

Advocacy and the role of human rights organizations in the Brazilian legislative branch: *Rede Justiça Criminal* campaigns

Rede Justiça
Criminal
campaigns

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to understand, from the analysis of the work of a Brazilian network of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), how advocacy on human rights issues is developed to defend causes before the legislative branch, identifying its contributions and effectiveness. For this, were observed, the strategies and tactics employed in the implementation of two advocacy campaigns promoted by a Brazilian NGOs network.

Design/methodology/approach – The research adopts the method of inductive investigation with a qualitative approach and uses the techniques of semi-structured in-depth interviews and documentary research. The paper is developed within the scientific field of public relations (PR), uses as reference the critical theory and the rhetorical theory of PR, and is based on the concept of advocacy.

Findings – Some results of the advocacy are observed, such as the greater awareness of political decision-makers, in addition to the influence on the definition of the political agenda and on the action of the political decision-makers.

Research limitations/implications – Among the limitations of this study are the time span for analyzing the campaigns' actions, which could be extended to observe long-term results, as well as the dedication of the study exclusively to the legislative branch since the campaigns also sought to influence decision-making in the executive branch.

Social implications – The results found encourage the strengthening of the democratic environment since it increases the power and influence of civil society in the political decision-making of the legislative branch.

Originality/value – The study showed that advocacy, as a PR activity, increases civil society participation in political decisions.

Keywords Advocacy, Public relations, Human rights, Network, Legislative branch, Non-governmental organizations, Communication of causes

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

To present demands and defend causes on behalf of individuals at risk or in violation of rights in the public sphere: this is a definition of advocacy (Mafra, 2014). The aim is to influence decision-makers (e.g., government officials and parliamentarians) to promote social changes that reverse this situation.

As a public relations (PR) activity, advocacy is materialized in actions such as campaigns (Edgett, 2002). These campaigns seek to sensitize citizens to obtain support for social causes and focus on political decisions that promote changes that benefit society (Motion and Weaver, 2005; Taylor, 2009).

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This paper seeks to examine the participation of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in political decisions. To this end, it focuses on the analysis of advocacy campaigns promoted by a network of human rights NGOs aiming to influence the decision-making of the legislative branch in Brazil.

For this investigation, two campaigns from the NGOs network *Rede Justiça Criminal* (RJC) were selected. They are: “For the end of the invasive body search” [1] and “Prison is not justice” [2]. The first was developed from April to December 2014 and the second from June to December 2017. However, both continue to be brought to the public sphere by their organizers, who use them in specific advocacy actions that involve their themes.

The choice of RJC is justified by the fact that it is a group formed by eight NGOs from three states in Brazil (Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo) [3] that practice advocacy to promote social participation in the construction of the national criminal policy ([Rede Justiça Criminal, 2021](#)). Thus, the campaigns were analyzed at two levels: state and federal. That is because, in the Federative Republic of Brazil, each state has its own parliament (26 states plus the Federal District), in addition to the federal scope, which adopts the bicameral system, comprising the Chamber of Deputies and the Federal Senate, which together form the National Congress.

The campaigns were selected because of the theme and the stage of development they are in. Both have the prison system as their central subject, a relevant issue on the human rights debate in Brazil, a country with the third largest prison population in the world (748 thousand prisoners), and the sixth world population ([Brazil's National Prison Department, 2020](#)). To the restriction of freedom of these people is added the deprivation of rights such as health, adequate food and social reintegration programs ([Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2018](#)). In addition, the two campaigns were active in ended legislative terms (2010–2014 and 2014–2018). The study of campaigns in completed terms is considered necessary, as the target audiences (parliamentarians) change with each election – this is at least partially, as they can be re-elected according to the Brazilian electoral legislation.

For all these reasons, the general purpose of this study is to understand, from the analysis of the work of a Brazilian network of NGOs, how advocacy in human rights issues is developed before the legislative branch, identifying its contributions and effectiveness. Ultimately, we sought to reflect on how advocacy, as a PR activity, reinforces citizen participation in the political system.

To respond to the general purpose of this study, two specific objectives were defined: 1 – to describe the advocacy strategies and tactics used in the campaigns and 2 – to measure the effects of the campaigns on the legislative branch debate to verify the consonance and harmony with the organization’s aims.

The investigation is developed within the scientific field of PR and is based on the concept of advocacy. Therefore, in a literature review, a brief conceptualization of PR is presented from the perspective of the basic theories of the paper: critical theory and rhetorical theory of PR. The role of PR in non-profit organizations is also discussed, as well as the role of advocacy developed by NGOs concerted in a network.

In the second part of the paper, the results of the investigation and their respective analyses are presented. The two campaigns analyzed in this study and their objectives are introduced, in addition to the tactics, strategies and activities developed in the execution of each of the initiatives. Then, we show the effects of the campaigns on the legislative branch debate and the consonance and harmony with the objectives of the organization.

Finally, we discuss the conclusions resulting from the research work that allowed us to identify the contributions and effectiveness of advocacy in human rights issues promoted by NGOs in the Brazilian legislative branch.

Literature review

Society in transformation: critical theory and rhetorical theory of public relations

Edward L. Bernays, one of the academic founders of PR, defined the concept as an attempt to reach public support for an activity, cause, movement or institution through information, persuasion, and adjustment (1955 quoted in [Heath, 2013](#), p. 68).

