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The normalization of precarity: an ethnography of energy spaces and life at risk in Vila Nova Esperança (São Paulo, Brazil)

A normalização da precariedade: uma etnografia do espaço da energia e da vida em risco em Vila Nova Esperança (São Paulo, Brasil)

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ABSTRACT: This paper aims to explore the intersections between the spatial configurations of disaster risk and its political, social, and cultural consequences. The article presents the results of the first phase of the field research, carried out between September 2021 and March 2022 in Vila Nova Esperança, a low-income community in the western periphery of São Paulo. The research originated from the ethnographic analysis of the access to energy infrastructure and services, defined as the object of study through the notion of *energy space*, ensuing from Setha Low's work on ethnography of space and culture. The precarity marking the energy space extends to other dimensions of the inhabited space and its social relations, encompassing other fragilities related to disaster risk and the impacts of climate change. Emerging from the systematization of the histories of people and place is the permanent and intertemporal character of precarity, which despite the achievements of the community and the residents, presents itself as a political fact. The results combine the analysis carried out with data on urbanization in the periphery of São Paulo, being the ethnographic work based on the narratives of community members, together with the study of the spatial configurations of energy access. From this triangulation emerges the combination of the social construction of biophysical and social risk as a transversal element that shapes the main result of the article: the multiplication of forms and dynamics of the social production of risk as a process that goes beyond disaster risk and the impacts of climate change. In this sense, the phrase "normalization of precarity" in the title is a provocation, an invitation to look into the intertemporal permanence of precarity in the periphery of São Paulo.

Keywords: risk; energy; disasters; periphery; São Paulo.

RESUMO:

O objetivo da pesquisa é investigar as interseções entre as configurações espaciais do risco de desastres e seus desdobramentos políticos, sociais e culturais. O artigo apresenta os resultados da primeira fase da pesquisa de campo, realizada entre setembro de 2021 e março de 2022 em Vila Nova Esperança, comunidade de baixa renda na periferia oeste de São Paulo. A pesquisa originou-se a partir da análise etnográfica do espaço, relativa ao acesso à infraestrutura e aos serviços energéticos, definidos como objeto de estudo através da noção de *espaço da energia*, trazida pela obra de Setha Low sobre etnografia do espaço e da cultura. A precariedade encontrada no espaço da energia amplia-se a outras dimensões do espaço habitado e suas relações sociais, abrangendo outras precariedades relacionadas ao risco de desastres e aos impactos das mudanças climáticas. O que emerge do levantamento das histórias das pessoas e do lugar é o caráter permanente e intemporal da precariedade que, apesar das conquistas da comunidade, dos moradores e das moradoras, se apresenta como um fato político. Os resultados combinam a análise realizada com dados sobre a urbanização na periferia de São Paulo, no qual o trabalho etnográfico centrado no espaço e nas configurações espaciais do acesso à energia é integrado pelas narrativas dos e das integrantes da comunidade. Dessa triangulação emerge a combinação da construção social do risco biofísico e social como um elemento transversal que dá forma ao resultado principal do artigo: a multiplicação das formas e dinâmicas de produção social do risco como um processo que vai mais além do risco de desastres e dos impactos das mudanças climáticas. Nesse sentido o termo “normalização da precariedade” proposto no título é uma provocação, um convite à investigação sobre a permanência intemporal da precariedade na periferia paulista.

Palavras-chave: risco; energia; desastres; periferia; São Paulo.

1. Introduction

The thematic division between the specialized subjects related to disaster risk and to the adjustments to climate changes has resulted in an apparent disconnection coming to the comprehension of the integrality of the different manifestations of socio-economic and environmental precarity which are part of the daily holistic experience of communities in urban peripheries of Global South countries.

The recognition of the place centralization where people experience and live their everyday life allows one to see a connecting element in such a disciplinary disconnection from the analysis of the implications of permanence over time in extreme ways of marginalization and poverty both in the spatial and social spheres. In face of the risks related to climatic, water, and geological dimensions, as well as to those generated by the shortage of urban structures, the present article elaborates the notion

of normalization of precarity as a way of intellectual provocation.

Based on this provocation, the following working hypothesis is built: such precarity may not be a factor that brings on indignation any longer, rather, something that deep inside has been accepted by our societies in different degrees and ways between the Global North and the South countries. However, the capitalist society, the risk society (Beck, 1992), has not managed to solve the dilemma represented by the deep inequalities (Piketty, 2014) in contexts highly exposed to simultaneous social and environmental risks (double exposure) (Leichenko & O'Brien, 2008). The risk is not only, as in Beck's work, an internal factor, the perverse result of our reflexive modernity. On the contrary, it is something that seems to articulate with increasingly standardized and sophisticated ways of exclusion which result in genuine dynamics of impossibility for people to live in environments that

offer higher welfare and security levels with regard to accessing means of providing their livelihoods as well as regarding their social and economic rights (Sassen, 2014). In the present work, the periphery, particularly São Paulo’s one – a controversial megapolis located in one of the most unequal countries in the world, is both seen as a consequence and a metaphor for the articulated dilemmas by the risk, spatial and social inequalities of our contemporaneity. This is particularly illustrated in Vila Nova Esperança, a low-income community located in the

western periphery of São Paulo, the place chosen for the ethnography of energy space.

2. Research context

The urban area identified as Macrometropolis Paulista (from São Paulo) (MMP/Macrometrópole Paulista) can be understood as the expression of an extreme social spatial concentration resulting from the union of five metropolitan regions and three urban areas with special status (Figure 1). In this there

