

Digital Transparency in Municipal Public Policy Councils: A Comparative Study between Penedo and Arapiraca, Brazil

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the work is to comparatively analyze the level of active transparency in the disclosure of information about the Municipal Councils of Public Policies on the institutional portals of the city halls of Penedo and Arapiraca, in the state of Alagoas. To achieve this goal, a qualitative approach, of a descriptive and exploratory nature, was adopted, using digital document analysis as the methodological procedure. The investigation focused on observing criteria such as the existence of specific sections dedicated to the councils, the availability of essential information, the clarity of language, and the updating of content. The study revealed that the city of Penedo has a fragmented model of publicizing information, without standardization and with scattered information, which makes it difficult for citizens to access and weakens social control. On the other hand, Arapiraca showed better organization, with the presence of the "House of Councils," a centralized space that gathers relevant information, although there are still limitations regarding updates and interactivity. The final considerations point out that, although there have been advances in information structure, substantive transparency has not yet been fully achieved in any of the municipalities. It is concluded that it is necessary to improve digital platforms, standardize public disclosure practices, and promote greater technical and political training to strengthen local participatory governance and ensure the effective exercise of citizenship and democratic oversight.

RESUMO

O trabalho tem como objetivo analisar comparativamente o nível de transparência ativa na divulgação de informações sobre os Conselhos Municipais de Políticas Públicas nos portais institucionais das prefeituras de Penedo e Arapiraca, no estado de Alagoas. Para alcançar esse propósito, adotou-se uma abordagem qualitativa, de caráter descritivo e exploratório, utilizando a análise documental digital como procedimento metodológico. A investigação concentrou-se na observação de critérios como a existência de seções específicas dedicadas aos conselhos, a disponibilização de informações essenciais, a clareza da linguagem e a atualização dos conteúdos. O desenvolvimento do estudo revelou que o município de Penedo apresenta um modelo fragmentado de publicização, sem padronização e com informações dispersas, o que dificulta o acesso do cidadão e enfraquece o controle social. Em contrapartida, Arapiraca demonstrou maior organização, com a presença da "Casa dos Conselhos", espaço centralizado que reúne informações relevantes, embora ainda haja limitações quanto à atualização e à interatividade. As considerações finais apontam que, embora existam avanços na estrutura informacional, a transparência substantiva ainda não foi plenamente alcançada em nenhum dos municípios. Conclui-se que é necessário aprimorar as plataformas digitais, padronizar as práticas de publicização e promover maior capacitação técnica e política para fortalecer a governança participativa local e assegurar o efetivo exercício da cidadania e do controle democrático.

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Introduction

The trajectory of popular participation in Brazil is marked by historical advances and setbacks that have deeply influenced the relationship between the State and society. From the colonial period to the authoritarian cycle of the 20th century, decision-making processes were largely exclusive (Pereira, 2008). The 1988 Federal Constitution, in the context of re-democratization, established important milestones for institutionalizing participatory democracy, including mechanisms such as Municipal Councils for Public Policies (CMPPs) (Dagnino, 2004; Santos, 2019).

The CMPPs are collective bodies that aim to promote deliberation between the government and organized civil society in areas like health, social assistance, education, culture, and human rights. When well-structured, they help legitimize public policies and strengthen social justice (Avritzer, 2003; Tenório, 2007). However, the effectiveness of these spaces directly depends on transparency in public management, as established by Article 37 of the Federal Constitution.

Transparency, understood as the clear, accessible, and timely availability of public information, is a fundamental condition for the exercise of social control (Jardim, 1999; Machado, 2019). However, many Brazilian municipalities still face structural, technical, and cultural challenges in ensuring this right (Sallati et al., 2021).

This article aims to comparatively analyze the levels of active transparency on the official portals of the cities of Penedo - AL and Arapiraca - AL, specifically regarding information about the Municipal Councils for Public Policies. The choice of these municipalities comes from the author's connection with both local contexts and from observing their different administrative realities and the way the councils are institutionalized.

