Social accountability by people with disabilities and barriers to access public services

Accountability social de pessoas com deficiência e barreiras para o acesso a serviços públicos

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Abstract

Social accountability may serve as a viable strength to interrogate and engage in discussion regarding the expansion of access for people with disabilities to public services and for social participatory spaces. Based on a case study of the ombudsman hotline for the Brazilian federal highway police, we exemplify how the barriers present in the ombudsman hotline restrict social accountability. We identify by the analysis of published documents and individual complaints from service users that accessibility for people with disabilities is not a central theme in the strategic plan for the police force. Moreover, the adopted online platform for the service users to submit their feedback or complaints within the system reduces the abilities of people with disabilities to exercise social accountability.

Resumo

Accountability *social seria uma força para questionar e debater a ampliação de acesso de pessoas com deficiência aos serviços públicos e aos espaços de participação social. A partir de um estudo de caso do canal de ouvidoria sobre serviços públicos da Polícia Rodoviária Federal, exemplificamos como as barreiras presentes no canal de atendimento ao usuário restringem accountability social. A análise de documentos públicos de gestão e manifestações dos usuários dos serviços, além de mostrar que a acessibilidade a pessoas com deficiência não era um tema central na gestão do órgão, também indica que a plataforma eletrônica para manifestação do usuário do serviço reduz a capacidade de pessoas com deficiência exercer* accountability *social.*

Practical implications

Inadequate electronic government channels for people with disabilities affect not only the service itself but also the capacity of these individuals to engage in social accountability for their rights. Customer service channels should consider, by design, the specific needs of people with disabilities and other minority groups.

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1 INTRODUCTION

"We are not claiming any privileges, only the means by which we can exercise the rights that are common to all human beings. How can a person with a disability exercise their right to vote if they are prevented from doing so because their polling station has stairs?..." (open letter distributed to the public by the Integration Center of the Disabled during a public event called by the Brazilian Association of Physically Disabled People on July 21, 1980, at Praça da Sé, in São Paulo).

Throughout history, individuals with disabilities have actively struggled to secure their rights, moving away from a paternalistic model toward embracing an assertive stance in advocating for their own interests. In recent times, they have organized into civil society associations, primarily led by individuals with disabilities, to amplify their voices (for a brief historical review, see Lanna Júnior, 2010). The inclusion of disability rights within the Brazilian Federal Constitution of 1988 did not originate from the initiative of the power elites; instead, it was the result of a Popular Amendment proposed by disability rights organizations in response to a paternalistic model suggested in the initial drafts. The Amendment shifted the focus toward autonomy (rather than the paternalistic model), integrating disability rights throughout the Constitution. Such advancements are the fruits of a lengthy history of concerted political and social efforts.

Individuals with disabilities face numerous accessibility barriers that critically hinge upon the nature of their disabilities (WHO, 2002). Modern organized movements of individuals with disabilities acknowledge that societal constructs generate impediments to social participation; whether attitudinal (stereotyping, ignorance, low expectations, stigma, prejudice), physical and spatial (lack of physical access), or institutional (legal discrimination) (Lanna Júnior, 2010). These barriers impede much more than mere physical mobility or access in spaces; they extend to information accessibility (Silva & Rue, 2015), rights to political expression (Evans & Reher, 2020; Waltz & Schippers, 2020), participation in co-production (Armstrong et al., 2019), and democratic representation (Beresford & Campbell, 1994; Johnson & Powell, 2020; Touchton & Wampler, 2023). When compared to the general population, the disparity for individuals with disabilities in accessing healthcare, education, economic opportunities, and political representation is notably significant (Frederico & Laplane, 2020). The United Nations has recognized the gravity of this situation, underscoring it as a priority aligned with several Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2019).

Individuals with disabilities constitute 18.6 million or 9% of Brazil's total population, as indicated by the "National Household Sample Survey: People with Disabilities 2022" administered by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, 2023). The responsibility for ensuring public service accessibility for this demographic falls upon public administration (Osborne et al., 2013; Lara & Gosling, 2016), especially when alternative service channels are unavailable (Coutinho, 2000; Lara & Gosling, 2016). Notable examples of essential services include public transit systems (Gilbert et al., 2020) and healthcare delivery attuned to the needs of individuals with hearing impairments (Vieira et al., 2017).

