This article explores transformational change in public policy through community-based governance and the collective design of experience-oriented policy and action. Using a critical-interpretive theoretical perspective, we derived three key lessons in achieving this change from the experience of Paraisópolis, a Brazilian favela made famous for its COVID-19 successful response plan, despite historical state abandonment and overlapping vulnerabilities. The three lessons were (i) proximity coordination, (ii) collective learning, and (iii) affectionate relationality. All three underpinned the principle of ‘community activism’ and ‘deliberative empowerment’, which in turn were both crucial in effecting democratic transformations. Through our case study of Paraisópolis, we argue that transformational change crucially involved civil society engagement alongside inclusive deliberative forums. This reinforces the need to pursue a policy research agenda attentive to sociocentric experiences, ordinary actors and the emotions and values underlying public action.

**Key words** public policy • civil society • democratic transformation • transformational change • community activism • deliberative empowerment • Paraisópolis • COVID-19

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**Introduction**

‘In the absence of a president, a mayor or a governor, we have decided to be our own presidents and to create a specific public policy’ (CAU-BR, 2021). This is how Gilson Rodrigues, the main community leader of Paraisópolis, Brazil’s fifth largest *favela*, proudly justifies a renowned COVID-19 response plan. Paraisópolis’ strategy to tackle the pandemic consists of a quite informal, voluntary and intricate set of actions activated by the community, with little or no state participation, but a significant amount of external donations (from civil society and market partners). Positively impressive results in containing cases and deaths by COVID-19 attracted media and academic attention and its organisational capacity has been nationally and internationally celebrated (Bloomberg, 2020; The Washington Post, 2020; VejaSP, 2020).
As this ‘case of success’ gained space revealing new data, actors and practices, its policy puzzle triggered our curiosity and drew us into exploring its meanings, values and sociocentric dynamics. At first glance, it was a case of strong individual leadership (VejaSP, 2020) and/or community resilience (Bento and Couto, 2021), provoked by the fear of being left out of state policies (Vidal, 2020; Oliveira and Berman, 2021), which, in any case, proved to be meagre and misguided (Padgett, 2021). But the deeper we dug, the more we realised that community mobilisation in Paraisópolis ‘went beyond a response to public helplessness’ (Boullosa, 2020) or to shortcomings in state-building (Oliveira and Berman, 2021). In fact, it was related to the accumulation of meaningful public experiences over time, towards participation, deliberative empowerment and autonomy, despite overlapping vulnerabilities. Microlocal transformations were strengthening the community’s ‘social fabric’ and fostering residents’ engagement, and what we were seeing was just the tip of the iceberg.

With the outbreak of COVID-19 in Brazil (March 2020), Paraisópolis found itself amid a hyper-vulnerabilisation process that intensified the need for deliberation and collective confrontation of growing problems. Reflecting on how Paraisópolis was coping with the COVID-19 pandemic, we soon realised that the way that Paraisópolis’ experience was being portrayed by the media – only in terms of public helplessness and self-made citizenship – was incomplete and unable to answer all our questions. What were the nature and limits of this experience? Who were its main actors? What kind of agency was taking place (how did they do what they did)? Overall, we were interested in digging into layers of meanings and values that could connect to ongoing community changes. Were these changes profound and enduring or superficial and transient? What could we learn with Paraisópolis about transformational change in policy and politics?

It requires imagination and ontological confrontation to escape the dominant theoretical currents and methods traditionally adopted in the policy field, together with the tendency to hierarchise knowledge and policy actors. Paraisópolis’ experience emerges as a paradigmatic case because it challenges state centrality in policymaking, policy implementation and policy evaluation, bringing the potency of grassroots actors and experiences to the fore. Seeing Paraisópolis’ experience as a ‘public policy’ is an effort to recognise different actors and community agency as important components of policy processes. Paraisópolis’ multiple ways of thinking and acting – inspired by different rationalities – led us to reflections on how we might reconfigure what we mean by participatory democracy, collective action and transformational change within the policy field. By looking at this experience through a critical lens, we seek not only to demonstrate how a vulnerable community could set in motion such a complex plan to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to provoke creative and critical thinking, stimulating the imagination of other researchers towards envisaging renewed theoretical-methodological approaches capable of making such experiences ever more visible within the policy field.

Paraisópolis does not provide us with a step-by-step model or successful formula to tackle wicked problems or to design transformational policy. Quite the opposite: it shows us that there is no silver bullet. Through an interpretive framework and cross-reflections between theory and practice, we draw three main lessons from this context-sensitive case: (i) proximity coordination, (ii) collective learning and (iii) affectionate relationality have been key to Paraisópolis’ experience in promoting significant community changes. These lessons illustrate something that goes far beyond the pandemic: Paraisópolis’ success in tackling COVID-19 is related to a ‘community
activism’ and a positive (and almost festive) atmosphere that only manages to emerge amid hardship and take root because this community activism has been brewing for decades. Their strategies do not follow traditional linear-instrumental logics and its ‘public policy’ is not exclusively problem- or solution-oriented, but oriented towards experience. A *turn* that, in Paraisópolis, has proved transformational concerning community capacity building and democracy enhancement, arguments we discuss throughout this article.

Community activism in Paraisópolis was certainly important and necessary, but obviously insufficient in the face of a silent government and historical state vacuum. In this sense, we propose an analysis not of the policy outcome, but of the transformational potential of the community activation and deliberative processes observed in the field, shedding light on the growing possibilities of sociocentric transformational change. Although public policies have been increasingly studied through more sociocentric lenses in recent years, especially in the context of ‘critical policy studies’, such a relation between ‘community activism’, ‘deliberative empowerment’ and ‘transformational change’ still deserves further elaboration. Paraisópolis’ experience carries propositions about governance arrangements yet to be imagined. We also take imagination as central to any change: besides not being an enemy of scientific research, objectivity, or neutrality, it is what ignites inquiry and puts ‘communities of inquiry’ into motion (Dewey, 1938; Brown et al, 2010).

