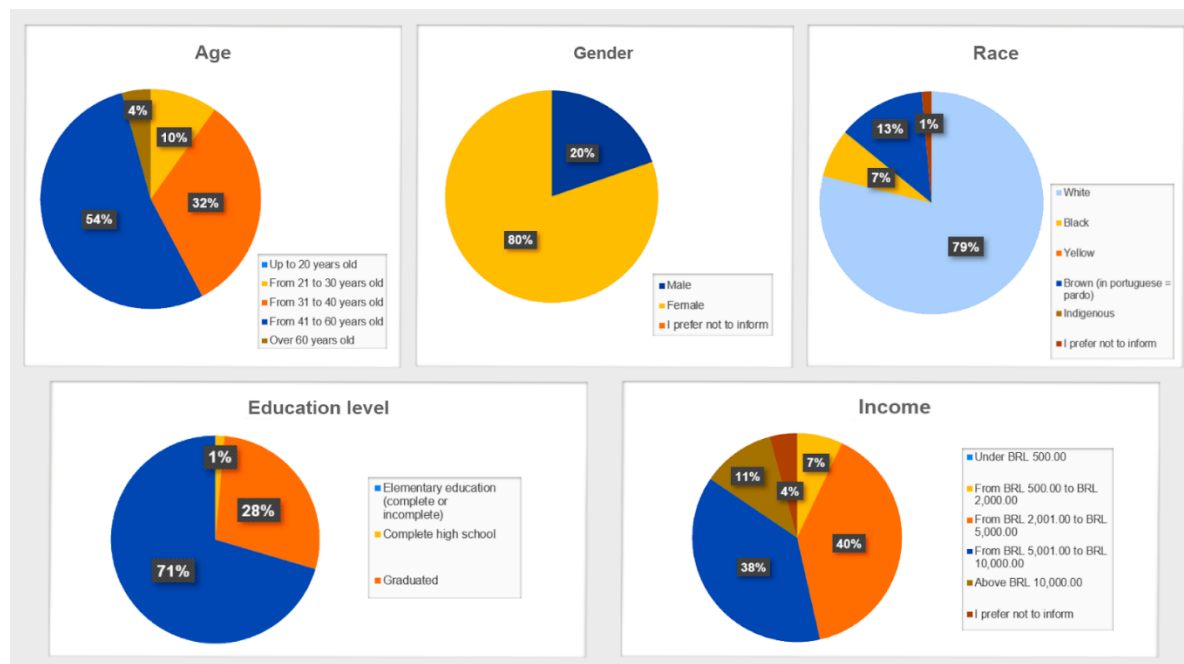


Figure 2 Panel data age group, gender, color/race, schooling and income

From this analysis, we found that most of the respondents were between 41 and 60 years old (54.4%), followed by 31 to 40 years old (30.9%), with a predominance of women (80.9%) and most of them declared themselves to be white (79.4%). In terms of schooling, we found that 98.5% were university graduates and post-graduates, with incomes ranging from 2,001.00 to 5,000.00 (41.2%) and up to 10,000.00 (36.8%). This data shows that the participants have a high level of education, compared to the national average for the population aged 25 and over, measured by the Brazilian Geographic and Statistical Institute (IBGE) in 2019, which shows 9.4 years of education. This profile of participants is more mature and has a high income, considering the IBGE Family Budget Survey (POF) (2018), which indicates an average per capita family income of R\$ 1,650.78.

The contributions of Fung (2006); Pina, Torres, & Royo (2017); Steinbach, Wilker, & Schöttle (2019); Dwivedi (2017) and Ventura (2016) allowed us to analyze "how the participation", discussion and interaction of the conference participants took place in this e-participation format. From the respondents' point of view, we found that in the preparatory stage, the virtual format hindered the presentation of their arguments for 58.8% of the participants, while for 11.8% there was no change and for 25% this format facilitated the presentation of their arguments. In the preparatory stage, events were held to mobilize the different segments - users, workers and entities - to participate in the conference, with the aim of broadening and qualifying participation and social control.

This element dialogues with another dimension of the literature, stakeholder skills, coined by Cunha, Coelho, & Pozzebon (2022), which directly influence participation in conferences, given that more than half of the respondents claimed to have been hindered by the virtual format. Considering that most respondents belong to civil society, this data indicates that they have less experience with ICTs than government representatives.