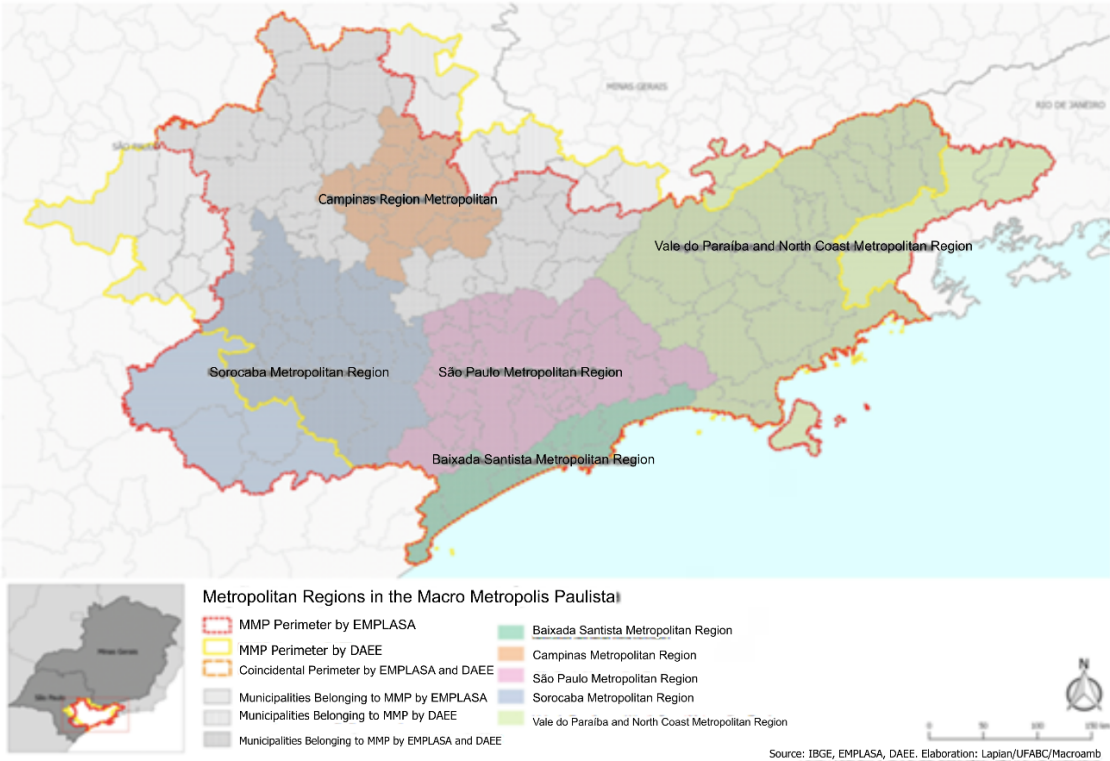


FIGURE 1 – Metropolitan Regions in the Macro Metropolis Paulista.
SOURCE: Canil *et al.* (2020).

is an articulation of 174 municipalities stretching over an area equivalent to Croatia and with a GDP (Gross Domestic Product) equivalent to the Swiss one. It is evident in the MMP a densification of infrastructures which makes its economy the most dynamic and modern in the country (EMPLASA, 2019). In 2016, the MMP was responsible for generating 1.6 trillion of Reais equivalent to 25% of the Brazilian GDP (EMPLASA, 2019).

In spite of being one of the main economic centres in Latin America, the MMP concentrates 2.68

millions of inhabitants in precarious settlements being the most vulnerable population to multiple risks. In Figure 2, it is represented the reality of housing insecurity from Nakano's work (2019), based on the IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) 2010 Census estimates. According to this analysis, in São Paulo City the population under potential housing insecurity is distributed among the 96 official districts. In turn, most metropolitan cities and districts in São Paulo had between 10% and 20% of their respective total populations in

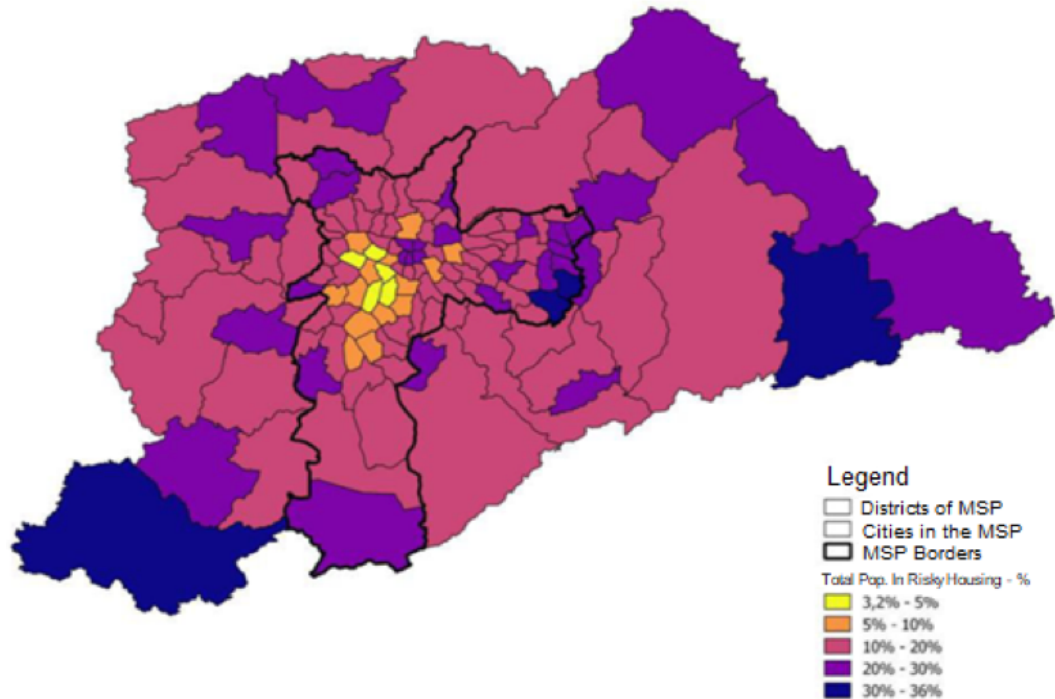


FIGURE 2 – Percentage of the total population in potential housing insecurity in the Metropolitan Region of São Paulo (RMSP/Região Metropolitana de São Paulo) and in the districts of São Paulo City (MSP/Município de São Paulo) in 2010.