The literature surrounding accessibility for individuals with disabilities has grown, touching on a variety of contexts which include, but are not limited to, studies on access to public infrastructure in the United States (Burns et al., 2023), healthcare for immigrant children with disabilities in Finland (Heino & Lillrank, 2021), challenges arising from misconceptions around autism in public education (McMahon et al., 2021), restricted political representation (Banks et al., 2023), and barriers to engaging in political discourse within the European Union (Waltz & Schippers, 2020).

Contrastingly, the fields of accounting and organizational studies have been slow to acknowledge the heterogeneity of the population, with different groups enjoying differing degrees of access to rights, services, representation, and voice (Scobie et al., 2020; Pianezzi et al., 2022; Dillard et al., 2023). Even research addressing "inclusion" often treats the population as a monolith (e.g., Grossi & Argento, 2022), with only incremental progress being made.

In both Brazilian (e.g., Teixeira et al., 2021; Dourado & de Faria, 2021) and international management and accounting journals (McCandless et al., 2022), discourse centring on individuals with disabilities has predominantly tackled employment barriers (Jorge, 2021). Nonetheless, some studies have ventured into the realms of educational access (Porte et al., 2022) and the perpetuation of barriers through e-government resources, such as the accessibility of government digital interfaces (Oliveira et al., 2021), municipal websites (Bernardes et al., 2015), and state websites (Silva & Rue, 2015).

The purpose of this analysis was to enhance the literature on public administration and accounting by integrating the concept of social accountability. This approach delves into how impediments to service accessibility also influence the collective actions of individuals with disabilities pursuing autonomy and a platform to voice their concerns.

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of an entity within the Brazilian federal public administration known for its broad service provision across the federation: the Brazilian federal highway police. It has been found that this agency does not adequately address accessibility concerns in its strategic planning, objectives or policies, and feedback from individuals with disabilities via the ombudsman's office is notably infrequent (spanning 2016 to 2022). Following this discovery, the analysis presents opportunities to explore social accountability with respect to accessibility and the inclusion of people with disabilities within public services. The conclusion proposes a research agenda focused on social accountability relating to individuals with disabilities, underpinned by critical disability studies. Such an agenda has relevance for investigations into transparency, openness in governance, accountability, social participation, and co-production.

This analysis calls for the literature on accountability to rigorously examine the multi-faceted nature of government responsiveness, with particular emphasis on human rights, representativity, and the voices of specific societal groups. The intent is to move beyond general discussions assuming a homogeneous citizenry and to recognize the diversity within the polity, challenging the notion of a 'standard citizen' (Couser, 2000).

2 DISABILITY STUDIES AND SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Accessibility is currently addressed by various theories and areas of knowledge. In their day-to-day lives, people with disabilities encounter barriers that hinder access to public services, medical assistance being one example. The socially imposed barriers exclude such individuals from participating in activities that are common to all (UPIAS, 1976; Diniz, 2007). Cruz et al. (2020) provide several examples, such as architectural, organizational, attitudinal, and communication barriers.

Most accessibility studies analyze the barriers to receiving the desired public service (access to services), focusing especially on physical barriers. For example, these could include barriers to facilities designed for women with disabilities during childbirth (Thomaz et al., 2021), or within the context of mobility (Koenig, 1980; Siddiq & Taylor, 2021; Baptista, 2010). Digital barriers are also discussed, such as those encountered on websites (Silva & Rue, 2015) or in user services designed based on the government's perspective (e.g., Sterrenberg & Decosta, 2023). Other approaches focus on how the brain accesses and processes information, in the form of texts or speeches (Teixeira, 1997; Ariel, 2001, 2014; Werner, 2018; Alves, 2020; Abud & Costa, 2020), on building trust (Baer et al., 2018; Cha et al., 2020), and on an individual's perception of their ability to perform a task outside their comfort zone (Le Vine et al., 2013).

Barriers are also observed in the absence of alternative communication (Paiva et al., 2020) and those arising from discriminatory attitudes, abuse, and actions leading to the invisibility of people with disabilities (Lima & Rocha, 2020). These are structural barriers in society, akin to racism and sexism (Diniz et al., 2009; Mello, 2016; Gesser et al., 2020; Lima & Rocha, 2020; Siqueira et al., 2020). These studies generally still overlook issues of discrimination, giving little attention to social equity (Porumbescu et al., 2021). All the aforementioned barriers reduce social equity, as people with disabilities do not access public services in the same way or with the same experience as people without disabilities.

