An experience of public engagement in a research about health inequalities on Covid-19 pandemic

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The covid-19 pandemic has deepened pre-existing social inequalities in Brazil. It affected more heavily population groups in more vulnerable conditions, like black people, poor people, people living in slums, etc. Based on this, a multidisciplinary team of researchers from Cidacs/Fiocruz Bahia built the Social Disparities Index for Covid-19 (SDI-COVID-19) to support policymakers, researchers, journalists and representatives’ community groups to identify the effects of pandemic on Brazil.

Our challenge was to develop strategies to engage relevant stakeholders during the research processes. We also had to consider the need of social distance indicated by WHO to avoid the dissemination of SARS-CoV2. To overcome this obstacle, we explore digital media and we looked for the contact of representatives of community groups and policymakers who were interested in information about social inequalities and pandemic and who explore data to take individual and collective decisions in their communities.

We maintained contact with 10 representatives’ community groups and 25 policymakers – who work for municipalities or state health secretaries in all Brazil regions. They participated on key-moments of the development of SDI-Covid-19 sharing their daily experiences on technical meetings, individual conversations, interviews, usability test of our dashboard and webinars. We also had a face-to-face meeting with members of one of the community groups in Maranhão state. Stakeholders also received periodically information about the progress of the research by our website and events.

Some impacts can be highlighted after our public engagement experience. Researchers reshaped some features of SDI-Covid-19 and its way of being presented to policymakers, community groups, journalists and civil society. Our dashboard was tested and after the comments of participants, we could improve its performance. Our team and the representatives of community groups decided to register this public engagement experience in the documentary series “Beyond the distancing: dialogues to understand the social inequalities on Covid-19 pandemic”, with four episodes of 15 minutes. The scientific dissemination products were also elaborated ensemble with participants.

Public engagement added to SDI-Covid-19 practices of research more equitable, transparent and ethical. We could validate information, assure the applicability of SDI-Covid-19 by stakeholders and help to strengthen public trust on science.