SOURCE: Nakano (2019)

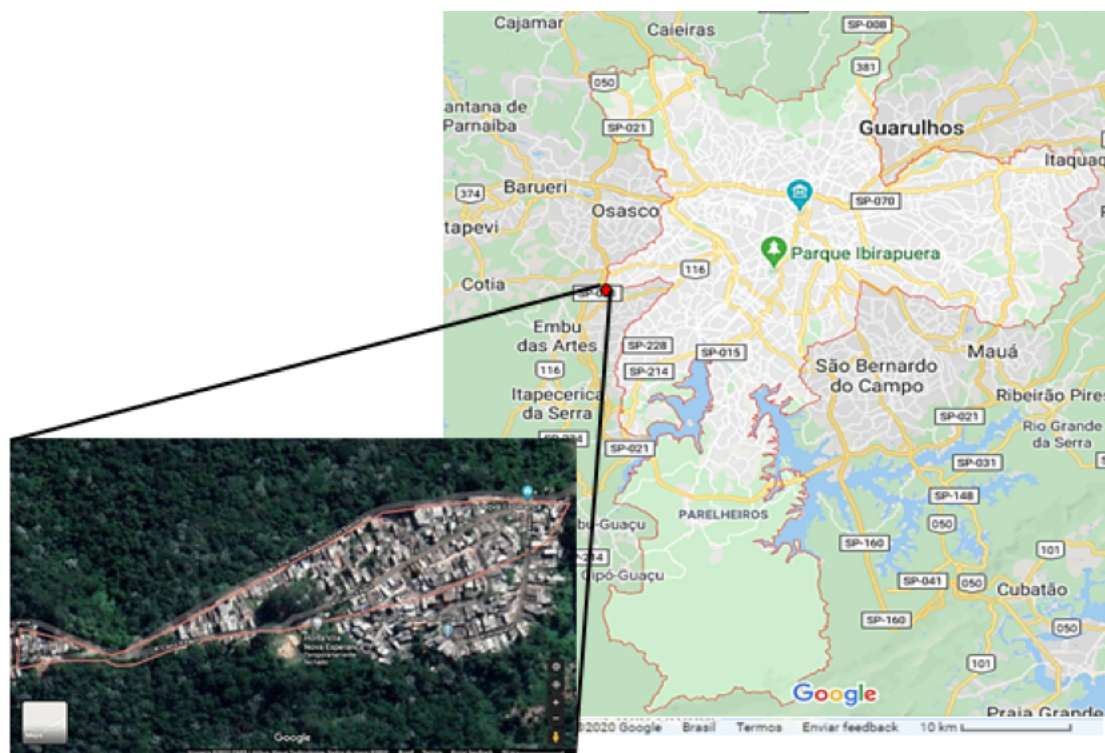


FIGURE 3 – Vila Nova Esperança location in São Paulo Metropolitan Region (Google Maps aerial view).

SOURCE: Capuano Mascarenhas (2019).

potential housing insecurity.

An important social consequence of the intertwined thread linking inequality and segregation is the strong cumulative effect of social and environmental risks at critical points, such as the peripheries with a high concentration of social, economic and spatial vulnerability, also known as “hyperperipheries” (Pereira Marques, 2004). An example of these is Vila Nova Esperança, a community with approximately 3,000 residents who have managed to establish their houses on non-legalized settlements. Vila Nova Esperança is located as shown by the arrow in Figure 3, on the

border of São Paulo and Taboão da Serra cities, in an area where the incidence of housing insecurity is between 20% and 30% (Nakano, 2019).

The occupied area by the Vila has multiple owners among them mainly SABESP (*Companhia de Saneamento Básico do Estado de São Paulo*, the company responsible for water supply and sewage treatment in São Paulo State), and CDHU (*Companhia de Desenvolvimento Habitacional e Urbano do Estado de São Paulo*, São Paulo State company responsible for providing affordable housing). Moreover, the Vila is located in a preservation area, Jequitibá Park, previously known as TIZO Park

(*Terras Institucionais da Zona Oeste*, West Region Institutional Lands), an important remaining area of Atlantic Forest (Mata Atlântica), in the middle of the urban area between São Paulo and Cotia (SIMA, 2019). Not being a legal district, Vila Nova Esperança does not hold accurate information coming to the extent of access to the electricity grid on the exact percentage of family units connected to this service or enjoying a good quality of power supply. The households in the bounded area in pink in Figure 3 usually have access to power supply provided by legal services as well as to water supply and sanitation. Yet, the most recent area established in this settlement (at the bottom of the image) access power through hotwire power supply connections.

Authors such as Campello Torres *et al.* (2019) and Luque-Ayala (2014) have pointed out the fact that the process of urban expansion to the peripheries makes these contention objects for resources like soil, water and energy. According to IBGE (2019), the access to electricity in Brazil increased from 94.5% in 2000 to 98.7% in 2010. However, the access to power supply services, what is strongly connected to the economic capacity of the family units, keeps on showing important differences in geographic terms and within the urban scope, when comparing the most central or residential areas and the peripheries.

3. Conceptual framework

The notion of normalization of precarity is presented as a questioning element of the notion of disaster in both the most traditional meaning of being an event related to a biophysics threat as well as being a multidimensional political phenomenon

resulting from social processes of risk production. In the space at risk, the notion of normalization of precarity questions the exceptionality character of these phenomena that is characteristic of every approach to “disaster”. It is thus suggested that in the periphery of Global South countries, as in the case of the slums (*favelas*) in São Paulo, such a condition has been taken as a normal pattern within broader dynamics of control, domestication and naturalization of difference, otherness and marginality.

Latin America has been living the particular contradictions of the broader process of accelerated urbanization. The climate emergency with increased impacts on the most vulnerable populations compels us to the constant reflection on the way by which our cities have been produced and reproduced as well as on the paths to follow aiming at alternative urban models, fair and sustainable ones. The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs report (UN OCHA, 2020) which has documented the disasters triggered by natural phenomena in the last two decades in Latin America and Caribbean, shows this region had losses of US\$1billion caused by damage in 12 floods which occurred between 2000 and 2019.

Until the publication of the fourth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Changes (IPCC) in 2007, there was an important absence coming to the analysis of the urban dimension linked to the two-dimensional relationship between the climate risk and processes of uneven development. In 2012, the publication of the report *Managing the Risks of Extreme Events and Disasters to Advance Climate Change Adaptation* (IPCC, 2012) contributed to fill in this knowledge blank giving to the scientific communities specialized in themes relating to disasters and development the due place

as legitimate interlocutors publicly recognized in debates about climate changes. With the publication of the fifth IPCC report in 2014 and the IPCC Working Group II report on Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability (IPCC, 2014), this multilateral agency advanced in the first topic including a whole chapter on urban areas

However, the political attention coming to the vulnerability reduction and increased resilience instigates numerous investigations and proposals of theoretical and empirical analyses which leave open the question of social citizenship. Public Policies debates have centered on cost reduction and in the technical and operational measurement of the vulnerability rather than in citizenship matters, quality of life and structural security of populations (Rodríguez de Luque *et al.*, 2016; IBGE, 2019). The transition from a vulnerability paradigm to a model based on resilience makes us question whether the underlying discourse implies, as a matter of fact, the transfer of responsibilities from the international and governmental entities to the communities and citizens (Béné *et al.*, 2012).