Linking this assumption to a critical notion of policy deliberation and participatory democracy (Dryzek, 2000; Fischer, 2009), we argue that transformational changes (in practice) can never do without civil society engagement and plural/democratic instruments. Rather than trying to define ‘transformational change’, we seek to identify its underlying values in Paraisópolis and to reflect on how transformational change – as an approach, a philosophy, or a methodology (Gass, 2010) – locally emerges when community practitioners engage in collective meaning-making and take deliberation as a transformative (and reflective) learning-acting process. Our research findings flow across the boundaries of different fields and suggest that transformational change is stimulated by experience, ‘action-oriented knowledge’ (Fischer, 2009) and by a kind of ethnographic intelligence, in which ‘public policy’ is understood as a collective, implicated, embodied and territorialised process. It is never linear, nor can it be fully orchestrated or projected. It follows different rationalities at once and to depend upon the proliferation of ‘transformative practitioners’ (Fischer, 2009).

After presenting how and why we designed our analytical and methodological frameworks (the second section), we dig into the case of Paraisópolis, focusing on discursive interactions, deliberative strategies, and the transversality of its instruments (the third section). Finally, we discuss our findings in terms of deliberative empowerment and community activism (the fourth section), identifying three key lessons that we found to be at the heart of transformational community changes in Paraisópolis: proximity coordination, collective learning and affectionate relationality. We conclude by summarising what lies beneath those lessons, together with the limits of the experience and considerations about this article’s contribution to policy practice and policy research.

**Shaping our theoretic-analytic frameworks**

Transformational change literature is strongly related to the idea of action adaptation facing persistent public problems, mainly within environmental studies such as climate...
change. Differently from ‘incremental changes’ (Park et al, 2012) and ‘transactional changes’, Hadarits et al (2017) argue that to be transformational, a change needs to reach and modify the deepest levels of a given system. It reveals an evolutionary perspective that primarily values deep adaptations/changes, putting the focus on empirical efforts to classify changes in levels (Pelling, 2010; Park et al, 2012), often pointing to how hard rare/difficult transformational changes are to achieve. Bringing this discussion into policy studies, transformational change is any kind of deep adaptation/change that reaches the deepest levels of a given socio-political system. Within the policy field, however, this in-progress concept must deal with at least two epistemological challenges: one regarding its ‘nature’ and scope (what kind of change is transformational?); the other regarding its ‘orientation’ (can transformational change point to any direction?). Our critical analytical approach and our interpretive research methods seek to address these questions by bringing two analytical categories to the fore: ‘community activism’ and ‘deliberative empowerment’. Matching a thick description of Paraisópolis’ ‘experience’ – mostly based on fieldwork observations and two in-depth interviews conducted in situ in October 2021 – with an interpretive framework designed in layers, we sought to give sense to a corpus of 31 policy texts or texts analogues (Taylor, 1971).

As Hendriks (2007) once asked, however, what do interpretive researchers actually do and how do they interpret policy? Anticipating that there is no ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach, we would like to add on Hendriks’ efforts to open the ‘methodological black-box of interpretive analysis’ (2007: 280). Ontologically committed to constructivism, we assume that even the deepest structures of the sensitive-symbolic world are susceptible to change. Deontologically, we reflexively assume the posture of active listeners and learners (Peres, 2020), embracing ordinary and non-state actors as well as non-traditional materials as key to meaning making and to understanding policy processes and change. In this sense, we inductively designed an analytical framework rooted in Paraisópolis’ experience. As soon as we started digging into Paraisópolis’ web of meanings and practices, Gilson Rodrigues’ statement caught our attention and became our research thread: ‘In the absence of a president… we have decided to be our own presidents and to create a specific public policy’ (CAU-BR, 2021).

Not only the phrase, but the confidence with which he repeatedly stated it made us reflect on the possibilities of seeing Paraisópolis’ experience as a ‘public policy’. What lenses would be necessary to see and interpret it in this way? To figure it out, we moved across four overlapping/interconnected layers of interpretation: meaning-recognising, meaning-interpreting, meaning-making and value-seeking:

1. **Recognising and selecting provisional pieces of the puzzle** (first layer of meanings): aimed at identifying main themes, facts, data, conflicts and pieces of narratives provided by multiple state and non-actors (journalists, community leaders, artists, academics).

2. **Meaning-interpreting and (re)constructing a narrative** (second layer of meanings): focused on deepening previous reflections, adding on complementary data (including COVID-19 data⁴), problematising issues, confronting the said with the unsaid, and critically interpreting narratives, to fill the gaps and recreate the researchers’ narrative/interpretation (one of the many possible), shaped by our background knowledge and our interactions with different materials and actors.
3. **Meaning-making and dots-connecting** (third layer of meanings): considering the previous findings, we focused on the interactions between meaning-making, actors (who makes sense) and strategies (how they make sense). Through the (re)constructed narrative, we sought to identify meaning changes over time and connections to the analytical categories – community activism and deliberative empowerment – that emerged from Paraisópolis’ experience but found fertile theoretical ground within critical policy studies.

4. **Digging into Paraisópolis’ values** (fourth layer of meanings): at this level, we retrieved all previous interpretations and promoted back-and-forth reflexive movements, to identify patterns, contradictions and Paraisópolis’ policy underlying affections and values: proximity, urgency, trust, solidarity, helplessness, coordination and positiveness.

To those interpretive layers we added other operational pre-phases and guiding post-phases, to pave the way for interpretation and to design the move from our puzzle to our research questions. The selection of texts and text analogues, data modelling, transcriptions, decoupages of written, oral and audio-visual materials, and the mapping of key actors illustrate the phases. Within this framework, we conducted a meaning-and-value-focused analysis.