Studies in the field of PR usually fall into two major paradigms: a dominant one (especially the theory of excellence) and a group of alternative ones (among these, theories of social influence and rhetoric) ([Spinola, 2017](#)). The first paradigm focuses on the PR management function, while the second considers the activity as an integral part of the social fabric, which produces meaning and is an exercise of argumentation and rhetoric. The present paper is based on the alternative paradigms and adopts the references of critical theory and rhetorical theory, which are dedicated to explaining how PR creates meanings between organizations and audiences ([Toth, 2009](#)).

The critical theory of PR is an interdisciplinary approach that seeks to elucidate transformative processes in society. Its aim is to identify, challenge and debate the domination strategies implicit in the social, political and economic structures that limit human potential. It is related to the categories used to understand and articulate social change ([L'Étang, 2005](#)).

[Edwards \(2015\)](#) argues that studies that use the critical perspective of PR serve, among other purposes, to examine the implications of the practice of democracy. According to the author, in deliberative systems, as in parliaments, PR campaigns justify their contribution to the debates when they show a clear connection to a generalized interest of the population and evidence the engagement of the public on the subject in question.

The rhetorical theory of PR focuses on the communication processes that result in shared meaning, which occurs when “each market, audience, or public that has a stake in some matter co-creates meaning through dialogue” ([Heath, 2001](#), p. 31).

According to [Heath \(2009\)](#), rhetoric and PR are based on the efforts that people (and organizations) make to influence each other. Through debate, different opinions considered relevant are presented to interested parties on the topic of the discussion for evaluation.

It is up to the PR practitioner to use rhetoric to present the interpretations of data and facts made by organizations to the public. These interpretations must be accurate, sustainable and consider the mutual interest of all parties concerned with the issue. The rhetorical capacity of an organization is directly related to the impact of its messages and the role (constructive or destructive) that it plays in society ([Heath, 2009](#)). Considered a socially responsible view of PR, the rhetorical perspective recognizes the active role of audiences in creating meanings and allows various entities to become purposeful and influential to one another ([Heath, 2001](#); [Toth, 2009](#)).

[Moloney and McGrath \(2019\)](#) state that PR is an activity carefully designed to influence opinions and behaviour for the benefit of a group or organization. Therefore, it must be persuasive. It should not only inform people, but also involve a “call to action”. Persuasive communication must include dialogue, so that the PR practitioner understands their audience perspective and deals with their perceptions. By constantly recognizing the needs and interests of an organization's audiences, PR professionals can build more persuasive and, consequently, more effective messages.

According to [Taylor and Kent \(2014\)](#), PR “is a communication activity that helps organizations to engage multiple audiences” (p. 384). The authors argue that engagement is a part of dialogue that has a dual role: it is both an orientation that influences the way organizations and audiences interact and the approach that guides the process of interactions among groups. Through the engagement established in conversations, organizations and audiences can make decisions that generate tangible outcomes with mutual benefits to those involved in the dialogue, or even to those who are not directly involved in it.

In order to influence the organizations' audiences, PR practitioners use convincing and truthful messages to persuade their listeners to agree with a certain point of view (Moloney and McGrath, 2019; Reber and Berger, 2006). Agreement (or not) is a matter of choice of the recipients and is achieved through dialogue. In other words, the creation of meaning in the PR process is built by both organizations and audiences at debates in the public sphere. The engagement started in these interactions can generate benefits for those directly or indirectly involved in the relationship (Taylor and Kent, 2014). Therefore, in the development of persuasive messages, PR practitioners must consider the audiences' values, attitudes, needs and interests, establishing, thus, dialogues that result in understanding (Fawkes, 2017).

PR in non-profit organizations

In non-profit organizations, Taylor (2009) points out that PR and rhetoric are used to defend their positions and inform society about local (e.g., community environment, urban planning), national (e.g., political reforms) and global (e.g., climate change) issues. In that way, in NGOs, through debates, PR practitioners allow these organizations to expose social problems to the public and advocate for political change (Motion and Weaver, 2005).

For the advocacy work to be successful in political change, NGO PR practitioners use influence. In the context of PR, influence is about shaping decisions/actions, having access to decision-making and being heard (Reber and Berger, 2006). Effectively, it is developed through the "art of persuasion", that is, the communicator uses words and symbols to structure messages in terms that are attractive to the recipient, with the aim of influencing the perceptions of others through dialogues (Fawkes, 2017). According to Reber and Berger (2006), among the tactics of influence in PR we find rationality, coalition building, pressure, specialized knowledge, legitimation and emotional appeals. Some indicators of influence to be considered are networks of contacts, access to decision-makers and political skills.

Moreover, it is important to bring the reflections of Taylor and Kent (2014) on dialogic engagement in PR actions. Engagement creates new opportunities for each group to learn about the other's perspectives. In a highly connected context, of constant interaction and media overexposure, mainly because of social media, the authors highlight the need for organizations to use a dialogic approach with their audiences. At the same time, this scenario is suitable for activists (or NGOs) to promote these dialogic interactions with organizations and demand engagement for social change.

In the Brazilian context, Peruzzo (2013) highlights the specifics of implementing PR work in non-profit organizations. The author argues that the main goal of organizations of this nature is to evoke transformations that add to the development of a more egalitarian society. This pursuit for social transformation involves a change in the internal procedures of PR in the organization, and the work of professionals requires "engagement and stances that facilitate participatory processes in communication" (p. 96) [4]. In this way, PR work is comprehended within the exchange of knowledge, debates and attempts to reach consensus, becoming a non-linear and collective process of knowledge building. Peruzzo (2013, p. 97) exemplifies this aspect: "Setting up a website homepage, creating an educational campaign (. . .) these are not the exclusive responsibility of the communications professional. The issues are collectively discussed and, from these dynamic, appropriate criteria are drawn for each situation" [5]. In the context of these organizations, PR activity has a holistic and multidisciplinary perspective that intersects and complements specialized knowledge (e.g., social service, law and public health).