As argued by Thomas (2008), the terms vulnerability, fragility and precarity have been inserted in today's vocabulary and have been massively used by experts in disasters. Together with the emergence of the concept of sustainable development in the late 1970s, they have become central theoretical frameworks within the social sciences and, in the meantime, of those life sciences articulated with the notion of resilience. Aligned with Thomas (2008), the present article considers matters that appear from these translations from one to another science and political field as ways of a knowledge circulation apparently parallel to the reality of slums (favelas), informal settlements, and peripheries.

This refers not only to the Brazilian context but also to the Global South countries in general where there is a concentration of big challenges coming to accessibility to water supply and sanitation as well as to contagious diseases, unemployment, and fragility of livelihoods all duly flagged in literature for over 30 years. The notion of “the normalization of precarity” is the reflection of the realization of our impotence to substantially transform the structures of economic domination which feed on the urban precarity as broadly analyzed by the critical urban theory throughout the last two decades with emphasis on processes of space appropriation and dispossession (Brenner *et al.*, 2012).

4. Methodology

In *Spatializing culture: the ethnography of space and place*, the work that inspires the methodology applied in the present work, Setha Low (2017) emphasizes the power of ethnography for the comprehension of what is hidden in the marginalization of society, all that quantitative data cannot reveal. The author points out this method as a means to question what is covered up to make this appear as obvious. Low's proposal to use the ethnography method for the space and place comprehension considers that this hybridization allows the generation of a detailed comprehension of biases such as inequalities and ways of social exclusion. It also considers that a more horizontal-oriented relationship between the researcher and the residents allows the self-understanding of the places where they live, work, exchange economically and socialize (Low, 2017).

The ethnographic method is settled on strict

protocols and sequences that need to be respected in order to guarantee rigor and success (Cefaï, 2013). This approach, or lens as Low would say, allows seeing relations between the risk of disasters and the energy space which make up the empirical foundation of this work. These relations were not initially contemplated as an object for the main analysis although they soon revealed their centrality. This article presents the results of a first phase of interdisciplinary research that contemplates an ethnographic follow-up work of about 15 family units and a quantitative component by means of a survey with questionnaires for 500 family units. This article is based on a component of the study that puts together the results of the ethnography of the energy space, six months of weekly presence (or fortnightly presence depending on several climate and social factors) in the community, and in-depth interviews with six residents of Vila Nova Esperança, apart from frequent conversations with Lia Esperança, the local community leader. The data collection of the ethnographic of the energy space was carried out between September 2021 and March 2022. The research has observed the required criteria by University of São Paulo coming to the presentation of a data management plan which includes a component on research ethics, treatment of identities and risks that it may pose to residents and people in general.

5. The space at risk

The notion of *space at risk* is the result of the fusion of classic elements in the literature about disaster risk management, and of the tradition of social science and technology studies (STS) together

with the production in the field of Latin American political ecology. In Latin America, the concept of territory is given by the idea that place and culture are inseparable. Thus this is very different from the Anglo-Saxonic idea of *landscape* which emphasizes the physical geography dimension of places (Moreira *et al.*, 2020). From STS the concept of socio-technical configuration (Jasanoff, 2004; Jasanoff & Kim, 2013) contributes articulating the notion of *the social* as the result of a combination between materiality (for instance, the power infrastructure or the existence of a given risk of landslide) and the way how both the forms of life and the narratives of power over them are articulated with the materiality itself (it is not normal to live in slums/*favelas*, therefore, these have to be removed.) From the systematization of the ethnographic notes, this is based on this combination that the voices that indirectly speak out in this article reveal the indissolubility among life, space and risk.

My name is MLAS, but everybody knows me as Lia. I am from the countryside of Bahia, from a city called Itaberaba. In this city to today there is no *favela* (slum). There, a poorer person who has no conditions to afford building a brick house builds a *pau a pique* one (translation note: *pau a pique* houses are rudimentary houses made of mud and straw or sticks). This is a sustainable way both for the nature and your pocket since it's very low cost and so fits it. (Siqueira *et al.*, 2020, p. 44).

In this part of the interview dedicated to the memory of her arrival in Vila Nova Esperança, Lia's narrative presents a set of categories that, as if they were the result of the work of a true painting brush, draws the main lines of a scenario marked by major socio-spatial fractures typical of the periphery of

São Paulo metropolitan area. A first opposition sees, on the one hand, her hometown, Itaberaba – a place marked by the presence of extreme poverty – and, on the other hand, the scenario of Vila Nova Esperança, implicitly accompanied by a set of elements that are the expression of risk and precarity. As a second opposition there is at one of the extremes the big city – although it is not expressly spoken of in these terms, a territory of wealth and opportunities which, indirectly, reveals all the magnitude of the socio-spatial inequality, income distribution, opportunities and access to social rights. At the other extreme, the periphery the place where there is, absolutely, poverty, misery, and struggles for space and decent housing summoned in the narrative with all the revealing strength of injustice.

Memory is the transversal element to these two oppositions, as well as the evocative factor providing, simultaneously, continuity to what would otherwise be time and space fractures. On one side it is possible to note that she misses that condition of life with dignity by means of the memory she has of that life time in her hometown even being in the midst of poverty. On the other side, the narrative emphasizes the unfinished search for new ways and configurations so that this dignity is reaffirmed in the new context of the periphery in São Paulo. Beyond any element of idealization of her hometown, Vila Nova Esperança, as told by Lia, is a space where lives and bodies are at risk. Risk weakens people's livelihoods; it consumes the resources and wears out energy. Therefore, as approached in the vast literature on the social impacts of disaster (Blaikie *et al.*, 1994) and the challenges posed by adaptation to climate changes (Romero-Lankao *et al.*, 2014), risk becomes a political element. Its comprehension is quintessential to unveil the rea-

sons which prevent, indisputably, the translation of IPCC centralist views and its unique discourse on disaster adaptation and management to the Global South countries peripheries. In the interview that the author carried out with other two colleagues for the scientific magazine *Socio-Environmental Dialogues* (*Revista Diálogos Socioambientais*, in a free translation), Lia remembers:

I arrived in Vila Nova Esperança in 2003 and, in 2006, I discovered that there was a process to remove all the community families going on because this is an environmental preservation space. In 2010, I was elected the association president because here there is an election for the community to choose their community leaders. In 2010, I replaced a former association leader and from then on I have started looking into the reason why that process aimed to remove the community. The reason, according to them, was that the environmental prosecutor said that we were having a negative impact on the environment and this was the motivation for them to want to remove the families from here. (Siqueira *et al.*, 2020, p. 44).