The literature on the importance of the tool's design is corroborated by Abreu (2016); Kitanova (2020) and Pietila et al (2021), since 58.8% of participants indicate that their participation was hindered by the virtual format. The importance and influence of design was also identified in studies that analyzed presential conferences in the literature review on conferences (Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2018).

It is important to problematize this issue to check to what extent technological tools are participatory or merely consultative, as Sampaio (2016) points out. In addition, most of the participants said that effective participation was hampered fusing technology.

From the analysis of the execution stage, represented by the Conference event, most of the respondents realize that there was a concentration of debate conducted by the theme coordinator (66.2%), followed by government delegates (27.9%), worker delegates (17.6%), SUAS user delegates (11.8%), entity delegates (8.8%) and, for 16.2% of the respondents, the debate was conducted by other unidentified participants. Regarding the level of debate in the discussions of the proposals coming from the municipalities, before the deliberations on the thematic axes, 39.7% of the respondents indicate that it was low, while 29.4% indicate that it was high. However, 30.9% of the participants said that the debate on the proposals was within the expected average, which means that even with

the weaknesses pointed out in the use of technology, there were still important participations that contributed to qualifying them and making them eligible.

One point to be highlighted is the concentration of the debate on the theme coordinator, which we consider to be a controversial issue in this case, as we understand the need for a qualified debate, supported by a methodology organized in advance, which allows everyone to participate. However, one of the possible consequences of the concentration of speeches already observed in the literature, is the influence of public power on decisions given its role, knowledge and skills and the little influence of the councilors (Fund, 2006; Miranda et al, 2016; Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, 2022). However, this was not necessarily the case this conference; the influence highlighted by the respondents, of the theme coordinators (delegates), are mostly representatives of civil society and their "influence/participation in decisions" is possibly due not only to the virtual format, but also to their "skills, individual characteristics, qualified knowledge", in addition to the power vested in them as theme coordinator authority. These aspects deserve attention in future research on conferences, regardless of their format, whether virtual or presential.

The level of debate at conferences shows that demands need to be more in-depth and specific, as they are sometimes treated as expressions of generic demands, as Miranda et al. (2016) point out. In addition, some research shows that the inclusion of individuals is also generic, since the inclusion of individuals is a great achievement for conferences, but it still requires them to consider not just people, but themes, interests, and causes (Martelli, Almeida, & Luchmann, 2019). This element can be verified when we look at the literature relating councils and conferences. Although the inclusion of councillors is an important milestone, even after this inclusion and the institutionalization of conferences, there are still obstacles to the participation model, as Guizardi et al. (2004) and Tofani & Carpintério (2012) point out.

When we analyze the open questions, together with other data, is possible to grasp the respondents' expressions more precisely. We realized that, for some, the debate was not hindered, but was simply more directive. However, in the perception of other respondents, the participation of SUAS users in discussions and debates was hampered by their lack of access to and familiarity with technology. Some municipalities in Santa Catarina organized spaces with technological equipment and high-capacity internet access so that representatives of SUAS users and workers had the necessary support during their participation in the Conference.

It is worth reiterating that Social Assistance is a policy that works with people in situations of vulnerability. This factor should not be overlooked, as part of this population does not use technology in their day-to-day lives. Consequently, this situation may have hindered the active participation of this segment in the debate during the Conference. Situations such as opening and closing the microphone and camera, asking to speak virtually, for those who are not familiar with technology, can be an obstacle to active participation. Another aspect pointed out by the respondents, and which possibly weakened the debate, may be linked to the participation of SUAS workers in the workplace and working hours, a fact which made it difficult to follow up and actively participate in the conference, due to the difficulty in spending the full time dedicated to the conference.

Regarding the lack of access to and familiarity with technology, once again we highlight the need for participants to be qualified, drawing attention to the "skills of the stakeholders" (Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, 2022). The context in which participation in the field of social assistance takes place is in line with the literature that highlights "the role of the context and institutional conditions" in which the participation model is inserted, as described by Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon (2022). We highlight the need to look closely at the Latin American context of inequality and digital exclusion (Gohn, 2019), Brazil's democratic maturity (Steinbach, Wilker, & Schöttle, 2019) and society's level of awareness, which stems from the elements that gained visibility in this study (Ladinho, Junior, & Dufloth, 2020).