The municipalities of Penedo and Arapiraca, both located in the state of Alagoas, have different administrative and socioeconomic realities, which makes a comparative look interesting. Penedo, located in the Baixo São Francisco region, has around 60,000 inhabitants and stands out for its historical and cultural heritage and tourism potential, but it faces structural limitations in terms of public management and digital access. Arapiraca, with around 236,000 inhabitants, stands as the second largest urban and economic center in the state, known for its commercial dynamism and role as a regional hub for public and private services. This difference in population size and administrative capacity makes it clear how different institutional contexts influence the implementation of transparency and social participation practices in Municipal Public Policy Councils (IBGE, 2022).

The study aims to: (i) Check the existence and organization of sections dedicated to councils on city hall websites; (ii) identify the presence of essential information such as composition, legislation, regulations, agendas, and minutes; (iii) evaluate the accessibility, frequency, and clarity of the available information; and (iv) reflect on the impacts of transparency (or its absence) on citizen participation and social oversight.

Foundational Discussions

Municipal Public Policy Councils: Concepts and functions

Municipal Councils for Public Policies (CMPPs) are institutional spaces for social participation within local public administration, aiming to promote dialogue between the state and civil society in the formulation, oversight, and evaluation of public policies. According to Tatagiba (2002), these councils emerged as mechanisms of participatory democracy, established following the 1988 Federal Constitution, which emphasized administrative decentralization and strengthening social oversight.

Legally, these councils are regulated by specific rules for each area (education, health, social assistance, among others) and are structured in a way that includes equal or representative participation, involving members from both the government and civil society. Their role, however, goes beyond just following rules: CMPPs are decision-making spaces that, when properly set up, can significantly help legitimize public decisions and deepen democracy (Avritzer, 2003).

The importance of these spaces is related to their ability to bring citizens closer to state decision-making processes, giving more responsiveness and legitimacy to government actions. For that, however, it's essential that the councils are organized transparently, with broad sharing of their agendas, decisions, and ways to get involved.

Principles of publicity and transparency in public administration

Advertising and transparency are fundamental principles of public administration in Brazil, and they are enshrined in Article 37 of the Federal Constitution. These principles not only guide the actions of the State but are also essential for social oversight and effective democratic management. As Abrucio (2005) explains, public transparency involves actively making relevant information available to society in a clear, accessible, and timely manner.

In the context of CMPPs, following these principles is crucial to make sure citizens are aware of the issues discussed, how resources are used, and the decisions made within these collective bodies. Transparency shouldn't just be a paperwork formality; it should be seen as an active practice of public communication, aimed at increasing access to information and encouraging social engagement (Pereira; Cunha, 2014).

The enactment of Law No. 12,527/2011 - the Access to Information Law (*Lei de Acesso à Informação* - LAI) - marked an important step in establishing public transparency in Brazil. The LAI sets clear guidelines on the obligation of public entities to ensure access to information for any citizen, reinforcing the idea that transparency is a right, not a government favor. Its applicability to CMPPs, although often overlooked, is crucial for strengthening democratic practices at the local level.

Public governance and citizen participation

The concept of public governance refers to the set of mechanisms, processes, and practices that guide the conduct of the State's actions in coordination with civil society and private sector actors. It's a management model that goes beyond the traditional hierarchical logic of public administration, promoting the co-production of policies through collaborative participation (Peters; Pierre, 1998).

In the context of contemporary public administration, local democratic governance involves strengthening institutional channels for deliberation and recognizing the diversity of social actors as legitimate participants in the formulation and monitoring of public policies. In this sense, Municipal Public Policy Councils are central tools of participatory governance, as they create space for sharing decisions between the state and society (Tenório, 2007).

However, for this participation to be effective and not merely symbolic, it is necessary for citizens to have access to clear, understandable information that is available in a timely manner. Transparency, in this context, emerges as an essential condition for the exercise of active citizenship, allowing people to participate based on knowledge and critical thinking (Speck, 2011).