On the website of the São Paulo State Secretariat for Infrastructure and Environment (SIMA, Secretaria de Infraestrutura e Meio Ambiente do Estado de São Paulo), the history of Jequitibá Park is marked by a socio-environmental conflict pre-existent to Lia's arrival in Vila Nova Esperança. The context was already much more complex and articulated. The charges brought against the residents for being considered a threat to the environment seem to be a result both of cultural stigma and the treatment given by the institutions and wealthier social classes to the communities who struggle for housing occupying urban spaces in Brazil (Cardoso e Denaldi, 2018). The charges are also based on the vested interest seeking to increase the availability

of free soil for urban redevelopment, that is, a potential source of financial profit in a city where the value of soil is one of the highest in Latin America (Rolnik, 2015).

According to SIMA’s narrative, the key moment for the conflict articulation occurred in 2001 when CDHU acquired the land, then called TIZO Farm, aiming at turning the area into a place for popular affordable housing (SIMA, 2019). The characterization of successive tension about the future of the lands is also detailed in SIMA (2019) which presents a typical narrative of institutional environmentalism. The latter presents itself as being sensitive and attentive to wildlife, biomes and the preservation of these as defined in the literature

dominated by the institutional economy as “commons” but not sensitive and attentive to the human and social dramas (Dietz *et al.*, 2002). Actually, in Lia’s narrative, the role of the virtuous is the one performed by the community and the villains are the ones who consider the community as being an environmental threat and a potential source of damage, a risk, a liability for TIZO Park (aka Tizo Farm). In the quote below, the division between the virtuous ones and the villains is clearly revealed; however, the roles are completely reversed – the Vila community being cast in the villain role:

With the news that the forest would be totally suppressed to make way for new developments, the

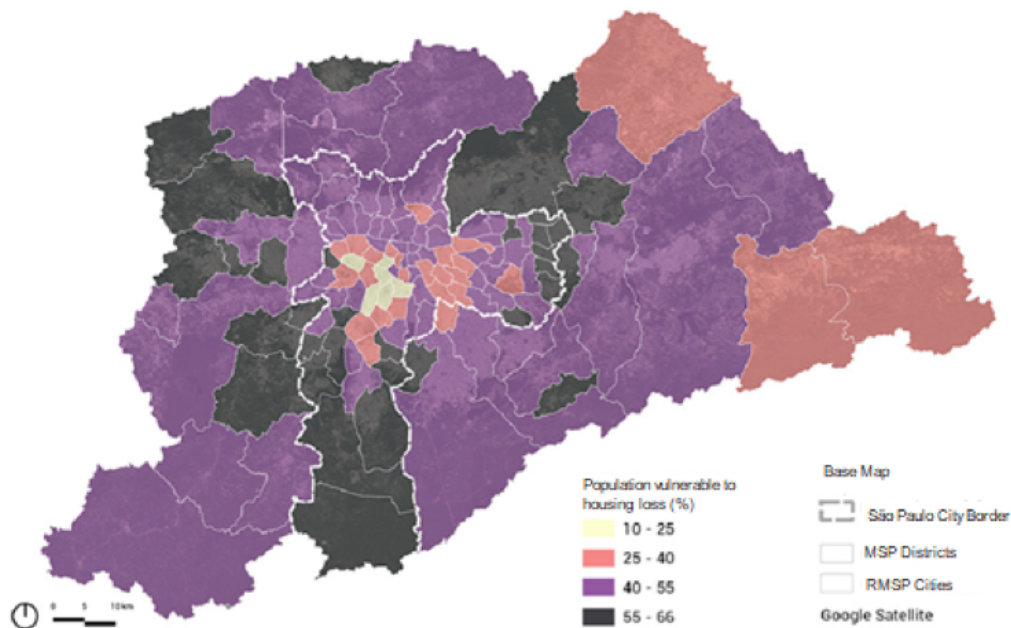


FIGURE 4 – Vulnerable Afro-descendant and dark-skinned population prone to housing losses in the RMSP (2010).
SOURCE: Nakano (2020).

surrounding schools and the community strongly engaged in the struggle to ensure the protection of the area as well as the preservation of its biodiversity. This struggle lasted throughout some years and grew stronger in 2004 resulting in the determination of the adoption of measures to preserve Farm TIZO vegetation and springs, as well as the recovery of the degraded areas, apart from preventing future split of the area (SIMA, 2019, p.1).

As a result of the Civil Action, the Urban Park of Environmental Conservation and Leisure (free translation of *Parque Urbano de Conservação Ambiental e Lazer*) was created by State Decree 50,597 by São Paulo State Legislature in 2006 in an area within the cities of São Paulo, Cotia and Osasco, covering 130 hectares and excluding Vila Nova Esperança area (Capuano Mascarenhas, 2019). In 2012, a symbolic action to celebrate the beginning of the works took place under the responsibility of SIMA, with the planting of a Pink Jequitibá tree, an extremely important tree for the Atlantic Forest biome. Thereby a new name was given to this area: Jequitibá Park.

The urban space and the forced removal processes in the RMSP are socially built and racialized as Nakano (2020) reminds us. The afore-mentioned author has carried out a highly accurate and detailed spatial analysis for to the Removal Observatory (free translation of Observatório de Remoções) work (Moreira *et al.*, 2020). In his *Cartography of the Production of Transience and Dispossession of Popular Territories* (free translation of *Cartografia da produção de transitoriedade e despossessão dos territórios populares*) (Figure 4), Nakano illustrates that the vulnerable Afro-descendant and dark-skinned population prone to housing loses are concentrated in districts in the farthest western and

southern peripheries in São Paulo city (exactly the area where Vila Nova Esperança is located). It is in this region that the urban spaces of São Paulo City are connected to the contiguous cities of the metropolitan region (Nakano, 2020).

6. Bodies at risk

The idea of a body at risk has been explored specially in the scope of cultural (Guzzo, 2004) and intersubjective practices (Albuero-Cañete, 2014) or, yet, in the public health perspective (Morgan, 2004). However, in the field of disaster studies and adaptation to the climate changes, less attention has been paid to risk genealogies (Davis & Hayes-Conroy, 2018). Within the Foucauldian tradition, the analysis of space organization and reproduction dispositifs operated by the urban public policy as ways of control and domestication of subjects by means of (both direct and indirect) control over their bodies still represent a niche relatively poorly researched.