The critical stream of disability studies debates the social construction of categories of people based on an assumed "subnormal performance". The focus is on inequality, discrimination, segregation, and exclusion (Goodley et al., 2019). In this perspective, the concept of 'disability' stems from the discrimination of people with differences in sensory, physical, and cognitive functions, which is socially constructed, reinforced in the educational system, and through social exclusion and access to public services and fundamental rights (Goodley et al., 2019). The driving force behind the phenomenon of stigmatization is the cultural framing of 'disability', invariably associated with a flaw or deviation from a normative, ideal standard of 'non-disabled' individuals (Garland-Thomson, 2011). Individuals with differences in experiences and expressions of functionality have their bodies labeled as "incapable," a behavior criticized as 'ableism' (Martín, 2017; Vendramin, 2019). These individuals are classified as inherently defective, having an impairment that implies 'subnormal' performance or action (Wolbring, 2008; Rios; Pereira & Meinerz, 2019).

International studies address the challenges of including people with disabilities in public services, including the related e-government adopted. For instance, Sterrenberg and Decosta (2023) criticize government-centered e-government initiatives and expose the difficulties faced by people with disabilities when trying to use public electronic services in Australia. Devine et al. (2021), also in the Australian context, interviewed people with mental and/or intellectual disabilities enrolled in a government employability program and observed that individuals felt their control over their own choices was disregarded.

To support the proposal to bring the discussion of accountability into public policies aimed at the rights of people with disabilities, we introduce the perspective of social accountability. Within this vein, the focus of control is not on audit bodies, but rather comes from the social engagement of various social actors in a persistent manner (Joshi & Houtzager, 2012).

This social accountability centers on the collective action of citizens who demand explanations, justifications, corrections, and transparency from public agents. It is a response to the limitations of more traditional forms of accountability, such as voting in public elections, the role of control bodies, or actions by civil society based on initiatives for transparency and government openness, and social participation in the design of public policies and public budgeting (Joshi & Houtzager, 2012).

In general, social accountability occurs via specific tools, such as complaint channels, collective monitoring, identification and social denunciation (naming and shaming), including exposure in social media. However, these depend in part on the sanctions imposed by Audit Courts (Courts of Accounts), legislative houses, or the judiciary. In a study comparing types of accountability, Joshi & Houtzager (2012) list five actions that make up typical social accountability: (i) raising or requesting information about the quality of public services, (ii) collectively monitoring the quality of services delivered, (iii) requesting justification to demand compliance with an unmet quality standard, (iv) collectively launching complaints, and (v) organizing protest demonstrations against the low quality of services.

In conclusion, collective control requires long-lasting engagement from affected groups or the general population over time and the capacity to access the tools in use, including the aforementioned five phases proposed by Joshi & Houtzager (2012). This raises some important questions: How can people with disabilities use communication channels with barriers to consistently advocate for their agendas? What is the role of organized civil society and control bodies in fostering this forum for persistent social accountability?

3 THE CITIZEN'S SERVICE CHARTER AS A BASIS FOR SOCIAL ACCOUNTABILITY

The history of accessibility regulation in Brazil is extensive. It is not our objective to provide a complete historical account of the construction of the legal framework. Following the Federal Constitution of 1988, which guarantees access for all to public services in health, education, work, and social protection, a series of decrees and laws have further defined the rights of people with disabilities to access public spaces in various contexts (Decree No. 5,296/2004; Decree No. 186/2008). Specifically, the Brazilian Inclusion Law (Law No. 13,146/2015) stipulated measures to reduce social barriers for people with disabilities, such as the construction of accessible spaces and the use of alternative communication formats for users, including simple language, Braille texts, audio, and video with support for Brazilian Sign Language. While these legal benchmarks lay down the foundation, they are insufficient in affording people with disabilities the autonomy to defend their rights, especially without legal training and facing the aforementioned barriers to accessing relevant information.

A first step in ensuring social accountability, as put forth by Joshi and Houtzager (2012), would be to establish the service standard delivered by a public body, which would be used as the expected benchmark. To some extent, the publication of a Service Charter (known as the Citizen's Charter in the United Kingdom, launched in 1991) sets a standard (albeit incomplete) for the list of services offered by each ministry, public body, or agency. The charter outlines what the user can expect in terms of access, office hours, wait times, eligibility requirements, etc (Nunes et al., 2019). The practice of the Service Charter was adopted in Brazil in the early 2000s as the Citizen's Service Charter as part of the National Program for Public Management and Debureaucratization (Gespública), and became mandatory for the entire Federal Public Administration with Decree No. 6,932/2009. The concept was revisited and expanded to "Citizen's Service Charter" in Decree No. 9,094/2017, dictating that the Charter must "inform the user about the services provided by the body or entity, ways of accessing these services, and their commitments and quality standards for public service".