What do we mean, however, by ‘deliberative empowerment’ and ‘community activism’? In a critical perspective, deliberation is an important part of a democratic theory, ‘but [it] is not all of it’ (Fischer, 2009: 86).\(^5\) One of the strongest strategies of the democratic system is that it can work well in different arrangements and situations, mobilising different strategies and instruments (Dryzek, 2000). Normatively, we understand these strategies as a ‘public system of argumentation’ aimed at decision-making, but not confined within formal deliberative forums. On the contrary, it embraces everyday talking and unfinished conversations as also concrete and valid structures of argumentation (Mansbridge, 1999). Therefore, the quality of the arrangement depends on ‘the engagement of discourses in a broad public sphere’ (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2008: 490) and the quality of deliberation results both from the ability to openly activate multiple actors, who take part in ‘mini-publics’ aimed at building ‘workable agreements’ or ‘meta-consensus’ (Dryzek, 2000) over ‘complex and controversial public issues’ (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2008: 492), without neglecting ‘diversity in values, beliefs and preferences’ (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2006: 647).

By ‘deliberative empowerment’\(^6\) (Fischer, 2009: 245), we mean an intricate individual and collective learning process taking place in discursive interactions and progressively improving community capacity to produce *meaningful* deliberation. It becomes more significant the more it encompasses territorial dimensions, cultural identities, local knowledge, socio-political discourses, conflicts and affections, if it is continuously renegotiated. Deliberative empowerment, in this sense, is both reason and result, process and outcome. It ignites a virtuous circle that is at the heart of deeper and longer-lasting transformations, if these efforts form a dialogue to broader participatory governance systems (Fischer, 2009), a path by which it could be possible to ‘democratise democracy’ (Santos, 2005).

Neither participation nor ‘deliberative empowerment’ can, however, be taken for granted. They depend on the prior activation of a spirit (or sense) of community, of co-belonging. It leads us to our second analytic category: ‘community activism’.

In dialogue with critical studies, we understand it as the political process of a
community that discursively assumes itself to be a collective actor, which fights for itself for improvements (Dryzek, 2000; Fischer, 2009). When ‘community activism’ and deliberation come together, a community of deliberative learners and practitioners emerges, components of a denser citizenship, the meta-goal of democratic deliberation – in a process that feeds back. Thinking of a community activated from within – especially when we problematise its learning dimension – presupposes recognising the agency of ordinary actors and critically reversing the way we look at (and analyse) public policies, as proposed by Boullosa (2013; 2019) through the ‘mirada ao revés’ policy approach. Going beyond classifying decision-making or implementation as ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’, we assume policy processes as ‘flows of instruments, practices and arguments activated by a multi-actoriality interested in defining public problems, and their alternative solutions, as well as in the preservation of public goods’ (Boullosa, 2019: 92). And, if public policy is not only ‘whatever governments choose to do or not to do’ (Dye, 1972: 4), there is a great number of sociocentric experiences and alternative systems of deliberation and governance – such as that of Paraisópolis – that deserve to be further and critically studied and interpreted within the policy field, which contribute to studies on critical deliberative research and participatory democratic theory (Mansbridge, 1999; Dryzek, 2000; Santos, 2005; Fischer, 2009).

Finally, we understand ‘multi-actoriality’ as a diverse and ever-changing combination of actors modelling (and being modelled) within policy flows (Boullosa, 2019). This concept, which runs counter to the idea of ‘multiple actors’ aims to shift the analytical weight of ‘individual actors’ (more common in traditional approaches) to the socio-political nature of a ‘new actor’, a different persona that differs from the sum of individual actors, precisely because it emerges from unorchestrated but dialogic processes of meaning-making, discursive interactions and deliberative empowerment; that is, it is intertwined with public experiences (Peres, 2020). Empirical research on public deliberation helps to shed light on the structural aspects of these territorialised and situated public experiences. In this article, we align ourselves with researchers interested in expanding the frontiers of the policy field and in broadening the repertoire of ‘deliberation’ as a practical and structural way of democratising democracy.

Digging into Paraisópolis’ experience: what they did and how they did it

Paraisópolis is a favela like others in Brazil. It is highly populated, demographically dense and marked by overlapping infrastructural, territorial and socio-economic public problems. It is also the fifth largest Brazilian slum, nationally known for countless tragedies.7 The emergence of favelas and their abandonment by the state have historical and structural roots, strongly related to the Brazilian housing deficit (Valladares, 2005; Castilho, 2013) and the implementation of elitist urban planning policies (Maricato, 1996; Valladares, 2005; Rolnik, 2018). According to DataFavela (2020), 8 per cent of the country’s population faces extremely precarious housing (with no bathrooms, running water, sewerage, or ventilation), insufficient public services, as well as a number of other structural urban problems such as unemployment or labour informality, and violence. This means that 17 million people (of which 67% are black) are scattered in favelas across the country.

When we focus in on the South Zone of São Paulo, however, we are faced with Paraisópolis’ specific reality. With a population estimated at around 100 to 120 thousand
residents, living in approximately 21 thousand domiciles squeezed into ten square kilometres (Maziviero and Silva, 2018; Nogueira and Borges, 2021), Paraisópolis is one of the most densely populated territories in the country, strongly contrasting with its closest surroundings, such as the prosperous neighbourhood of Morumbi, with less than half the density of Paraisópolis (Figure 1). In topographical and socio-territorial terms, Paraisópolis is embedded in a steep slope that prevents the circulation of vehicles in the entire favela and makes it even more difficult to provide public services, rendering the already vulnerable even more vulnerable.

One century ago, the region where Paraisópolis is now located was part of an old farm owned by the Englishman John Maxwell Rudge and destined for the cultivation of tea (Maziviero and Silva, 2018). In 1921, the area was subdivided into 2,200 land shares and, by the 1950s, these smaller farms began to be occupied by Japanese families. The occupation process, however, was hindered by Paraisópolis’ topographic characteristics and its orthogonal mesh, insensitive to the conditions of the terrain. In the 1960s, the population profile changed radically, mainly due to accelerated urbanisation and migratory flows of people arriving in São Paulo in search of better living conditions (Nogueira and Borges, 2021). With the growing surplus population and the lack of state capacity to respond to housing and employment pressures, a larger number of shacks began to appear in Paraisópolis (and other favelas), precariously built over streams or on its banks, obeying no urban or legislative rules, occupying areas that were not of interest to the state/market and threatened by high risks of pollution of the water bodies, flooding and landslides (Castilho, 2013). In the 1970s, following the disorderly occupation dynamics intensified by poor distribution and high-income concentration, Paraisópolis experienced a boom of self-built housing and became a ‘pocket of poverty’ in the heart of São Paulo (Figure 2).