Within the Brazilian and Chilean scholarships, a remarkable exception is Saavedra & Marchezini's work (2020) which rebuilds the biopolitical processes of life control from the systematized evidences in two studies on disasters: the February 27th, 2010's earthquake in Chile and the January 12th, 2011's floods in Rio de Janeiro's mountainous region in Brazil. Both cases show the biopolitical character of governmental actions during the emergency. The latter ranges from matters relating life management (restriction to access to the original housing for the ones hit by the tragedy) to the cultural production of the stigma and the establishment of devices which oblige people either to stay in places or move along routes or compulsory stops in order to maintain state

control on people's health or, due to the housing typology imposed by resettlement processes, to remain in places such as temporary shelters. This biopower reaches the imposition of limitations on free commuting and access to life and memory spaces through the creation of high-risk zones as well as limited and controlled access. In these dispositifs, gender, racial, and social diversity stand out for the violence and extreme rigor in the application of the measures in the processes observed in Chile and in Brazil (Saavedra & Marchezini, 2020). Such a form of governmentality, after Foucault, also applies to the interpretation of the Vila Nova Esperança case in the relation to their residents and their struggle against the institutions throughout the processes through which they seek to reaffirm their right to stay while facing the multiple facets of risk as illustrated throughout this work.

According to the conceptual contributions and the examples presented in this section, the notion of space is used as a socially-built functional dispositif for control purposes (Foucault, 2008). On these premises, I try to emphasize how the materiality of the spatial precarity in the peripheries of Global South countries, such as in the Brazilian slums (*favelas*), exposes a set of non-explicit and profoundly politically-oriented purposes whose objective is to expel (Sassen, 2014) and segregate (Gama Torres *et al.*, 2003). In other words, taken as a whole, risk management, as well as territorial and urban infrastructure public policies consists of a dispositif. The latter operates as an enclosing and controlling factor on people deployed within a space marked by a territory, and an element of risk normalization.

As such, this dispositif not only reaches people's physical bodies but also their psychological dimensions on a daily-life basis in which risk is a

constant in space and throughout time despite life histories being absolutely dynamic and changing (Albrecht *et al.*, 2007).

Therefore, the use of the notion of risk employed here overcomes the perspective of classic approaches to disaster risk management. According to that classic view, risk is something that breaks with normality, something extraordinary, as stated by classic authors who studied disasters (Lavell, 2012), a perspective still widely used in the current comprehension of the relation between disasters and climate changes. Figure 5 presents an area in Vila Nova Esperança where the constructions are more recent compared to the oldest area of the district located on the main street, Eiras Garcia Ave. (along the superior margin of the map represented in Figure 3). In the most recent area, housing is mostly the result of self-building processes, urban furniture is precarious, and electricity supply connections are illegal, mostly precarious and improvised.

Social vulnerability is not compartmentalized. Talking about the economic dimension or about infrastructure in a separate way could serve us, academics, as an element of analysis. But in people's lives the assets and resources as well as the processes that determine the decreasing, weakening and exhaustion of them are interconnected. Figure 6 represents what is informally defined as a "hotwire" power supply, an illegal electrical connection. This is just the exterior image of a much more complex process of social vulnerability and of a risky social construction. Similarly as described above in Vila Nova Esperança, the precarity of economic forms of support exposes the family units to institutional risks related to potential sanctions and accidents that may bring serious impacts on people's health besides representing a form of extended impact



FIGURE 5 – Informal electrical connections in Vila Nova Esperança.
SOURCE: the author.



FIGURE 6 – Informal electrical connections in Vila Nova Esperança.
SOURCE: the author.

(or stress) over time due to poor quality in power supply. This part of the community history is both revealing and scary at the same time. In the most recent area in Vila Nova Esperança, all the buildings stick to illegal power supply connections, i.e., people use electricity by means of a connection without safety standards being followed, at least formally. These safety standards are their right but just accessed by those who enjoy a formal connection. The “hotwire” power supply presented on Figure 6 is proof of all the precarity and risk such an arrangement represents for users.

According to the interviews carried out with two residents in this area of the Vila Nova Esperança, this dynamics seems to be even more terrifying than the serious fact itself of having people and whole families subject to such a precarious access to an essential service for the realization of many human and social rights like health and education. In the periphery reality, not only is poverty a dramatic fact but also the imposition of institutionalized ways of submission and economic vexation in which both the public and private sectors are co-responsible. In order to guarantee the safety of such connections avoiding likely problems, the interviewees told the community has to privately hire technicians who work for public companies at an exorbitant price reaching sums that go beyond 15,000 Reais (approximately US\$ 2,700). Therefore, in São Paulo periphery, life and space exist in a risk context representing normality compared with many other social geographies in the Global South countries. In these, the residents also have to struggle to defend this context at risk so that the situation does not get worse.

7. The struggle for space and place

Lia¹ has arrived in the area in the middle of a process of struggle for the right to housing and to the permanence in the place in 2003. The residents elected her as the representative of the community leadership in 2010. Her discourse highlights this process challenges:

[...]We have to remove you because you are degrading (the space), you are in an environmental preservation space. I thought, but nature was made for people, I went on thinking, why taking nature out of nature? Why not teaching these people to live together with nature[...]if you come and point out a problem to me, you have to bring a “pack” because it is easy to show the problem, it is difficult to teach me how not to make mistakes[...]in 2010 I became a leader, I already knew who was the owner, I already knew it all, and we filed an Interdiction Action against CDHU. On the hearing day, CDHU arrived here early with armed men saying that there was no hearing any longer and that we had to get out of here anyway[...]

The violent action of the removal attempt was followed by Lia's intervention in the hearing despite intimidations as well as in the institutions public meetings until gaining political visibility.

Together with the environmental attorney it began the construction of a transformative vision of the Vila Nova Esperança as an ecologically sustainable territory. In 2011, waste cleaning efforts were organized and supported by Vila residents, some universities and NGOs. Lia had to face much opposition and tensions related to private interests,

cultural habits, and different views coming from the environmental attorney. The next initiative in 2013 was the creation of a vegetable-planting space to reach food security as well as to advance Vila Nova Esperança transformation towards being a sustainable space. Brazil's and Latin America's cities recent history is full of stories like this. None equals the other and all of them deserve to be told because behind the figures there are hidden faces, people's experiences, suffering, and dignity and with all these the memory of those who think they are not prone to being hit by the need of struggling for their essential rights. These experiences can be read from a number of angles. As Ribeiro (2022) points out, Lia's work presented an unusual transcendence.