The concept of social accountability is echoed in the words of the Brazilian Federal Court of Accounts (*Tribunal de Contas da União*) itself, indicating that the use of the user service charter could "precipitate improvement in the service to people with disabilities" (TCU, 2012, p. 43) as it enables users themselves to oversee

the services provided by the State (Souza et al., 2016; Doroteu et al., 2017). The service charter gives users a basis on which to challenge the services at the public bodies' ombudsman offices (Santos et al., 2019, Schier & Bertotti, 2019), including the necessary improvements in accessibility for people with disabilities (Souza et al., 2016; Nunes et al., 2019).

Society is not homogenous, and parts of the population are stigmatized and rendered invisible, as indicated by critical disability studies. For these individuals to effectively practice social accountability, they need to be able to access and evaluate the delivery promised in the service charter, identify stigmas and failures present in the conception of the service and the charter itself, indicate which promised aspects of the charter are not being fulfilled by the entity, and express their opinions in later phases of the social accountability process. For this to be feasible, the service charter must be detailed in terms of expected performance and consider the diversity of users, thereby serving as a benchmark for interaction between public administration and users in the subsequent phases of social accountability.

4 METHODOLOGY

This study is based on a qualitative analysis of a federal public administration agency noted for its extensive regional reach in providing face-to-face and digital services, including to people with disabilities. The Brazilian Federal Highway Police was selected according to this criterion, the services of which cater to individuals affected by road and urban transport, including drivers, passengers, motorcyclists, cyclists, and pedestrians, as defined by the Brazilian Traffic Code (Law No. 9,503/1997). Our analysis included public documents as sources of evidence, such as reports, institutional videos, and user feedback on the services provided by the agency (Table 1).

The Federal Highway Police is an agency of the federal public administration which is currently linked to the Ministry of Justice and has service units across the country. The agency's responsibilities have expanded since 1988, when the Federal Constitution assigned it the duty of "ostensive patrolling of federal highways". It is tasked with overseeing more than 70,000 km of roads and highways nationwide. Over time, functions have been augmented to include the Repression of Theft and Robbery of Vehicles and Cargo (Decree No. 8,614, 2015), the Integrated Border Protection Program (Decree No. 8,903, 2016), the National Plan for the Reduction of Deaths and Injuries in Traffic (Law No. 13,614, 2018), and the III National Plan to Combat Human Trafficking (Decree No. 9,440, 2018).

The 'User Service Charter' of 2022 covered 57 available services, indicating the appropriate channel for each service (in-person, letter, email etc.) and their associated fees. Among the services are registration or rectification of traffic accident reports, requests for clearances for individuals or vehicles, issuance of fine payment slips, obtaining a copy of the Infraction Notice, defense against fines, appeals, as well as the registration of complaints and reports. The service charter does not provide information on alternative communication channels to enable people with disabilities to access services, including access to the "191" (rescue services). The only mention of people with disabilities, the elderly, pregnant women, and nursing mothers in the service charter is that they will be given priority service at the agency's units, but nothing is addressed regarding online services.

As the agency's website is part of the gov.br portal, its pages are equipped with a sign language translator (VLibras); an open-source tool that employs artificial intelligence and natural language processing techniques to automatically convert texts in Portuguese into Brazilian Sign Language (*Libras*). A virtual assistant (computer-generated character) appears in human form in a window overlay on the website and performs the gestures and facial expressions of the sign language. Thus, the user hovers the mouse over a link, and the virtual assistant interprets any sentence on the page in *Libras*. However, this functionality does not extend to PDF files as they (including standard forms in the Electronic Information System, the government's infrastructure for electronic administrative processes and documents) do not receive tool support. The same limitation applies to the ombudsman service (Fala.BR), when users submit feedback and complaints to the ombudsman.

Table 1.
Sources of evidence

Data source	Description
PRF (Federal Highway Police) Ombudsman (recorded in Fala.BR)	22.8 thousand user submissions from 2016 to 2022, filtered to 18 complaints by people with disabilities.
User Service Charter	Service Charter (2022).