Although it is like other Brazilian favelas, Paraisópolis has its particularities. Its long history of social struggles and community activism in favour of decent housing, job opportunities and infrastructure improvements were responsible for the political formation of community leaders, groups of residents and the youth. These groups have been activating the area and engaging residents in shared public problems for almost four decades, mainly through the Union of Residents and Merchants of Paraisópolis (UMCP) (acronym in Portuguese), created in 1984 (G. Rodrigues, 2021). In this sense, we argue that Paraisópolis accumulated, over decades, micro socio-political transformations that facilitated speedy and effective strategies to tackle COVID-19 in the favela.

Figure 1: Contrasting neighbourhoods at the heart of São Paulo

Source: Google Maps satellite view (printed by the authors on October 16th 2021), on the left; Tuca Vieira (2004), on the right.
When Gilson Rodrigues (CAU-BR, 2021) says that, faced with state abandonment, they had to build their own public policy, he turns ‘public helplessness’ and the need for (self)activation into a discursive resource, fostering internal and external mobilisation. But, beyond a functionalist and instrumental approach, what is Paraisópolis’ policy about? Digging into it, we realised that its success is related to a collaborative stance, built from (and around) the UMCP and the newly created ‘G10 Favelas’, an association of community leaders from the ten largest Brazilian slums. It is also related to a growing positiveness that has been brewing for decades not only in Paraisópolis, but in other Brazilian peripheries. Favelas have never lived the ‘normality’ to which many wish to return and have been struggling to reposition themselves in socio-political/territorial terms, discursively challenging the very concept of ‘periphery’. With the outbreak of COVID-19, old problems got worse and Paraisópolis was forced to develop a survival strategy. The same, however, did not happen in other Brazilian favelas (at least not with this strength and these repercussions), which made us inquire into the specifics of this experience, seeking lessons.

Interpretatively explaining the complex web of actions, however, is not an easy task. In general terms, Paraisópolis incrementally designed a new governance arrangement, deeply territorialised, while resorting to existing initiatives. They gathered different instruments, arguments and practices, with varying levels of articulation and density, reminding us of the critical notion of ‘policy flows’ (Boullosa, 2013; 2019). Even if fragmented, sometimes fragile, and irregular as they developed, these initiatives mutually worked towards the solution of concrete shared problems and the construction of
new community meanings and values. Therefore, its quantitative features,\(^8\) such as the number of projects, or amount of food baskets delivered, or donations, seems to matter far less than the nature of its arrangements, narrative disputes and underlying values in the process of transformational change.

Information about the number of ongoing projects in Paraisópolis is not accurate. Its leaders speak of ten, 12 or even 26 intertwined initiatives co-activated either by the UMCP, the ‘G10 Favelas’ or the ‘Agência Cria Brasil’. What stands out is that all initiatives are part of a discursive network and share common characteristics: they were collectively built, in response to locally perceived problems and opportunities, based on community/territorial resources, related to local knowledge and to already existing action regimes. They also share the fact that they are open to variable interpretations, as they are not formally documented or extensively planned. In addition to already activated instruments, an important number of them had to be reframed for the pandemic context, while others were specifically created in response to emerging problems or as far as opportunities and resources expanded due to increased media visibility.

One way of giving sense to its complexity is through its main operational and discursive axes: the system of ‘street presidents’, implemented in March 2020, the hallmark of Paraisópolis’ strategy and its most publicised initiatives. It consists of a growing voluntary support network, currently formed by 658 residents of Paraisópolis, each one responsible for monitoring and assisting up to 50 residencies/families. It covers approximately 100,000 residents of Paraisópolis (F. Rodrigues, 2021), which illustrates how wide its reach is. The street presidents identify community needs and engage in different strategies: they disseminate science-based reliable information; identify COVID-19 outbreaks; conduct active searches for the infected; provide care, food and goods; guarantee the arrival of help/ambulances in aggravated COVID-19 cases; and establish priorities for care among the residents of their cells. They are mostly women who are socially highly vulnerable and organise themselves to help other people, who are also under precarious conditions.\(^9\) It also functions as an integration mechanism, keeping people close to each other, guiding and feeding other strategies, in a very elastic and resilient way.

Another feature that seems truly relevant in terms of ‘community activism’ and ‘deliberative empowerment’ concerns the transversality of Paraisópolis’ ‘policy’. Instruments and programmes are not aimed at just one problematic situation; they are part of a network of strategies, each acting simultaneously on different fronts. We could identify five priority axes, which often overlap:

i) **Food security**: in response to increasing hunger, socio-economic vulnerability and unemployment (directly connected to axes (ii) and (vi)).

ii) **Health and protection**: focused on producing personal protective equipment and providing private mobile first-aid services, due to the immobility to which the favela is subjected, both in terms of its topography and the state abandonment (directly connected to axes (i) and (iii)).

iii) **Work and income**: focused on job generating through training programmes, for rescuers and brigade members (directly connected to axes (i) and (ii)), and on the creation of solidarity virtual platforms to connect demand–supply within the community (directly connected to axes (i) and (v)).
iv) **Housing and hospitality** given the precariousness of housing and the impossibility of social distancing within the favelas (directly connected to axes (i) and (ii)).

v) **Communication**: addressing the urgent need to keep residents close together and disseminate scientific and reliable information on the unfolding of the pandemic (connecting all the axes).