Specialized literature points out that the quality of governance is directly proportional to the degree of openness and accountability of public institutions. So, initiatives to strengthen transparency in councils have the potential to boost public trust, improve decision-making quality, and encourage greater citizen engagement (Matias-Pereira, 2010).

Challenges of transparency in Municipal Councils

Despite regulatory progress and the recognition of the importance of transparency in the public sphere, CMPPs face multiple challenges in effectively implementing this principle. One of the main obstacles is the lack of adequate institutional mechanisms for systematically sharing information. Often, the councils don't have the technical infrastructure, skilled staff, or financial resources to carry out continuous public communication efforts (Pereira; Lima, 2019).

Another important challenge is the way information is made available. Even when data is published, it's often not in an accessible language or on easy-to-navigate platforms, which affects usability and understanding for the general public. So, it creates a paradox: The information exists, but it doesn't serve its democratic purpose because it's not truly accessible (Santos; Marcondes, 2020).

Besides that, there are sociopolitical factors that make transparency harder, like people's lack of interest in keeping up with government actions and the low culture of participation in many local contexts. As Avritzer (2009) points out, social capital and the density of civil society organizations are variables that significantly influence the level of social oversight exercised over the councils.

Informational opacity undermines not only the legitimacy of the CMPPs but also their effectiveness as deliberative bodies. Without transparency, the councils lose their ability to attract new participants, to be accountable to the public, and to meaningfully influence the direction of municipal public policies.

Methodological Procedures

This study takes a qualitative approach, of a descriptive-exploratory nature, focusing on the documentary analysis of content available on the institutional websites of the city halls of Penedo - AL and Arapiraca - AL. The main goal is to look at the level of active transparency in sharing information about the Municipal Councils for Public Policies (CMPPs).

The choice of a qualitative approach is justified by the interpretative nature of the study subject, which requires contextualized analysis and understanding of the meanings assigned to transparency and participation at the local level (Minayo, 2012). The descriptive-exploratory nature of the work is appropriate given the lack of systematic studies on the publicization of CMPP activities in small and medium-sized municipalities (Gil, 2008).

As a methodological strategy, a comparative case study was adopted, considering the municipalities of Penedo and Arapiraca, both located in the state of Alagoas. This choice comes from the researcher's familiarity with both places and the different administrative realities they present, which allows for identifying relevant patterns and contrasts in terms of the institutionalization and transparency of the councils (Yin, 2001).

The data collection was carried out through digital document analysis, focusing on the official city hall websites. The pages aimed at sharing information about the municipal councils were examined based on the following analytical criteria:

- Existence of a specific section dedicated to CMPPs;
- Availability of information about composition, legislation, internal regulations, and contact methods;
- Presence of documents like agendas, minutes, resolutions, meeting calendars, and reports;
- Update, organization, and accessibility of information;
- Clarity in language and ease of navigation for the average user;
- Existence of an explicit time frame in the published information.

These criteria were based on the Access to Information Law (Law No. 12,527/2011) and on academic studies that deal with transparency and digital disclosure in municipal public management (Machado, 2019; Sallati et al., 2021).

The data analysis followed the principle of triangulation, linking empirical evidence with the theoretical and normative frameworks discussed in the previous section. This technique aims to boost the validity of the interpretations and is widely recommended in qualitative research (Minayo, 2012; Yin, 2001).

Regarding the time frame of the analyzed content, it was observed that only the Arapiraca City Hall's portal clearly indicates the period during which the information is valid, covering the years 2020 to 2024. In Penedo, although there are recent records, there's no explicit time organization, which highlights a significant gap in the organizational aspect of transparency.

Finally, it's important to point out that this research is limited to the document analysis of electronic portals and does not include the subjective perceptions of councilors, managers, or citizens. This methodological limitation will be taken into account in the discussions and in the suggestions for future studies.

Results and Discussions

The comparative analysis between the institutional websites of the city halls of Penedo/AL and Arapiraca/AL, focusing on the publicity and transparency of information related to the Municipal Councils of Public Policies, made it possible to identify different levels of institutionalization, organization, and effectiveness in public communication, especially between the years 2020 and 2024 - a time frame mentioned only on Arapiraca's website.