Table 1.
Sources of evidence

Electronic Information System	Web pages for accessing services.
Official Documents on PRF (Federal Highway Police) Portal	https://www.gov.br/prf, e.g., Strategic Map 2013-2023; 2023-2028; Information and Communication Technology Master Plan (PDTIC) 2020-2023; Strategic Map 2013-2020; Strategic Plan 2013-2020; Strategic Performance Indicators 2013-2020; Value Chain 2023; Strategic Plan Magazine 2020-2028; Master Plan 2020-2021; 2023; Tactical Plan 2023; Strategy Magazine 2021-2028.
Mapping project ('Projeto Mapear')	Survey of points vulnerable to the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents on the margins of federal highways, 2011 to 2021.
PRF (Federal Highway Police) Channel (YouTube®)	https://www.youtube.com/prfbrasil

Our analysis started with a content analysis of the public documents and videos of the Federal Highway Police. We looked for the persistence and central focus of accessibility policies within the organization, as laid out in strategic plans, value statements, performance indicators, and targets. We extended this by investigating how these policies reflect the transparency of the service charter and the implementation of concrete actions, as well as how this performance is justified to oversee bodies and civil society. To measure the existing pressure for compliance, we studied the actions and statements of external control bodies that audit and recommend adjustments for federal agencies, paying particular attention to the case at hand.

In order to ascertain how people with disabilities voiced their concerns through the agency's ombudsman, we examined records from January 2016 to June 2022. The year 2016 was selected as our starting point, following on the heels of the enactment of Law No. 13.146/2015. The Ombudsman's archive maintains records of these submissions, including the type of input (access to information, communication, complaint, praise, not classified, grievance, simplification, request, and suggestion) and the status of the submissions (archived, registered, supplementation requested, supplemented, concluded). Such records have previously been utilized by the Federal Court of Accounts (*Tribunal de Contas da União*) in internal studies by the Accessibility Commission (TCU, 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021).

During the 2016-2022 period, the Ombudsman of the Federal Highway Police received 22.8 thousand user inputs, the vast majority came directly via the Fala.BR platform (18,056 complaints), with others coming from email (4,200), social media (262), telephone (82), the WhatsApp messaging app (6), by letter, (44) and in-person (112).

The submissions were filtered by the Ombudsman and shared with the authors, with more of a focus on the ones containing keywords associated with disabilities and special needs, such as the lack of specific parking spaces, lack of access ramps, or difficulties in accessing systems via the internet (Neves, 2018; Diniz et al., 2020; Deodoro et al., 2021). The granting of anonymized complaints was based on a Confidentiality and Secrecy Agreement signed with the first author.

Out of the nearly 22.8 thousand inputs, 307 related to the demands of people with disabilities or special needs, that is, with potential accessibility barriers. However, most of them (289 cases) use disability-related terms in contexts which are not specifically related to disability. For example, "system accessibility" is used as a synonym for "unavailable information system", or "the sign is deficient" which pertains to the sign 'being absent or faulty'. At times, the term was employed in ableist expressions, like "vehicle blind spot" to refer to the range of the driver's visibility. When complaining about an employee's performance, a non-disabled user said they acted "as if they were mentally ill", "played deaf", or "asked if I was blind". In other cases, third parties claimed to represent the interests of people with disabilities, the elderly, pregnant women, or those accompanied by individuals with these characteristics, to justify review of a citation received for misuse of exclusive parking spaces or traveling at speeds above the limit. Lastly, some submissions concerned questions about the agency's public service exams or reports of elder abuse, for example.

In the end, only 18 submissions were identified as having been made by people with disabilities regarding the accessibility of services provided by the Federal Highway Police, with the overwhelming majority being made between 2019 and 2022 via the website or email.

5 ACCESSIBILITY AS A (LOW) PRIORITY POLICY WITHIN THE ORGANIZATION

Accessibility is not a priority policy within the Federal Highway Police. The transparency of the level and accessibility of its services has also not received attention, despite the determination of Interministerial Ordinance No. 323/2020. The subject of accessibility is not a performance indicator and is not mentioned in

strategic projects. Even in the strategic project of digital transformation, individuals with disabilities are not explicitly mentioned as a criterion to be addressed.