Although simultaneous, actions respond to different dynamics, and gather different actors. Walking around the favela and talking to its participants, it was noticeable that, even when residents are responsible for one specific action, they end up acting transversely, engaging in two or more actions, interpreted as a tacit solidarity. Decisions are taken collectively, mostly in an organic way, as problems and opportunities arise. In this sense, deliberation processes are at the heart of Paraisópolis’ strategy, guaranteeing its continuity. Hardly anyone can fully explain the project of which they are a part without mentioning other projects, which also reinforces the transversality and horizontality of their governance arrangement. Making sense of each project triggers processes of co-dependency while generating the affection of co-belonging.

At first, Paraisópolis’ governance arrangement might seem quite unstable. Its actors, however, are reasonably comfortable moving between different initiatives. What an ‘external eye’ could interpret as instability is revealed to be nothing more than a fluidity imposed by external conditions, such as the availability (or not) of resources and the different degrees of practitioner’s commitments. The experience is not context-free. Overall, there is an atmosphere of confidence involving strategies and their actors, as well as consolidated local knowledge on how things work in the *favela*, interpreted as the result of historical processes of self-recognition. Concerning project leaders’ positions, they are not fixed/predefined, varying for diverse reasons: the former leader may have found a new job, given birth, grown tired of the task, moved elsewhere. Such turnover, however, does not significantly change the functioning of the whole, what we attribute to a (tacit) pact regarding meanings/values that keep people together despite the challenges.

Very soon Paraisópolis understood the need to overcome the apparent logic of picking up pre-formatted policies from boxes full of allegedly universal solutions that do not usually fit into their reality ([CAU-BR, 2021](#)). During fieldwork, we realise that its leaders truly grasp the complexity of public problems and consciously value transversality and plurality in the design of governance arrangements. Each piece of the puzzle has its purpose and, due to the growing media interest, they have been directing efforts towards communication strategies: describing and branding projects, giving each initiative a proper name, and defining their visual identity, giving increased density to the process.

It is necessary, however, to employ a critical eye and not romanticise Paraisópolis’ experience. In a context of overlapping vulnerabilities and severe scarcity of material resources, the ‘dream’ of creating their own policy has faced fluctuations. We have already discussed *what* resources they were able to mobilise and *how* they were able to put their plan in motion, but, before moving on to connecting these dots to our analytical categories – ‘community activism’ and ‘deliberative empowerment’ – we briefly highlight its limits. On the one hand, there is no doubt that Paraisópolis has achieved well-desired public consequences; on the other hand, neither the experience nor its consequences are linear. Things ran well in the first six months of the pandemic, but by the end of August 2020, COVID-19 deaths had jumped from 16 to 54 per
100,000 inhabitants (Agência Brasil, 2020; Instituto Polis, 2020). Used to instability, Paraisópolis drew from their experience a ‘response pattern’ to discursively reinforce the bonds and efforts already mobilised, even though they are aware that their vulnerabilities will stand in the way of the profound changes which they look for. As Fischer (2009) suggests, to be thoroughly transformational, this experience would have to be inserted in broader governance arrangements, sustained by similar values, and publicly and/or privately financed. More than that, its community actors – those who had the main responsibility for the continuous meaning-(re)making that keeps the policy and the community activated – would have to be able to engage without having to worry about whether they would have enough to eat the following day. The intertwined processes of community activation and deliberative empowerment, therefore, were key in Paraisópolis’ experience, but obviously insufficient in the face of a silent government and a crisis that has dragged on for so long.

As a last note, the scarcity of resources did not dissolve the ties between residents, arguments and affections in Paraisópolis. On the contrary: it stimulated better resource use and deepened local engagement, fuelled by the pride of conducting their own plan (autonomy) and by a cheerful outlook towards the future (which guarantees a festive atmosphere at the project headquarters). They have learned, in recent years, that keeping the community activated (from within) and engaged in decision-making processes through open and inclusive dialogue/negotiation are their main resources, without denying that it involves high material and immaterial costs.

Building community capacity through ‘community activism’ and ‘deliberative empowerment’

So far, we have argued that, although Paraisópolis’ ‘public policy’ might be considered a great novelty, it is the result of a much older process of community activism that allowed growing deliberative competence based on the engagement/empowerment of its residents. Analysed through interpretive lenses, these processes reveal the strength of the collective dimension over the individual one. Paraisópolis does count on important individual leaders, but their transformational capacity derives from its ‘multi-actoriality’: complex and unstable meaning-making interactions between micro and macro actors. Such multi-actoriality is constitutive of Paraisópolis’ social fabric. Throughout this article, we emphasised this ‘collective actor’, seeking to overcome state-centric analysis, claiming that ‘policies’ are only ‘public’ if their actors are (Boullosa, 2019; Peres, 2020). In Paraisópolis’ intermediary scale of practices, residents ‘think, resort to previous experiences, argue, problematise, imagine consequences’ (Peres, 2020: 84) and reframe their positionalities, over time, through storytelling, shared affections, values and achievements that set the tone for community activation.

Paraisópolis’ multi-actoriality turns into a discursive resource. It managed to shape meanings and to create situated consensus, allowing multiple ways of thinking and acting. On the one hand, these meta-consensuses maintain their discursive coherence and independence from one project to the other; on the other hand, they run within a broader flow of practical and argumentative articulations, within which residents empower themselves. While their deliberation strategies are inserted in a broad system of informal/fluid participatory governance, they are also very present and concrete in the community’s daily life. In this sense, it could not have been born ready-made or in a vacuum. It is deeply contextualised/situated; it activates and is activated by
a dense multi-actoriality, and it is guided by a common set of values. From these features, we derive three main lessons from Paraisópolis, which are aimed at promoting transformational change: (i) **proximity coordination**, (ii) **collective learning** and (iii) **affectionate relationality**, as follows.