Based on this approach, and considering advocacy as a PR activity, we researched NGOs advocacy campaigns that sought to influence the legislative branch. This is because, the references to critical theory and rhetorical theory of PR provide an understanding of the impacts of the activity on society and its effects on democracy (Edwards, 2015; Heath, 2009;

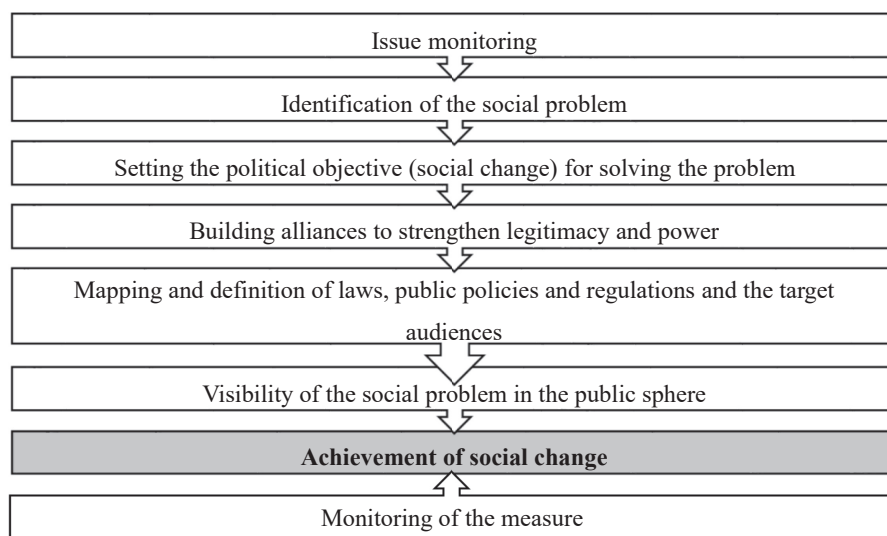
L'Étang, 2005), through shared meanings established in the communication processes (Heath, 2001). Through the exchange of knowledge, debate and attempts to build consensus, PR practitioners allow NGOs to expose social problems to the public, introduce new values and behaviours and advocate a social transformation that adds to a more egalitarian society (Peruzzo, 2013).

The defence of causes in a network: advocacy

According to Mafra (2014, p. 182), advocacy consists of defending causes on behalf of individuals “without a voice and place in formal political arenas, under conditions of violation of rights, moral suffering and/or invisibility on the public sphere” [6]. In a broader definition, Edgett (2002) describes advocacy as the act of publicly representing an individual, an organization, or an idea with the goal of persuading the target audience to support them or accept their point of view. With this, and supported by an extensive literature review, the author defends that advocacy is a central function of PR.

The activity is developed by groups that fight for causes and seek practical achievements, such as the approval of a law, the prominence gained in social media or the participation in debates in deliberative arenas, such as in a parliament (Mafra, 2014; Patri, 2011). Therefore, it consists of systematic efforts that make specific political goals possible (Prakash and Gugerty, 2010). Some examples of these objectives are: to approve a new public policy through legislation; oppose and prevent the approval of a policy proposal; to monitor a policy to ensure that it achieves the intended impacts (Coffman, 2010).

The target audiences of advocacy actions are decision-makers who are responsible for authorizing social change, as members of public power (government officials, parliamentarians) and private initiative (business executives), in addition to citizens (Mafra, 2014; Patri, 2011). The citizens can be mobilized with the purpose of increasing support for the cause and strengthening the demands towards policymakers, changing their behaviour in relation to a given theme or for both purposes.



Source(s): Adapted from Mafra (2014) and Prakash and Gugerty (2010)

Figure 1.
Advocacy process and
its stages

PR operates to empower organizations, strengthening advocacy efforts (Saffer *et al.*, 2013). However, it is important to highlight the power disparity in the relationships established between NGOs and stakeholders. Through communications actions, organizations can persuade policymakers, those who in fact have the decision-making power (Edgett, 2002; Fawkes, 2017). When communications activities carried out by PR practitioners can demonstrate the connection between the topic under discussion and a generalizing interest of the population (or of a group), evidencing the engagement and support of the public, they are able to influence decision makers (Edwards, 2015; Reber and Berger, 2006).

Breláz and Alves (2009), in an exploratory study comparing the advocacy role of civil society organizations in the United States of America and Brazil, concluded that advocacy strengthens democratic processes, as it brings to deliberation process organizations that represent different groups in society. However, in Brazil, there is still a long way to go before the creation of institutional mechanisms for the effective participation of civil society organizations in the deliberative spaces.

Some challenges to establishing civil society organizations in Brazil as participatory actors cited by Brélaz and Alves (2009) are relevant to understand the results analyzed in this study. Among those are: the difficulties to obtain financial support for advocacy activities because they have mainly long-term results; the absence of state policies for the operation of these organizations and their advocacy role; the absence of rules and laws for exerting influence on public policy, which would add legitimacy and transparency to the process; and the struggles and need to act in coalition.

Saffer *et al.* (2013) argue that building organizational relationships networks is one of the ways in which PR can support organizations' advocacy efforts. The authors point out that a diverse coalition of organizations that span different organizational types can create enhanced reach of the activities and bring more people, actions, and ideas that strengthen a position in a political issue. Within a network, organizations operate as a collective of political actors that seek to influence political processes.