The moment of debate at the Conferences becomes fundamental for extracting the desires and possibilities for ensuring social justice in the implementation of new public policies. We found that 50% of respondents felt that the virtual event made it difficult to organize the debate, while 29.4% felt that this format made it easier and 20.6% saw no negative or positive influence on this issue. When we inverted the question to detect response consistency, we saw a certain alignment in the positions. 60.3% pointed to the presential format as facilitating the organization of the debate, while 19.1% pointed to difficulties and 20.6% saw no difference between one format and the other.

This element shows the influence that the design of the tool has on the organization of the debate (Abreu, 2016; Kitanova, 2020; Pietila et al., 2021). Although the pandemic period caused by Covid-19 has created a favorable scenario for migrating to the online format to mediate a Conference (Amâncio & Meneses Neto, 2021; Fonseca, 2021; Oliveira, 2021; Oliveira & Mendonça, 2022), practical experience in this virtual context for effective participation is still practically innocuous. In addition, it must be said that recent studies on conferences have not

analyzed the context of the pandemic (Izepão & Celeste, 2022; Maccari, 2022; Silva, Pinheiro, & Santos, 2022), which is one of the main theoretical contributions of this work.

The conclusion of the conference was the moment when the "qualification of the content of the deliberations" was defined by the thematic axes. In this respect, 54.4% of respondents indicated that the virtual format made it difficult for delegates to participate in qualifying the content of the deliberations, while 20.6% said it was easy and 25% did not perceive any impact on delegate participation at this point in the conference. According to the participants, the debate was unidirectional, captured by the theme coordinator, followed by the government actors, a context which, for some participants, is due to the ease of using technology. According to the respondents, the biggest problem with the virtual format lies in the lack of familiarity with its use by SUAS users. On the other hand, traveling to participate in an event in the physical format requires financial resources, which are funded by the municipalities only for the elected delegates, legitimate representatives of a given segment, a fact that restricts the participation of other non-formal representatives in conferences.

The percentage of respondents who point to the use of technology in the virtual mediations of the Conference as hindering delegate participation leads us to return to the importance of stakeholder skills, as highlighted by Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon (2022). By stating that the debate was unidirectional, captured by the theme coordinator, the respondents believe that this is due to their technological skills, while Miranda et al. (2016) point out that this type of capture has also been observed in conferences held in person. One wonders if the use of technology in online mediations participation is the biggest obstacle to effective conference participation is really. The results of this study indicate a confrontation with the argument already pointed out by Miranda et al. (2016), while at the same time contradicting the position of the respondents, by stating that online mediations are important to broaden the participation of people who are not delegates and facilitate for participation.

Also looking to see if the format of the conference - virtual or presential - is a factor in determining participation in future events, we found that 58.8% of respondents agree that the format is a determining factor in participation, 23.5% are neutral, while 17.6% do not agree that the format is what will determine participation in the Conference. Furthermore, it is interesting to note that 60.3% of respondents say that in future conference events, organized in person, it would be easier for them to take part, while 16.2% say they have no influence whatsoever on participation. On the other hand, for 23.5% of respondents the presential format would make it difficult for them to take participation.

In view of this data, we are struck by two elements which, when analyzed together, denote obstacles to effective participation in the virtual format. While more than half of the respondents say it is the "format" that determines their participation, an even higher percentage of respondents consider the presential format to be a facilitator for their participation. We can therefore see that the virtual format still encounters many obstacles and resistance from participants. This reaffirms the importance of e-participation as an important element of stakeholder skills, indicated by Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon (2022). This position in favor of the presential format may be related to the difficulties the use of technology, especially of SUAS users, or even the difficulty of SUAS workers being able to reconcile participation in the virtual conference with their workspace and schedule.

Corroborating the literature on conferences, the influence exerted by the design of the tool, since the format influences participation (Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2018; Neto & Artmann, 2014). The design is not the only element responsible when it comes to the type of format, since the skills of the stakeholders must also be considered (Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, 2022; Alarabiat, Soares, & Estevez, 2021; Fonseca, 2021; Amâncio & Meneses Neto, 2021; Oliveira & Mendonça, 2022). Although the findings have largely pointed to situations of difficulty in using technology, we have seen positive manifestations regarding the virtual format, with constructive criticism that has been more intense, as we can see:

[...] the virtual method enhances participation - the problem is to develop awareness of the importance of this moment and the participation of those registered; [...] the debate being virtual was more organized and the discussions more direct; [...] the conference in virtual format was rich in learning, however, it does not replace the learning obtained in the presential format, as occurred in previous years.