Municipality of Penedo/AL

In the case of Penedo, information about the municipal councils is scattered and fragmented, mostly shared through news and individual publications. Searching for "Municipal Council" on the official website brings up records related to events like member appointments, public notices, and calls, with mentions of the Health, Culture, Environment, Women's Rights, and Food Security councils.

However, there isn't a centralized section dedicated to the councils, nor is there any evidence of systematic records like internal regulations, updated composition, meeting schedules, agendas, or minutes. The absence of these elements undermines active transparency, making it harder for the public to oversee and participate (Jardim, 1999; Sallati et al., 2021). Even though there are occasional institutional mobilization efforts, the lack of standardization and updates of information reinforces the opaque nature of the local public administration (Machado, 2019).

Municipality of Arapiraca/AL

On the other hand, the Arapiraca City Hall portal has a more structured model, featuring the "House of Councils" section, which centralizes the data of the municipal councils. At least six active councils were identified, in addition to the Guardianship Council, with varying levels of detail. Below are the main ones described:

- **Municipal Health Council:** Has a representative composition, legislation, internal regulations, and a meeting schedule. However, minutes and detailed decisions are missing.
- **Municipal Council of Social Assistance:** It has good organization, with members, resolutions, a calendar, and ways to get in touch that are easy to access.

- **Municipal Tax Council:** Stands out for its level of detail, with regular publications of decrees, minutes, and reports.
- **CMDCA and the Municipal Council for the Elderly:** They have rules and regulations, but they lack updates regarding recent activities and decisions.
- **Municipal LGBT Council:** Although it has resolutions and a composition, it lacks data on recent actions and decisions.

Despite the centralized structure and the presence of relevant content, there are gaps in updates and a lack of deliberative records, which limits substantive transparency, the kind that allows for critical monitoring and effective public engagement (Pereira & Cunha, 2014; Avrtizer, 2009).

Comparison between the municipalities

To organize the results, the comparative table below was created based on the defined criteria (see table 1):

The levels of transparency were classified according to the availability and organization of the information:

- **Nonexistent:** Total lack of information.
- **Partial:** Limited presence, no standardization.
- **Moderate:** Regular attendance, with update lapses.
- **Full:** Full presence, organized and accessible to the public.

Table 1.

Difference between Penedo/AL and Arapiraca/AL regarding digital transparency.

Criteria	Penedo/AL	Arapiraca/AL
Specific section of advice on the website	Nonexistent	Full
Board composition	Partial	Moderate
Available internal regulations	Nonexistent	Partial
Data update	Irregular	Moderate
Meeting calendar	Nonexistent	Partial
Publication of minutes and decisions	Nonexistent	Partial
Contact info and address	Partial	Full
Accessible language and intuitive structure	Nonexistent	Moderate
Explicit time frame (2020-2024)	Nonexistent	Full

Note: Data obtained from documentary research (2025).

Table 1 summarizes the results obtained from the comparative analysis between the institutional portals of the city halls of Penedo and Arapiraca, highlighting significant differences in the level of digital transparency of the Municipal Councils for Public Policies. The city of Penedo showed a performance mostly classified as nonexistent or partial, indicating the absence of specific sections, lack of standardization in publications, and outdated information.

This situation reflects a fragmented and not very accessible communication practice, which limits social oversight and citizen participation. In contrast, Arapiraca achieved moderate to high levels in several criteria, standing out for having the “House of Councils,” which centralizes relevant information and makes access to institutional data easier. However, gaps were still identified related to the periodic updating and the sharing of minutes and decisions.

Overall, the table shows that, although Arapiraca has made structural progress in promoting transparency, both municipalities lack consistent digital disclosure practices. These results highlight the need to standardize platforms, improve technical aspects, and increase political commitment to solidify substantive transparency and strengthen participatory governance at the local level.

Critical discussion in light of the theoretical framework

In light of the theoretical framework, the empirical findings highlight the structural challenges faced by Municipal Councils in establishing themselves as spaces for genuine citizen participation (Tatagiba, 2002; Tenório, 2007). The lack of active transparency, especially in Penedo, shows an information opacity scenario that, according to Jardim (1999), directly undermines the legitimacy of public management.