By acting in coalition with civil society organizations, government bodies and business sector organizations, NGOs could become stronger and gain legitimacy in their actions (Breláz and Alves, 2009). However, it is important to highlight that working in coalition requires professionals to make decisions on behalf of their organizations while at the same time coordinating and balancing these choices together with the efforts of their alliance partners (Doerfel, 2018). In summary, advocacy is understood in this study as a function of PR (Edgett, 2002), materialized in a process (see Figure 1) and made through a set of activities carried out systematically (Prakash and Gugerty, 2010) to influence political decisions that benefit citizens without a voice in the political arena (Mafra, 2014). A human rights advocacy network is perceived as a collective of political actors that influences political processes (Saffer *et al.*, 2013) to defend fundamental freedoms and human dignity.

Advocacy in practice: campaigns

Advocacy work is guided by long-term and medium-term options, which we understand in this study as advocacy strategies. These are put into practice through short-term options, which we here call tactics. The strategies (long-term and medium-term options) aim to influence public policies and, as such, guide the tactics (short-term options). Thus, the tactics take the form of actions on the ground (Guo and Saxton, 2014).

According to Guo and Saxton (2014), experts have over time created a variety of ways to broadly categorize advocacy guidelines. In common with these categorizations two large groups are identified: the one "within the system" (tactics that directly activate the decision-makers) and the one "outside the system" (tactics that target the media and the population). Based on this division, the authors present a list of 11 possible advocacy tactics. Although this list does not

exhaust all the tactics that can be employed to execute different advocacy guidelines, they summarize the commonly used procedures (see [Table 1](#)).

Possible tactics in the “out of the system” guideline	<p><i>Research</i>: Analysis of specific legislation and social problems</p> <p><i>Media advocacy</i>: communications to the media, opinion articles, building relationships with editors and journalists</p> <p><i>Grassroots mobilization</i>: mobilizing the public to support or oppose a policy</p> <p><i>Public events and direct actions</i>: strikes, protests</p> <p><i>Public education</i>: efforts to inform and educate the public about public policies</p> <p><i>Coalition building</i>: establishing partnerships and networking with other organizations</p> <p><i>Electoral registration and voter’s education</i>: efforts to register voters or encourage citizens to vote</p>
Possible tactics in the “within the system” guideline	<p><i>Direct advocacy</i>: efforts to influence legislation through direct communication with politicians seeking to convince them to support a specific position</p> <p><i>Judicial advocacy</i>: acting through the legal system, such as litigation, civil actions, among other advocacy actions</p> <p><i>Regulatory advocacy</i>: meetings with public officials to influence public policy management</p> <p><i>Expert testimony</i>: provide testimonials/advice at public hearings/ political committee meetings, upon request from a public agency</p>

Source(s): Adapted from [Guo and Saxton \(2010\)](#) and [Guo and Saxton \(2014\)](#)

Table 1.
Advocacy tactics

This paper is dedicated to the practical dimension of advocacy, where we find the campaigns. [Table 2](#) summarizes, without intending to exhaust, some activities that can be adopted within the scope of the campaigns. Below, [Table 3](#) presents some results that may be the result of advocacy work.

Stages	Activities
Monitoring and problem identification (pre-campaign)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation of public policies, laws, regulations • Identification of social problems • Preparation of studies, research • Development of a proposal to solve the problem (proposed legislation, changes to regulations)
Building partnerships and strengthening efforts (pre-campaign)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resource mobilization • Networking • Hiring/consulting specialized professionals (communication professionals, political consultants) • Partnerships with media companies (companies that agree to promote a cause in their content) • Public policy pilot projects • Litigation

(continued)

Table 2.
Advocacy campaign activities

Stages	Activities
Civic engagement (execution)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advertising, press office, social media campaigns • Protests, public acts, petitions • Development of a community support base that helps people affected by the public policy in question to advocate on their own behalf
Engagement of decision makers (execution)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courses, forums, and provision of public service information • Raising support from opinion leaders/celebrities • Meetings with policymakers • Participation in public hearings, conferences
Reaction and defence (post-campaign)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reaction to opponent's criticisms and the political climate • Identification of new solutions • Monitoring the implementation and execution of public policies

Source(s): Adapted from [Coffman \(2010\)](#), [Gen and Wright \(2013\)](#), [Mafra \(2014\)](#) and [Prakash and Gugerty \(2010\)](#)

Table 2.

Short-term results

Strengthening of the democratic environment

Governance: improving transparency/accountability
Civil society: increasing power and improving capacity for action

Change in public view and social norms

Changes in beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours
Reaching new people or groups engaged with the cause
Greater media coverage for the cause
Support of the cause by opinion leaders or celebrities
Increased visibility of the campaign message (advertising, media coverage)
Alignment of the campaign's goal with the fundamental social values

Strengthening of the advocacy's organizational capacity

Improving NGOs advocacy interventions
Greater ability to obtain and use data
Improving NGOs management
Greater recognition of the organization as a credible source of information (invitations to NGO members to be sources of interviews; download reports and materials produced by the organization)

Change in the view of decision makers

Increased awareness of policymakers
Influence on the definition of the political agenda
Influence on the political will
Mentions to campaigns/organizations in deliberations and speeches by decision makers

Strengthening alliances

Increased number of partners supporting a cause
New or stronger organizational relationships
Increased level of collaboration between organizations
Alignment of partners' efforts and the political agenda
Greater ability to identify and understand the processes that will enable social change

Medium-term and long-term results

Policy improvement

Development and improvement of public policies
Adoption of public policies
Blocking public policies

Implementation of changes

Improvement in the implementation of public policies
Execution of public policies

Source(s): Adapted from [Coffman \(2010\)](#), [Gen and Wright \(2013\)](#), and [Reisman et al. \(2007\)](#)

Table 3.
Results of the advocacy campaigns

Method

The present paper adopts as a general purpose to understand, from the analysis of the work of a network of Brazilian NGOs, how the advocacy in human rights issues is developed before the legislative branch, identifying their contributions and their effectiveness. For that, it uses the inductive method with a qualitative approach, for identifying, analyzing and understanding standardized behaviours and social processes (Given, 2008).