**Proximity coordination**

We argued that Paraisópolis’ experience is deeply rooted in well consolidated incremental processes of community activation from within, which was intensified during the pandemic. In the early 2000s, a group of young dwellers, engaged in the student movement, ran for the presidency of UMCP and won by an expressive majority. Their main motto was ‘social mobilisation and dialogue’. This meant not only in-house dialogue, but also dialogue with Paraisópolis’ richer neighbours, especially Morumbi (stronghold of a wealthy economic class). This was the first important movement towards a new posture and to deliberative empowerment, since the expansion of the residents’ associations – either the UMCP or the *G10 Favelas* – led to contradictions, conflicts and disputes that, once encompassed, added complexity and quality to the process and empowered both groups. As stated by F. Rodrigues (2021), ‘there may be some [other] groups, but they are small and perhaps not as representative as this group, you know? They cannot mobilise so much. I think they don’t have that much visibility.’

The first lesson that Paraisópolis offers us concerns the importance of (loose) coordination, which emerges as the underlying value of such ‘deliberative empowerment’. Empirically, it reveals itself through the creative tensions between autonomy and control, a tension which is to be understood as a resource to be explored rather than a problem to be tackled. In the context of Paraisópolis, the formal/traditional systems of ‘policy monitoring’ and ‘policy evaluation’ were replaced by community (self)control, exercised in an organic and affectionate manner by the multi-actoriality itself. Their sense of coordination derives from (and triggers back) proximity: people know each other by name and neighbourhood, friendship ties are strong, and relationships transit fluidly between the social, the personal and the professional. Moreover, different residents’ associations increasingly mix among themselves, in discursive or practical ways, reproducing the same narrative and sharing physical structures, in crossings that are positively absorbed and organisationally exploited.

The value of ‘proximity’ turns Paraisópolis’ policy ‘personal’, but also ‘public’, enhancing the paths of community activism – which rules out any attempt to present it as neutral. The experience is collective, but fully aware of the concreteness of the commitments and consequences in each practitioner’s life. They know each other and they understand the strength of being together, regardless of their place in the hierarchy. Gilson Rodrigues, for instance, has been the main Paraisópolis community leader for almost 20 years: a 40-year-old Black man who migrated from Bahia (Northeast of Brazil) to São Paulo and became Paraisópolis’ spokesperson (mainly external), to the point of being nicknamed ‘Mayor of Paraisópolis’ (*VejaSP, 2019*). This apparent contradiction (as strategies are mostly decentralised) is neither perceived by them, nor exploited.

With the onset of the pandemic, Gilson also became a discursive resource himself, almost omnipresent (physically or symbolically) whenever Paraisópolis’ experience is mentioned or broadcasted. To deliberate complex and controversial issues, they rely
on ephemeral forums that gather variable mini-publics (Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2008) as issues emerge. Someone takes the lead and proposes a locus (WhatsApp private or public groups, physical formal/informal meetings, or a quick ‘stop by’ the association), a deadline, and the problem’s boundaries. Such processes continue to (re)start again, always looking for a new (albeit always unstable) balance. To make important decisions, they rely on proximity, resorting to close dialogues and multiple simultaneous articulations. If, on the one hand, broader perspectives/interpretations might be difficult to grasp, practical consensus is facilitated. In doing so they encompass distinct types of rationalities and values, further promoting the feeling of co-belonging.

To illustrate it, we return to the ‘street presidents’ initiative: residents ‘run for presidency’ through mobile apps (such as WhatsApp or Instagram) and, having their registration validated, become responsible for a ‘mini-public’ of about 50 households (chosen and declared by the presidents themselves). Within this group, they talk, share emotions, make sense of their problems, undertake practical tasks, feel responsible for each other, engage and make decisions involving the use of material resources when they diminish, but also when they abound. This autonomy also generates internal disputes and complaints about resource misuse, as there are no mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the quality of the experiences, and the problems are resolved on a day-to-day basis. Paraisópolis’ leaders explain the lack of such formal mechanisms both by a lack of resources and by a belief in the system and in the residents’ performance (Rodrigues, 2021). Trust is mobilised as a social cement (related to proximity coordination) and a path to social emancipation/empowerment: by feeling respected and trusted, residents increase their engagement and their degree of commitment to the initiative. Moreover, they believe (based on experience) that a ‘bad president’ ends up isolated and leaving the system voluntarily.

Collective learning

The second lesson we draw from Paraisópolis is that collective learning is key to transformational change and especially important for deliberative empowerment. By valuing collective learning processes, they keep residents working together, confident in their ability to transform a challenging reality. They know there is no magic solution to complex public problems and that coping with the pandemic, for instance, depends on acting, simultaneously, transversely and promptly. There is a sense of constant urgency in Paraisópolis’ governance arrangement. Marcivan Barreto, president of Central Única das Favelas (CUFA-SP), is accurate in summarising their vulnerability facing COVID-19: ‘in 10 days, no one had anything else to eat in their homes’ (CAU-BR, 2021). It challenges sectorised or fragmented policy solutions as well as problematising incrementalism, since they cannot afford ‘muddling through’ (Lindblom, 1979). Since Paraisópolis (like other favelas) has never experienced a situation of ‘normality’, they are not seeking a pre-modelled (new) ‘normal’. They seek meeting urgent needs, recognition and respect – more towards collectivism and cooperation, rather than individualism and competition, stimulating transformative learning (Freire, 1973; Fischer, 2009).

Throughout its history, the residents of Paraisópolis realised that major public problems cannot be tackled if not through collective action. In the analysed texts and text analogues, it is evident that inequality is a collectively perceived problem, partly filled with concrete and local stories that somehow synthesise and stimulate learning.
When Gilson Rodrigues (2021) says that ‘there is no good Morumbi, with a bad Paraisópolis’, he condenses different meanings related to the present and to the future of the community. He denounces the existence of two ‘Brazils’ living side-by-side (one rich and prosperous; the other vulnerable and helpless), while encouraging the community to come out of a position of subalternity. In this process, words, images, gestures, expressions, behaviours and slang acquire new and shared meanings, through which learning passes. Evident examples are the concept of ‘potency’ as a value of overcoming difficulties, the expression ‘us for us’ as a value of mutual recognition and cooperation, as well as the gesture of hands crossed on the chest as a value of moral support, not to mention aesthetic codes as a value of racial/community recognition.