In Arapiraca, although greater institutionalization can be seen, the failures in publishing decisions, as well as the lack of interactive mechanisms, limit the potential of councils as deliberative arenas (Avritzer, 2003; Speck, 2011). Transparency, as Pereira and Lima (2019) argue, should go beyond record-keeping: It requires accessibility, clear language, and regular updates to be effective.

Literature also shows that in contexts with low participation culture or limited social capital, the lack of information can discourage people from getting involved (Santos & Marcondes, 2020). This highlights the need for proactive public communication strategies to ensure a good connection between the state and society.

Both municipalities illustrate, albeit to different degrees, the diagnosis of Sallati et al. (2021), according to which the transparency of the councils is still uneven and often neglected, compromising the constitutional ideal of democratic participation.

Final Considerations

This study comparatively analyzed the levels of active transparency on the institutional portals of the city halls of Penedo - AL and Arapiraca - AL, focusing on the information provided about the Municipal Councils of Public Policies. The investigation revealed significant contrasts between the two municipalities regarding the organization, accessibility, updating, and completeness of the data related to the councils.

In Penedo - AL, a fragmented information structure was observed, with no section dedicated to councils and with scattered, outdated, and unstandardized publications. The lack of essential data, such as compositions, regulations, agendas, minutes, and decisions, undermines the principle of transparency and makes social oversight difficult, contrary to the provisions of the Federal Constitution (art. 37) and the Access to Information Law.

Arapiraca/AL, in turn, shows a relatively more structured scenario, with the presence of the “House of Councils” and basic data like legislation, composition, and meeting schedules. However, there are still significant gaps, especially regarding periodic updates, the sharing of minutes, and the availability of interactive digital participation channels.

These findings support the specialized literature, which points to the persistence of technical, institutional, and cultural obstacles to consolidating transparency in municipal councils (Sallati et al., 2021; Machado, 2019). Even in contexts with a higher degree of institutionalization, substantive transparency - the one that actually enhances participation - is still limited.

Based on the analysis carried out, the following stand out as best practices:

The centralization of the councils' information in a specific space (like the “House of Councils” in Arapiraca);

The availability of laws and regulations, even if only partially.

On the other hand, common weaknesses were identified:

Lack of standardization and consistency in posts;

Shortage of decision-making documents (minutes, resolutions, reports);

Lack of digital channels for participation or interaction with society;

Lack of time clarity in records, especially in Penedo.

Given this scenario, the following measures are proposed to improve transparency and social control in the CMPPs:

Creation or restructuring of portals dedicated to the councils, with a user-friendly interface and standardized informational structure, as Pereira and Cunha (2014) argue, highlighting the importance of accessible platforms for strengthening public communication;

Systematic and accessible publication of legislation, compositions, agendas, minutes, resolutions, and calendars, in line with the guidelines of the Access to Information Law and with Machado (2019), who emphasizes the need for active publicity practices in the era of digital governance;

Continuous updating of data with clear language and visual/ multimedia resources, as Speck (2011) points out, emphasizing that transparency should be accompanied by clarity and effectiveness in communication with the citizen;

Investment in training civil servants and in technological infrastructure to support digital governance, following the recommendations of Matias-Pereira (2010), who advocates the development of institutional capacities as an essential element of good governance;

Implementation of transparency indicators and social monitoring mechanisms, with participation from civil society, as proposed by Avritzer (2003), who highlights the importance of social control tools and citizen participation in strengthening democracy.

As a limitation of the study, it stands out that the focus was exclusively on digital document analysis, without using interviews or direct observations of the councils' activities. Future research could expand the empirical scope by including different municipalities, quantitative methods, and the perspectives of council members and public service users.

Transparency, as a condition for effective citizen participation, remains a structural challenge in the municipalities analyzed. Overcoming it requires coordinated efforts in planning, investment, and political commitment to democratic values.

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