The object of study are two campaigns promoted by the NGOs network RJC entitled “For the end of invasive body searches” (active from April to December 2014) and “Prison is not justice” (active from June to December 2017). Table 4 summarizes the specific objectives, as well as the data collection and analysis techniques employed in this paper.

Specific objective	Data collection	Action	Data analysis
1. Describe the advocacy strategies and tactics used in the campaigns	Individual interview in semi-structured depth	Interviews with RJC professionals	Interpretative analysis
2. Measure the effects of the campaigns on the legislative debate to verify the consonance and harmony with the objectives of the organization	Documentary research	News, records of the processing of draft bills, records of public hearings and records of parliamentary committee meetings published on the websites of the legislative houses	

Table 4.
Specific objectives and research techniques

Source(s): Own elaboration

Object of study: the *Rede Justiça Criminal* campaigns

Before presenting more about the method, it is important to briefly present some information about the campaigns studied in this paper, as well as about the RJC, the collective of organizations that promoted them.

RJC was founded in 2010 with the objective of promoting social participation in the construction of Brazil’s criminal policy. The collective, currently formed by eight NGOs [5], executes advocacy actions to make the Brazilian criminal justice system more just, humane and effective. Since its foundation, RJC has already promoted three campaigns aimed at expanding information and awareness of a target audience about criminal justice (Rede Justiça Criminal, 2019). For this study, two of these campaigns were selected.

The campaign “For the end of invasive body searches” was launched on April 23, 2014. The procedure of invasive body search consists of the obligation to remove clothes and squatting repeatedly in front of a mirror to have the genitals inspected by agents of the prison system. Relatives of prisoners on visiting days are subjected to this procedure, which is a condition for the visit to take place (Rede de Justiça Criminal, 2014). The invasive body search is considered torture by the United Nations. Although the procedure is already banned in some states in Brazil, a federal law is still pending approval to permanently exclude invasive body searches from the country’s prison policy. Thus, the objective of the campaign was to abolish intimate searches within Brazilian prisons, through the approval of a law that prohibits the procedure in the national territory.

The “Prison is not justice” campaign was launched on June 13, 2017 to combat the culture of mass incarceration that prevails in Brazil (Rede Justiça Criminal, 2017). The country has 748 thousand people incarcerated (3rd largest prison population in the world), with a vacancy deficit of almost 313 thousand (Brazil’s National Prison Department, 2020). Between the years 2000 and 2019, the number of people arrested increased by more than 320% – while in the same

period the total Brazilian population grew by less than 25% ([The Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics, 2019](#)).

The “Prison is not justice” campaign was developed in two phases: the first one was characterized by a virtual reality experience promoted over four days in a shopping mall located in the city of São Paulo. The activity sought to emulate the atmosphere of a typical Brazilian prison cell: overcrowded and with poor hygiene conditions. The experiment was carried out in an installation that simulates a cell, in which the participants entered an overcrowded space, with a size of 3 m² (32 ft²), with 25 inmates. In this immersion, the participants heard accounts of the mistreatment of people who have been imprisoned for months without being tried or sentenced or serving a sentence longer than the time they were convicted and without any information about their judicial process. The 360° virtual reality video was staged by previously incarcerated people and by actors. At the end of the activity, one of the ex-inmates that appeared in the video talked to the participants about his life in prison. The reactions of people who went through the experience were recorded and later promoted in another video. In the second phase of the project, the videos were widely disseminated on social media.

Data collection and analysis techniques

The data collection techniques used were:

- (1) Individual interviews in semi-structured depth with the professionals responsible for the campaigns to collect information from the point of view of the organization and story of the campaigns. The interviews were carried out with the support of flexible open-question guides, which allowed them to give more emphasis to what the respondents highlighted in their answers ([Croucher and Cronn-Mills, 2014](#)). These interviews were conducted in May and July 2020 with two RJC professionals responsible for the campaigns (an advocacy advisor and a communication advisor).
- (2) Documentary research, in which different documents were seen as communication media that contain significant messages presented in different formats (e.g., text, video and audio) ([Given, 2008](#)). The documentary research was applied in June 2020. Documents about the legislative measures that are the focus of the campaigns published on the official websites of five parliaments were selected. The parliaments are: Federal Senate, Chamber of Deputies, Legislative Assembly of the State of Pernambuco, Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro and Legislative Assembly of the State of São Paulo. The documents collected and later analyzed were: news (text, audio and video), records of the processing of draft bills, records of public hearings and records of parliamentary committee meetings. The collection followed two time spans: (1) the active period of the campaigns and (2) the end of that period until December 2018.

In the analysis of the data collected in the interviews and in the documentary research, the interpretative analysis technique was used, with the codification of messages for the shortening in common categories that allowed us to relate them. The use of this method is justified by involving analytical categories, comparative analysis between campaigns and the formulation of conceptual categories ([Neuendorf, 2002](#)). The categories of data analysis were pre-defined according to the literature review, the operationalized concepts and the specific objectives established in this paper.