With these records, we raise one of the greatest reflections and contributions of this study: the virtual format cannot be underestimated, nor overestimated in isolation when evaluating participation, considering that several elements influence the engagement of citizens in the conference, the main one being the skills of those involved (Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, 2022; Alarabiat, Soares, & Estevez, 2021; Fonseca, 2021; Amâncio & Meneses Neto, 2021; Oliveira & Mendonça, 2022).

Finally, we realize that individual experiences are integrated into a broader contextual network (Coelho, Cunha, & Pozzebon, 2022) and connect with the participants' previous experiences. This fact became visible in the percentages of respondents' participation, as the majority have already taken part in two or more conferences,

whether municipal, state or national, which, in principle, indicates a level of maturity in relation to this model of participation. In this way, we cannot rule out SUAS users, who as a rule fall within the digitally excluded groups, a factor that may have had a direct impact on their level of participation in the debates and discussions for the deliberations, compromising their influence on the deliberated decisions. This aspect deserves attention in further research, in order to ascertain whether it was really the format that influenced active participation or qualified knowledge to express opinions and exert influence.

CONCLUSIONS

As an answer to the research question, we can infer that the virtual format has the positive points of objectivity, less investment in time and travel resources and the inclusion of more individuals. However, we also highlight the negative points, such as the low quality of the debate for deliberations and technical difficulties for effective participation, due to the technological specificities.

Thus, we can infer that the virtual format can favor the inclusion of more individuals in the debate, as well as the objectivity of the agendas. However, the participants' lack of familiarity with the use of technology posed challenges that made it difficult to experience this practice virtually. This difficulty has also been seen in different literature, which has shown that the level of knowledge and skills of the participants is recurrent in any conference format. Notably, it was evident in this study that "stakeholder skills" was the most recurrent element in the responses, even if they were related to the use of technologies or knowledge of the agendas and dynamics of participation, which need to be considered mutually.

We are interested in saying that one of the contributions of this work is related to the fact that we analyzed participation in conferences during the pandemic caused by Covid-19. Even with recent studies on conferences, we still haven't identified any that focus on this period, nor on the virtual format. Thus, it is reasonable to think that this work brings important findings, not only about the functioning of conferences held in the virtual format and mediated by technologies, but above all, the relationship between this and the presential format.

In our analysis, we found that many of the difficulties presented by the use of the virtual online format were also present in other studies, the results of which focused on the presential format of the conferences, including the lack of stakeholder skills, the very generic demands, the low quality of the debates, the greater influence of specific actors, elements similar to those found in the results of this research. To this end, we raise the very pertinent question: is the presential or virtual format the major obstacle to people's active participation in conferences? We would point out that, historically, obstacles have been present in participation practices.

Finally, it is interesting to note from the profile of the respondents that there is a concentration of women, white, with a high level of education and at a more mature stage in life, either in terms of age or professional experience. These characteristics show that the participants do not represent the population in general, and this can lead to weaknesses when it comes to making decisions based on their knowledge, experience, or interests. This profile does not seem to differ from other studies (Faria, Silva, & Lins, 2019), which have also often found that participation is not representative of the general population, even though the space is open to everyone, represented by individuals with higher incomes and levels of education or with special interests. On this last point, it is not possible to infer, but it is worth remembering, that these represent the group of respondents to the survey and participated in the conference, although they do not correspond to the entirety of the conference participants.

As limitations of the study, we can point out that more subjective aspects such as the content of interactions were not investigated, and the research was limited to the application of questionnaires. A second limitation is the number of people who answered the questionnaire. In this sense, it is important to note that the conference took place in December 2021 and the survey was carried out in early 2023. The time that elapsed between the conference and the survey may have made it difficult to contact conference participants and lose representation on the municipal and state councils. Councillor's mandates are for two years and the end of the mandate may have led to a drop in interest in taking part in the survey.

In this sense, it is worth recommending further studies of e-participation in conferences, councils or other forms of social participation in public policymaking mediated by ICTs.

Despite these limitations, we believe that, given the emergency context revealed by the pandemic and the urgent need to adapt to the online environment, this work makes a contribution to e-participation and indicates gaps for future studies on the subject.

As a research agenda, this aspect points to the need to delve deeper into the skills of stakeholders and the role they play in each of the formats - virtual and presential. As well as research into the quality of the debates. We

maintain that the virtual format may have given greater objectivity to the practices, being more direct, increasing the chances of including more individuals, but the quality of participation may be hampered by this format, while the use of technology is still an expectation for many who have already had experiences in conferences and many others who envision occupying this place of participation.

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