Learning, however, takes time and effort. Discursive resources are increasingly mobilised in the community to overcome the lack of other resources, stimulating residents themselves to improve their community capacities and communicative competencies, what conforms a ‘self-transformative learning’ through the experience of deliberation (Fischer, 2009: 12) and through collaborative action. The emphasis on communication, although recent, aims at reorganising the identity of community initiatives, through alternative media platforms, the use of marketing-appealing names, and strong visual projects. If, on the one hand, this has facilitated the relationship with external partners, attracting attention; on the other hand, it may have the side effect of distancing the community.

**Affectionate relationality**

The third lesson from Paraisópolis’ policy is strongly anchored in community activism, in the gradual accumulation of experiences and in emotional-affective frameworks. The affections of helplessness, trust, (self)esteem, solidarity, socio-territorial belonging, collective confidence, are all brought together by F. Rodrigues (2021) when she affirms that if someone ‘is asking for help, it’s because they need it… that’s what we… this is how we see it […] because there’s nothing more humiliating than having to ask [for food/help]’. In other words, Paraisópolis’ public policy is affectionate. And its affective dimension is also what activates empowerment in Paraisópolis, making its multi-actoriality emerge: as far as the community is affected or disturbed, they are set in motion, they are co-moved (Peres, 2020). Through community activation and deliberative empowerment, they reconstruct territorial identities that have long been disowned. The persistent work of community leaders plays a role that goes beyond the instrumentality of the mechanisms adopted to tackle COVID-19. Community ties have been strengthened and a set of emotions and affections have been activated to the point that Paraisópolis’ residents gathered around meanings/values to lead a change, including in socio-territorial belonging and to how they see themselves: they could finally ‘stop lying about their “zip codes”’ (UOL, 2021). A sense of pride, empowerment and respect can be felt, which gives the struggle for rights a positive and almost festive atmosphere that, somehow, is a by-product of the adoption of deliberation as the main strategy of local participation.

According to Gilson Rodrigues (2021), Paraisópolis’ experience is a ‘network of cooperation and solidarity in which residents are agents of their own transformation’, both emphasising residents’ protagonism and the importance of ‘dialogue with [and within] the community’. But in Paraisópolis, the affection of (public) solidarity is not to be confused with blind altruism. Residents volunteer and engage in order to meet
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The needs of their neighbours and their own. The capacity to activate the value of solidarity is also manifested through the impressive network of donations. Although concentrated in the state of São Paulo, the slum received donations from the entire country, which allowed Paraisópolis’ strategies to be implemented in a coordinated way. This was achieved through discursivity, through storytelling: the construction of a narrative capable of engaging even those outside the *favela*. Going beyond the idea of charity, both in discursive and practical terms, solidarity (as well as the donations themselves) is treated in Paraisópolis in terms of a collective commitment; collective designed and financed solutions to collective/shared problems. It dialogues directly with our notion of affectionate relationality, which presupposes the ability to ‘act in relation to [and towards] others, [even if] at the risk of losing’ (Paglione et al., 2021: 26). By giving ‘deliberative encounters’ new meanings, they generate more qualified interactions and the willingness to remain in the game, in this ‘celebration of democracy’, amid a daily life burdened with vulnerabilities and violence.

**Final reflections towards broader debate**

In this article, we reconstruct a narrative of the experience of Paraisópolis, made famous for its successful response to COVID-19. Through a meaning-and-value-focused framework, we interpreted it as a case of ‘community activism’ and ‘deliberative empowerment’, with the potential to offer important lessons for democratic transformational change in the policy field. Our analysis followed the discursive thread of Gilson Rodrigues, who attests that in the absence of a president, Paraisópolis’ residents became their own presidents, creating their own public policy. Although first motivated by the affectations of defiance and irony, Paraisópolis’ experience revealed a complex positionality, in which the values of abandonment and entrepreneurship/activism emerge. More than an analogy, Gilson’s statement is situated in the world of metaphors, the discursive world of ‘as if it were’, rather than in the concrete world of ‘it is’, offering insights on the relations between community activism, deliberative empowerment and transformational change.

Paraisópolis’ experience is an unwritten project that did not pass the ballot box, but is strongly anchored in shared values/meanings, feeding community activism, and connecting the dots of a moving whole that could never have been completely defined *a priori*. It has a collective, implicated, embodied and territorialised nature and its multi-actoriality carries the seed of critical learning: a collective posture built over the years and currently inherent to the experience itself, which is reinforced by frameworks of contradictory values, such as the generally festive atmosphere in a context of deep vulnerabilities. Paraisópolis’ experience does not follow linear-instrumental logics and is not exclusively problem-oriented or solution-oriented. It is oriented towards reflective experience, which epitomises the requirements for building community capacity through multi-actoriality and democratic values.

It also proved to be a helpful case to broaden discussions about transformational change, as it reinforces the argument that transformational change can never do without solid civil society engagement and only makes sense if conducted in the dynamic theoretical and practical context of plurality and radical democracy. In other words, Paraisópolis’ participatory governance offers no efficacy, efficiency or effectiveness guarantees. But Paraisópolis’ residents choose to engage anyway on behalf of the community, feeding back processes that are at the heart of transformational change towards the democratisation of democracy. Its main gain, however, is never
its product – the final decision made – but the activation of transformative learning processes. ‘Doing together’ is the core shared value they have, and they are aware of it. In this sense, what turns Paraisópolis into an emblematic case, worthy of critical studies within the policy field, is its interpretive and value dimensions, consciously mobilised by community leaders as a central resource in its regimes of action and communication. Paraisópolis teaches us that, despite the limits imposed by socio-territorial specificities and socioeconomic vulnerabilities, it is possible to promote community activism and deliberative empowerment through ‘proximity coordination’, ‘collective learning’ and ‘affective relationship’.