Therefore, to assess the effects of advocacy actions in the legislative branch, as well as to verify the consonance and harmony with the objectives of the campaigns (specific objective 2, see [Table 4](#)), two analytical categories were established:

- (1) *Technical alignment/misalignment*: use of data produced and disseminated by the organization as a source of technical information, which supports the decision made by the parliamentarian in the context of deliberation or debate.
- (2) *Alignment/misalignment of values*: use of data produced and disseminated by the organization as a source of information committed to the debate on human rights, which supports the decision made by the parliamentarian in the context of a deliberation or debate.

The information collected in the interviews and in the documentary research is presented and discussed in the next topic considering the contents synthesized in [Tables 1 and 2](#) presented in the literature review of this paper. The analysis of the results is also guided by the content summarized in [Table 3](#). In this way, the most immediate results of the campaign (called “short term”) are presented, as well as the most gradual and slow outcomes (called “medium and long term”).

Results

Operationalization of strategies and tactics

The campaign “For the end of invasive body searches” sought to enable the approval of federal law that prohibits invasive body searches in all prisons in Brazil. In developing this campaign in the federal legislative branch, RJC used regional instruments and spaces for civil society’s participation in the parliament. It is worth explaining that, at the time of the campaign’s launching, there was already a draft bill about the theme being discussed in the National Congress.

The strategy that was adopted was the approach to different audiences carried out through a mapping of interlocutors, which allowed them to identify: (1) the parliamentarians who would never support the initiative; (2) those who already had an agenda aligned with the campaign; (3) and the so-called “midfield”, parliamentarians who do not necessarily defend the same agendas as RJC, but who could be sensitive to the campaign’s theme.

One of these potential partners identified in the mapping was a federal deputy with a very different profile from the parliamentarians who usually support human rights campaigns: he was a member of a conservative party, minister of an evangelical Church and police chief. RJC used the tactic of approaching and seeking the support of this parliamentarian because, for religious and moral reasons, the deputy was opposed to conducting invasive body searches, as the procedure forced women to undress and have their bodies inspected. The deputy was a key interlocutor for the campaign and, later, became the rapporteur of the draft bill that tries to prohibit the practice.

At the federal level, another tactic adopted was the presentation of the campaign during a public hearing on the topic of invasive body searches held in the Chamber of Deputies. On the occasion, RJC carried out a scenic intervention that staged aspects of how these searches are carried out in practice.

Documents (e.g., reports and technical notes) were also produced to be presented at meetings with parliamentarians, including the leaders of the main political parties. Some of these materials were distributed in spaces of great circulation of people in the Federal Senate and the Chamber of Deputies. There was also direct dialogue with federal deputies and senators during meetings of parliamentary committees that analyzed proposals that addressed the issue.

Within the scope of the state legislative branch, discussions at state assemblies were followed on the initiatives that prohibited invasive body searches in state prisons, but a specific advocacy action plan in this sphere was not defined. However, as state laws related to the theme were approved, the RJC started to use these achievements as a new asset, which supported the advocacy carried out at the federal level. Thus, RJC used concrete examples of the states to defend in the federal legislative branch the feasibility of the proposal, in addition to presenting ways of implementing it and its projected results.

Based on the content listed in [Tables 1 and 2](#), shown below, [Table 5](#) summarizes the strategies, tactics and actions undertaken in the campaign “For the end of invasive body searches”.

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Table 5.
Development of the campaign “For the end of the invasive body search”

Strategy/Tactics	Activities
Mapping interlocutors	Mapping of parliamentarian’s profiles, and division into three categories: no dialogue, partners and “midfield”
Expert testimony	Presentation of the campaign in public hearing in the Chamber of Deputies
Intervention	Intervention carried out during a public hearing in the Chamber of Deputies that staged of how invasive body searches are carried out in practice
Direct advocacy	Meeting with parliamentarians to present research, reports, technical notes and other materials
Dissemination of information	Distribution of informational materials in spaces of the National Congress
Identification of new solutions	Use of information on passing state laws to put pressure on the federal legislative branch

Source(s): Own elaboration

In the case of the “Prison is not justice” campaign, an attempt was made to sensitize through a virtual reality experience the public authorities and civil society to the problem of mass incarceration in Brazil. It put direct pressure (by activating members of the executive and legislative branches) and also indirectly constrained (through pressure from citizens) the government to adopt measures that can mitigate this situation.

Since the campaign focused on raising sensitivity and awareness, in the federal legislative branch, RJC sought to insert the issue of public security and the problems related to the significant increase of incarceration in the country at the centre of the parliamentary debate. The tactic used to present the campaign to federal deputies and senators was to demonstrate the virtual reality experience during an event held in the National Congress, inviting parliamentarians to experience it.

As in the campaign “For the end of invasive body searches”, the strategy of mapping interlocutors was used to identify potential supporters, as well as the possibilities of impacting them. Other tactics adopted were the presentation of studies in meetings with parliamentarians. RJC members were also invited to participate as specialists in public hearings in the Chamber of Deputies on issues related to the campaign’s theme.

In the states, the campaign did not include a specific advocacy plan aimed exclusively at the legislative branch, but the virtual reality experience was taken to different locations in the country and exhibited at various events.

[Table 6](#) uses [Tables 1 and 2](#) as a reference to gather the strategies, tactics and actions adopted during the development of the “Prison is not justice” campaign.