Under [MLAS]'s leadership, 57 years old, known in Vila Nova Esperança as Lia, about three thousand residents who make up the 600 families in the district in São Paulo western region close to Taboão da Serra City, now live in sustainable ways with regularized power supply and selective waste collection (Ribeiro, 2022, p.1).

However, from the work *Urban Warfare: housing under the empire of finance to Removal Observatory* (free translation of *Observatório de Remoções*), Raquel Rolnik and other members of her research group have pointed out that the removals must be understood as part of a process of structural dispossession by means of forms of violence that are not triggered only by the act of removing itself but also as part of daily violences on bodies (female and racialized). In this sense, such violences

¹ MLAS, known as Lia, name that she prefers to use also in the media and when interacting with researchers from the academic world.



FIGURE 7 – Occupation on the edge of Vila Nova Esperança during COVID-19 pandemic.

SOURCE: the author.

present the traits of collective traumas (Moreira *et al.*, 2020), contribution that is collected here and integrated in the analysis that aims at characterizing the process of normalization of precarity. Moreira *et al.* (2020, p. 12) point out that precarity is not only an element of passivity and marginalization but also of potency, “to the extent that from precarity and struggle transforming collective processes are born”. Regarding the contribution of social sciences to the studies on poverty dynamics from the 1980s

(Chambers, 1989) passing through contributions to the studies on the social construction of disasters and risk (Blaikie *et al.*, 1994) until reaching the literature on the adaptation to climate changes in local communities or to the recent elaborations on nature-based adaptation (Bennett *et al.*, 2016), the theme of the capability of low-income groups to actively engage with processes of great social and environmental complexity is a classic.

Throughout the early stage of COVID-19 pandemic until mid 2020, in the area close to the only public access road to Vila Nova Esperança, young families, couples, and single women with children, mainly, started to arrive. As shown in Figure 7, the new houses are made of wood, with no foundation, or security systems.

Wilmer² knows in details the infrastructure of the community particularly that related to the power supply connections. He has told us how the placement and installation process of the electrical infrastructure works at least under bare minimum security conditions³. Wilmer works at night. Many times he arrives from work and goes to the occupation to check what is necessary to be done in order to guarantee that a house is safe from accidents and fires.

[...] I pass the (electric) wire, even when I do the circuit they don't have to pay the market price. So if they have the amount, they pay me, otherwise I do it the same, I worry about their safety. Sometimes the person gives you 20 or 30 Reais, I do it on the

² The name was changed to ensure the anonymity of the interviewee.

³ Throughout Wilmer's account, one cannot help thinking of the climate change theme, of the intensification of the extreme hydro-meteorological phenomena as well as the considerable distance that puts apart the spaces of IPCC debates and those of the global diplomacy on climate from the realities like either the one here presented or from COP26 priorities that was to start two days later.

weekend when I have time. [...]the guy comes here, he doesn't care [referring to someone who does the initial installations when the occupation space is sold to the occupiers, generally under mechanism controlled by militias, he pulls a 7 mm wire, connects a bunch of houses, doesn't do a calculation, doesn't search to know the potential of anything, and starts connecting all, puts together and we use it, here nobody knows it, oh, I'm going to have a shower now, my shower is 8,660W, yours is 5,300W (...) nobody tells anybody you have to turn off [...]that's the way here, no matter here we don't pay the electricity bill because Eletropaulo (the power supply company) doesn't enter here, but we have to take care, there are dried leaves, there are trees[...]

The density of the information and emotions of the listening in the further reading goes on being devastating. Wilmer's words point out the absence of institutions and the presence of non-formal logics of organization and governance of the living space, reverberating with the potency of an unwanted electric shock. The expression "Eletropaulo doesn't enter here" weighs heavier than 20 indexed articles analyzing and explaining the historical reasons for the denial of human, social, and cultural rights in the peripheries realities being in São Paulo, in Rio de Janeiro, in Latin America, in the Global South countries, connected in the midst of a huge diversity by a fractal that sees the global risks systematically translated into specialized vulnerabilities at the local level.

However, life and social struggles are always filled with hope. That is why the narrative of Lia's struggle conquers as well as Vila Nova Esperança Independent Association's and the residents' have been left for the end. In 2014, after several years of resistance and struggle, and the creation of an organic vegetable garden and its conversion into the

pillar of the project focused on ecological sustainability, the Association was awarded the prestigious Milton Santos Prize. This victory was celebrated as follows on São Paulo City Council Magazine (free translation of Revista da Câmara Municipal de São Paulo):

In this year's edition, Category 1 winner (projects that aim at a consolidation of territorial and cultural rights) was *Vila Nova Esperança Independent Association* (free translation of *Associação Independente da Vila Nova Esperança*) with the project Union for the Urbanization of Vila Nova Esperança (free translation of *União pela Urbanização da Vila Nova Esperança*). According to the president of the entity, [MLAS], better known as Lia from Vila Nova Esperança, the objective of this work is to establish an ecological village on a sustainable basis in the community located in the extreme western region of São Paulo, in order to improve the residents's quality of life. "In our struggle I've already cried so much that I have no more tears. Now we have reason to smile", said Lia, thanking for the Silver Sage Award received on June 24th in a solemn session in the Chamber. She hopes the award will help the community, which has been around since 1960, to urbanize in a better way. "What we want most is not to harm the forest." (Garcia, 2014, p.1).

Beyond the fair celebration and the importance of celebrating a highly positive event throughout a history marked by risk and precarity, writing early in 2022, having followed Vila Nova Esperança community since before COVID-19 pandemic, allows me to reflect on the following topic: Milton Santos Prize has changed Lia Esperança as well as Vila Nova Esperança into a highly referenced case in the media and frequently researched by universities and/or students in São Paulo, Brazil, and even abroad. However, the dispute against SABESP is

far from being settled and the permanence of the community in these lands has never been legalized despite the recognition of the enormous ecological relevance of the initiatives carried out. Nonetheless, similarly, militias control the arrival processes of hundreds of families in new occupations by the community margins in a way that the Vila residents got into a precarious situation that is, in many ways, the continuity of the past.