In addition to the challenges of building an interpretive framework of analysis for the study of a sociocentric experience, we also dealt with other research challenges: moving fluidly through a large volume of research materials and across four interconnected layers of meanings/interpretation; balancing the relativisation-generalisation of our research findings; and clarifying our epistemological positionality. Experiences such as those of Paraisópolis challenge deeply rooted socio-political structures, pressing for reinterpretations of what the policy field understands by urban policy and governance, social participation, and state action. These community-based experiences, systematically ignored by the state, still deserve wider space within policy studies, which reinforces the importance of a research agenda concerned with the formulation of sociocentric public policies and locally situated experiences, especially those conducted by traditionally marginalised actors/communities. Proximity coordination, collective learning and affectionate relationality, still little mobilised by traditional governance structures, might be at the core of such an agenda, opening up two research paths: one pointing to the importance of ordinary, small and powerless actors bridging with macro-structures of consolidated power (and giving rise to intermediate scales of public policies); another pointing to the importance of emotions and embodied/territorialised experiences in the policy field.

Notes
1 Compared to the rest of the city, according to Instituto Polis (2020).
2 More than a geographically and predefined territory or group of people living in the same location, a ‘community of inquiry’ is formed by those directly or indirectly affected by a problematic situation (physically or symbolically), to a point that they act to collectively solve shared concerns (Dewey, 1938; 1980; Boullosa, 2013; Peres, 2020).
3 We gathered our secondary data through online searches in open platforms such as Google and YouTube using the keywords ‘Paraisópolis’ plus ‘COVID-19’. In order to select our texts and ‘text analogues’ (Taylor, 1971) – that is, a set of new and non-traditional research materials that start to be taken into consideration within the policy field not only to reflect on what a policy means but how it means (Yanow, 2016) – we took into consideration aspects such as ‘relevance’ (number of views and reach of the media promoting the event), ‘temporal-spatial frames’ and ‘actors involved’, favouring events with community participation. It led us to 31 different text, video or audio extracts from council meeting minutes, seminars, webinars, live events, podcasts, audio-visual interviews, debates, institutional videos, TED Talks and journalistic reports.
4 In February 2020 Brazil registered the first cases of COVID-19. By October 2021 Brazil had already reached 21,638,726 cases of COVID-19 (ranking only behind the United States and India, in absolute numbers) and 603,152 deaths, occupying the
second worst place in the COVID–19 death ranking, second only to the US, also in absolute numbers (Worldometers, 2021).

5 Different from a classical view that defines it as a form of government structured by political institutional spaces for equal and free citizens to build decisions, especially if they are encouraged to adopt moral principles (Gutmann and Thompson, 2014), but also with normative concerns about the principles that should regulate deliberative dialogues – such as reciprocity, publicity and accountability – as also discussed by Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (2014).

6 Fischer’s (2009) idea dialogues with Paulo Freire’s articulation between critical pedagogy and empowerment (Freire, 1973), acts of resistance with a strong political dimension. Both ideas emphasise the proximity between pedagogy and politics in a democracy, especially if we understand that deliberative processes are at the heart of democracy.

7 Tragedies ranging from large-scale fires, such as those in 2017, destroying 80 homes in a ten–day interval (Terra, 2017) to the slaughter of nine young boys (aged 14 to 23), who were participating in a funk party at DZ7 (Carta Capital, 2019), a nationally known event that culminated in the filing of the case due to the claim of self-defence, strongly contested by residents (Carta Capital, 2019; CAU-BR, 2021).


9 The initiative started with around twenty volunteers. Its expansion, however, came at the expense of the hyper-vulnerabilisation of favela women. Following the deleterious trend that it is women who mostly engage in care activities and policies (Hirata and Kergoat, 2007; Biroli, 2018), they are 546 out of 658 street presidents (more than 80%), which points both to female protagonism in struggles for rights (and consequent female hyper-vulnerabilisation) and to the ‘feminisation’ of power in micro-territories (Nunes, 2021).

10 Although barely visible, of low quality and inaccessible, residents of Paraisópolis were able to count on some State infrastructure, often located outside the favela, such as public hospitals, universal distribution of vaccines, and emergency aid of around 80U$ per month, in addition to private donations.

11 It is important to emphasise that there are very few barriers to becoming a street president, which also facilitates community activism: living in the favela, being between 18–45 years old, having reasonable accessibility conditions, and no serious comorbidities. Approvals are based on self-declared information.

12 For further detail, see Boullosa et al, 2021 and Peres et al, 2021.

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**Resumo (in portoghese)**
Este artigo explora a mudança transformacional nas políticas públicas por meio da governança baseada na comunidade e no desenho coletivo de políticas e ações orientadas pela experiência. Usando uma perspectiva teórica crítico-interpretativa, extraímos três lições-chave para alcançar essa mudança da experiência de Paraisópolis, uma favela brasileira que ficou famosa por seu plano de resposta à COVID-19 bem-sucedido, apesar do abandono histórico do Estado e das vulnerabilidades sobrepostas. As três lições foram (i) coordenação de proximidade, (ii) aprendizagem coletiva e (iii) relacionalidade afetiva. Todos elas sustentaram o princípio do ‘ativismo comunitário’ e do ‘empoderamento deliberativo’, que por sua vez foram cruciais para efetuar transformações democráticas. Por meio de nosso estudo de caso de Paraisópolis, argumentamos que a mudança transformacional envolveu crucialmente o engajamento da sociedade civil ao lado de fóruns deliberativos inclusivos. Isso reforça a necessidade de buscar uma agenda de pesquisa política atenta às experiências sociocêntricas, aos atores comuns e às emoções e valores subjacentes à ação pública.

**Palavras-chave**
Políticas públicas; sociedade civil; mudança democrática; mudança transformacional; ativismo comunitário; empoderamento deliberativo; Paraisópolis; COVID-19

**Conflict of interest**
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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