Table 6.
Development of the campaign “Prison is not justice”

Strategies/Tactics	Actions
Mapping interlocutors	Mapping of parliamentarian’s profiles, and division into three categories: no dialogue, partners and “midfield”
Public events	Presentation of the virtual reality experience at the National Congress
Direct advocacy	Meeting with parliamentarians to present research, reports, technical notes and other materials
Expert testimony	Participation in public hearings in the Chamber of Deputies

Source(s): Own elaboration

Effects: consonance and harmony with the objectives

In this part, the effects of the advocacy process on the legislative branch debate will be addressed. The aim is to verify the consonance and harmony with the objectives of the campaigns. To this end, we carried out a documentary search in official, public access documents of the federal legislative branch and of the three states of the NGOs that are part of RJC (Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo).

The analysis of the campaign “For the end of invasive body searches” covered 57 months, including the beginning of the active period of the campaign (April/2014) until the end of the last legislative term (December/2018).

At the state level, mentions of the campaign were found only in the Legislative Assembly of the State of Rio de Janeiro. At the federal level, there was a bigger impact of RJC’s performance in the Chamber of Deputies (eight mentions) than in the Federal Senate (six mentions).

It is important to note, about these mentions, that seven of them were made by parliamentarians and five mentions were made by other people who were not deputies or senators but participated in debates at the National Congress. Moreover, two of these mentions were active insertions of RJC. Members of the RJC used participatory spaces granted to civil society in official, political debates to insert the theme of the campaign on the agenda of the legislative branch. For example, one of these occasions occurred during a public hearing held by the Human Rights and Minorities Commission of the Chamber of Deputies to discuss the commission’s work plan with the members of social movements and civil society organizations. At the meeting, the RJC advocacy advisor defended the urgency of banning invasive body searches.

On every occasion when parliamentarians mentioned the campaign and RJC in the debates about invasive body searches, they did it so in a positive light. In other words, mentions were all aligned with the campaign objectives. In most cases (four mentions) it was a technical alignment, in which, the parliamentarians used data, studies and analyses made by the RJC to corroborate with decisions and positions they took during debates in parliament, in the elaboration of reports or in votes of legislative proposals. An example was the use of data from an RJC research by a senator to support an amendment he presented to the text of a draft bill that prohibits invasive body searches.

In three cases, there was a technical alignment as well as in values. In these situations, parliamentarians used information produced by the campaign to highlight not only the ineffectiveness of invasive body searches as a security rule in prisons, but also the violation of human dignity that the procedure represents. One of these mentions was made by a federal deputy when voting on the text of a draft bill on the subject.

As part of the analysis of the campaign effects on the legislative branch debate, it is necessary to identify the results obtained that led to changes in decision-makers. According to [Table 3](#), these changes can be seen in: mentions of campaigns/organizations in deliberations and speeches (e.g., opinion presented by deputy, who mentions research by RJC to support his decision in favour of banning invasive body searches); in influencing the definition of the political agenda (e.g., advocating that the ban on invasive body searches is part of the work plan of the Human Rights and Minorities Commission of the Chamber of Deputies); in the influence on the political will (e.g., invitation to RJC professionals to participate in public hearings on the topic) and in the greater awareness of these policymakers (e.g., during a vote, a deputy mentioned the campaign to defend that invasive body searches violate human rights).

From the documentary research and subsequent analysis of the campaign “For the end of invasive body searches”, all the effects listed above were verified. Along with the change in the view of parliamentarians, there were also results of advocacy that led to the strengthening of the democratic environment, such as the participation of RJC members in two debates in

the Chamber of Deputies and the publication of three news articles on the website of the Federal Senate that mentioned the campaign. This type of activity generates an increase of power and an improvement in the capacity of civil society to act in the fight for political changes.

The analysis of the “Prison is not justice” campaign considered the content published on the parliament’s websites over 19 months, which comprises the beginning of the campaign’s active period (June/2017) until the end of the last legislative term (December/2018).

In state parliaments, no mention of the campaign was identified. At the federal level, there was more presence of the campaign in the Chamber of Deputies (eight mentions) compared to the Federal Senate (two mentions). Out of these ten mentions, five were made by deputies and senators, three were made by people who were not parliamentarians but participated in debates at the National Congress, and two were active insertions of RJC.

The impact of RJC work was evident above all in the Human Rights and Minorities Commission of the Chamber of Deputies, which invited members of the network to participate in four public hearings on topics related to mass incarceration, the central subject of the campaign. The invitations indicate the RJC’s influence on the commission’s parliamentarians, in addition to showing that they consider the coalition a voice of civil society that must be heard in debates about the prison system.

Considering the four invitations that RJC received to participate in discussions in the Chamber of Deputies, it was observed that the RJC used the spaces granted to civil society to insert the theme of the campaign into the legislative agenda. These invitations gave rise to two active RJC insertions in the discussions, when members of the group presented in the debates information and analysis of different aspects about the prison system in Brazil and, thus, confirmed the accumulation of RJC knowledge production.

Almost all the mentions (four) made by parliamentarians were of technical alignment. In these cases, the deputies and senators used specialized information produced by RJC to justify decisions or arguments presented in debates in parliaments. The exception was a mention in the Federal Senate that had technical and values alignments: senators cited a study by the RJC, which shows that the overcrowding of prisons violates the dignity of human beings, to defend the need for more investments in the sector.