8. *The normalization of precarity*

The intertemporal permanence of extreme precarity in a situation in which a broad set of human and social rights still waits to be fulfilled transforms everyday life into an endless struggle against various risks of environmental and social disasters. It also operates a deeper transformation, that is, the normalization of precarity as a condition for social and personal existence. Different contributions throughout the last 20 years present powerful and illustrative intuitions and elaborations for the comprehension of such a transformation such as the systematic study of struggles against land colonization by financial groups organized for urban speculation (Rolnik, 2015).

The first element for the normalization of precarity is the constant conflict to stay in the place. For instance, on *Jusbrasil*⁴, among the 17 judicial processes related to Vila Nova Esperança Independent Association, stands out the one number 0056778-64.2012.8.26.0100 between the Association and CDHU, proof of the fact that the

permanence of the community is not guaranteed even after Milton Santos Prize or the possession concessions by SABESP. According to Low (2017), the process of spatialization ethnographic analysis allows a comprehension of the social relationships as being something produced and located in space under the point of view not only physical but also historical, affective, and discursive. For the author, thus,

Culture in this context refers to multiple contingent ways of knowledge, power and symbolism which make up human and non-human interactions; material and technological processes; and cognitive processes including thoughts, beliefs, imaginations and perceptions (Low, 2017, p. 7).

The MMP is the product of an uneven development model that concentrates social wealth and is marked by multiple political crises and economic recessions (Nakano, 2019). It is also the outcome of the uneven production and reproduction of space and environmental liabilities in broad areas with a very high exposure to landslide and flooding risks along with other less frequent disaster typologies equally impacting (Canil *et al.*, 2020; Canil *et al.*, 2021). Section 6 of this article, specially, allows a look that goes beyond a unidirectional comprehension coming to the relationship between the social and spatial processes showing they interpenetrate and recreate each other all the time. The media has produced a simplified narrative of Vila Nova Esperança in which the honest admiration for the social conquers obtained by the community leader-

⁴ *Jusbrasil* – a public portal but with consultation upon payment.

ship together with the organized community walk side by side with a selective characterization of the historical processes and of a typification of the actors as cartoon characters, good and bad, heroes and villains. For instance, in the interview carried out by Ribeiro, the main character portrait, Lia's, is not different from the one of a heroine fighting against a hostile world:

The initiatives led by Lia keep on impacting the community, although not all actively participate in the works. "Everybody benefits from it", says Lia, "even the ones who don't get involved. Because it was by means of this work that people stopped being expelled. And CDHU itself together with the Public Ministry that didn't want to urbanize here, came to us [later] and declared being interested in this", she tells. (Ribeiro, 2022, p. 1).

This is not about diminishing the importance and reach of Lia's work as well as the social and environmental transcendence that is resulting from all this. Notwithstanding, from the points of view of scholarship and the scientific production it is important to relocate the dominant narratives within a more complex context marked by socioeconomic, demographic and urban transformation dynamics which allows a more accurate reading of the socio-environmental conflicts associated with the risks in this area in São Paulo periphery.

9. Final reflections

According to Abram & Wieszkalnys (2013), the empirical analysis reveals the illusory and instrumental character of planning. The results presented here come from the triangulation of the following research components:

- i) historical data related to peripheral urbanizations in São Paulo;
- ii) narratives by the community leadership and people who are part of the community struggling for the permanence and establishment of decent living conditions; and
- iii) the ethnographic analysis of the spatial configurations of the access to power supply and of the biophysical and social risk.

From these overarching results a main consideration emerges: the intertemporal permanence of precarity in the periphery of São Paulo which presents two relevant implications for the contemporary debate on disasters, risks, and urban peripheries in the Global South countries. The first one is related to the critical literature on planning. It is necessary to bear in mind that the institutional architecture for disaster risk management led by multilateral agencies such as the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction is the reflection of a verticality that alternative contributions on the co-building of planning and the participative planning as well as the citizen science have not been able to change. Neither have they been able to disassemble the power ramifications which favor both national and sub-national entities excluding the local communities from the decision making processes on urban destination of the built space, its infrastructure, and budget. The myth of planning is replicated within the technocratic paradigms and ends up being functional for the predatory capitalism, financializing and excluding our contemporaneity (Brenner *et al.*, 2012).

The second implication derives from the contributions by important authors to the contemporary ethnographic and sociological analysis of the glo-

balization in the Global South countries peripheries such as Burawoy (2000), and follows the notion of “global ethnography” proposed by him and his research group. Due to the homologation of the trajectories of the economic and cultural processes as well as the construction of the space in the globalization, local cases do not represent the idiosyncratic and unmatched specificity coming to other cases in this same scale. Otherwise, coming to globalization, the local space, specially in highly standardized urban contexts, is representative of processes that develop very similarly in different places worldwide. In this sense, to say that precarity has normalized in São Paulo periphery is a, not so indirect, provocation for a discussion on the intertemporal persistence of gaps in the capacity of public policies to work out the big dilemmas relating to the access to socially relevant services such as water supply, sanitation, and electricity. The precarity of these services causes other forms of deprivations in inhabited spaces and people’s lives. As Raquel Rolnik points out, we need to remember that

in the same way the urban planning action and the housing policy have been fundamental to expand the borders of the financialized capitalism on the territory, it is also necessary much urbanistic and normative imagination to protect, promote and potentialize these new geographies (Rolnik, 2015, p. 534).

To reach a new paradigm of social protection in the precarious and financialized society which reproduces the social and environmental risk, it is necessary to come to a number of political and pragmatic agreements in the face of social vulnerability. The present system presents high volatility, insecurities, and inequalities before which our time needs to develop a new ethics as well as a new

policy of human protection and security involving all social classes.

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List of Acronyms

CDHU Companhia de Desenvolvimento Habitacional e Urbano do Estado de São Paulo (São Paulo State company responsible for providing affordable housing)

FAPESP Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (São Paulo Research Foundation)

IBGE Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics)

SABESP Companhia de Saneamento Básico do Estado de São Paulo (company responsible for water supply and sewage treatment in São Paulo State)

SIMA Secretaria de Infraestrutura e Meio Ambiente do Estado de São Paulo (São Paulo State Secretariat for Infrastructure and Environment)

TIZO Terras Institucionais da Zona Oeste (West Region Institutional Lands)

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