From the analysis of these mentions, some short-term results of advocacy work that change the view of decision-makers can be seen (Table 3). These changes, seen in the mentions of the campaign and the RJC, led to greater awareness among parliamentarians (e.g., senators who cited an RJC study that shows that the overcrowding of prisons violates the dignity of human beings), in addition to highlighting the influence of the campaign in the action of parliamentarians (e.g., senator mentioned on his report on a draft bill the contribution of RJC in the elaboration of the document) and in the definition of the political agenda (e.g., invitations sent to members of RJC to participate in public hearings). Simultaneously, the action also results in strengthening in the democratic environment, as it increases the power and influence of civil society in decision-making by members of the legislative branch, while consolidating its presence in parliaments.

Discussion and conclusions

The present study intends to understand, from the analysis of the work of RJC, how advocacy in human rights issues is developed before the legislative branch, identifying its contributions and its effectiveness. In the two advocacy campaigns analyzed, no legislative changes were achieved. That is, there was no result in terms of legislation, but progress in the public debate and in stages in the processing of draft bills on which the campaigns focused.

The purpose of advocacy is to influence decision-makers, which occurred in both campaigns. The influence of the work of RJC was observed in the legislative process decision-making stages, such as in votes, in the presentation of reports and in the elaboration of draft bills. There were also invitations from parliamentarians for members of RJC to participate in public hearings in parliaments. These invitations were also the result of the influence of RJC on the decision-making of parliamentarians, who chose professionals of the group as specialists for the discussions held in parliaments.

The first specific objective of this paper was dedicated to describing the strategies and tactics of advocacy used by campaigns in the legislative branch. Among them, we observed the mapping of interlocutors in parliamentarians, the testimony of RJC specialists in public hearings in parliaments, direct advocacy strategy (meetings with parliamentarians), events and interventions in National Congress spaces, as well as the promotion of informative materials for deputies and senators.

The second specific objective, on the other hand, tried to measure the effects of the campaigns on the legislative branch debate, to verify the consonance and harmony with the objectives of the organization. On all occasions when parliamentarians mentioned campaigns in debates in parliament, in reports or in their votes, they did so positively. That is, mentions were aligned with the objectives of the campaigns. Most of these mentions showed a technical alignment, as deputies and senators used data, studies and analyses carried out by RJC to support their positions and the decisions they took. In some cases, an alignment of values was also observed, as the information produced by the RJC was also used in defence of human rights.

These observations made it possible to verify some results of the advocacy work. In terms of effectiveness, considering it as the production of legislative changes, this study does not allow it to be fully observed, since there were no significant changes. However, it is necessary to consider the long-time spans of legislative processes, which does not allow definitive conclusions as to the effectiveness considered in this dimension. Even so, one can observe the effectiveness in introducing the subject on the legislative agenda and in raising awareness among policymakers. Therefore, it is possible to conclude that these results favour the strengthening of the democratic environment, since it has increased the power and influence of civil society in decision-making of the legislative branch.

Among the limitations of this study is the time span for analyzing the campaigns actions. Even though the criterion of analyzing the campaigns in expired legislative terms (four years each) has been adopted, the draft bills that were the target of the campaigns are still being processed by the federal legislative branch. As highlighted in literature review, advocacy consists of systematic processes, which can continue for long time spans and part of its results are made possible in the long term. The dedication of the study exclusively to the sphere of the legislative branch is another limiting factor since the campaigns also sought to influence decision-making in the executive branch.

These limitations open future lines of investigation, which may allow us to continue to observe the progress of these campaigns in the legislative and executive branches. Another possibility would be to check the implementation and effectiveness of the public policies claimed by the campaigns. More challenging lines could be dedicated to learning the views of parliamentarians and civil society about the campaigns.

The closure of this study can still be accompanied by a series of reflections on the role of advocacy in society. The results observed show that advocacy is a complex process, formed by stages that begin and end with the purpose of defending the rights of citizens, especially those in situations of social vulnerability. As such, advocacy is one of the main PR tools for increasing civil society participation in political decisions. Using this tool is a challenging and necessary endeavour.

Notes

1. Freely translated by the author. In the original: “*Pelo fim da revista vexatória*”.
2. Freely translated by the author. In the original: “*Prisão não é justiça*”.
3. At the time of conducting this study, RJC was composed of eight NGOs from three different states in Brazil (Pernambuco, Rio de Janeiro, and São Paulo). They are: *Centro de Estudos em Segurança e Cidadania* (Rio de Janeiro); *Conectas Direitos Humanos* (São Paulo); *Gabinete de Assessoria Jurídica às Organizações Populares* (Pernambuco); *Instituto de Defesa do Direito de Defesa* (São Paulo); *Instituto de Defensores de Direitos Humanos* (Rio de Janeiro); *Instituto Sou da Paz* (São Paulo); *Instituto Terra, Trabalho e Cidadania* (São Paulo); *Justiça Global* (Rio de Janeiro). Since March 2020, RJC has a ninth member, the NGO *Instituto de Desenvolvimento de Ações Sociais - IDEAS*, from the state of Bahia. As this organization was not part of the group in the analysis periods defined for this paper, the campaigns were not the subject of study at the state level of Bahia.
4. Freely translated by the author. In the original: “*engajamento e posturas facilitadoras de processos participativos na comunicação*” (Peruzzo, 2013, p. 96).
5. Freely translated by the author. In the original: “*a montagem de uma home page, a criação de campanha educativa (...) não são de competência exclusiva do profissional de comunicação. Os assuntos são discutidos coletivamente e, dessa dinâmica, se tiram os encaminhamentos adequados para cada situação*” (Peruzzo, 2013, p. 97).
6. Freely translated by the author. In the original: “*sem voz e vez nas arenas políticas formais, em condições de violação de direitos, de sofrimento moral e/ou de invisibilidade na cena pública*” (Mafra, 2014, p. 182).

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