In recent years, there have been various initiatives related to accessibility; however, they do not seem to be integrated into a comprehensive policy within the organization. Beginning in 2012, statements of intent were made such as the "adaptation of the Federal Highway Police Portal on the Internet", the "Training Plan with a focus on Brazilian Sign Language (*Libras*)", and improvements to infrastructure. These intentions can be found in several documents, including PRF Normative Instruction No. 12/2012, the IT Strategic Master Plan 2013-2015, and the Tactical and Operational Plan of SPRF/BA, 2013, among others. Despite these statements, there is a lack of clear alignment and coordination that would lead to the development of a structured accessibility policy.

The following three identified initiatives seem to aim for compliance with legislation but lack depth: (i) adaptation of web platforms and websites for people with disabilities, (ii) access to physical facilities of the agencies, and (iii) training of employees in *Libras*. These initiatives were either interrupted or only partially addressed. First, the adaptation of web platforms and websites, which has been overseen for over 10 years by Normative Instruction No. 12/2012 and reinforced in the 2013 IT Strategic Master Plan, 2015 Management Report, and 2016-2017 IT Strategic Plan, has not been widely implemented.

Second, access to physical facilities within the agencies has been addressed in internal documents related to "building infrastructure", but implementation progress has been limited. In 2016, the IT Strategic Plan for 2016-2017 established that all infrastructure projects should adhere to accessibility standards, with this evaluation serving as a strategic indicator for the area. During the same year, Federal Highway Police Normative Ordinance No. 139/2016 released the Building Infrastructure Manual, emphasizing the importance of accessibility as an integral component of building systems throughout the agency, including police stations, parking lots, reception areas, and restrooms. However, it is worth noting that the aforementioned internal ordinance was revoked in 2021 with no replacement having been issued as of yet. Due to the lack of transparency in management reports, it is challenging to assess the effectiveness of these two initiatives.

Finally, the training of agency employees in *Libras* (Brazilian Sign Language) appeared in 2016 in the "Training Plan with a focus on *Libras*", to comply with Decree No. 5,626/2005. The goal was to train at least five percent of employees in *Libras*, use interpreters, or even have technological resources for the provision of this service. In 2021, this training was not a priority and appeared as priority number 539 on the list of actions and goals for the year. Only in 2022 did this training become mandatory for all employees, alongside the "Emergency Vehicle Driver Update" and "Traffic Enforcement" courses.

In terms of transparency, information about the accessibility of services and facilities should be easily accessible to users and fully available for social control. In the case of face-to-face service at an operational unit or police station, sometimes involving emergencies, users do not have the option to choose which unit to seek assistance from, as one of them is usually much closer to their location than the others. Users will almost always seek the nearest unit, which requires all units to be accessible.

On the organization's portal, the section that discloses the level of physical accessibility of the various units and headquarters does not contain complete information for most states (PRF, 2022). The headquarters of Sergipe (2021) and Pará (2021) released accessibility reports and work plans for 19 operational units, police stations, and state headquarters. The reports show a failure to make the appropriate adaptations to restrooms and cafeterias, inadequate signage, and inappropriate furniture.

6 EXTERNAL OVERSIGHT AND TRADITIONAL FORMS OF ACCOUNTABILITY

In relation to coercion for conformity, for the Federal Highway Police, which is subordinate to the Ministry of Justice and Public Security, the current level of accessibility of its services is not discussed in its management reports. These reports mistakenly assert that the agency complies with Law No. 10.098/2000 and Decree No. 5.296/2004, which are the basic criteria for promoting accessibility for people with disabilities. They rely on the reader's goodwill to accept the justification that "the General Ombudsman's Office of the Ministry of Justice and Public Security is located on the ground floor" and "the Federal Highway Police Ombudsman's Office is located in the central atrium of the headquarters building" as a guarantee of accessibility for people with disabilities or reduced mobility, pregnant women, the elderly, and the sick.

The Ministry in question further argues that the services and facilities meet the accessibility criteria because the Ministry's electronic services can be accessed through the agency's website, as well as the mandatory information defined by the Access to Information Law. Hence, it becomes the responsibility of external control to exert pressure for the adequacy of facilities and services. At the federal level, the actions of external control bodies in raising awareness and obligating compliance with legislation indicate generally timid control actions, primarily focused on physical accessibility to service units.

The Federal Court of Accounts (*Tribunal de Contas da União*) has made an important contribution to the issue, but its efforts remain limited to ensuring physical accessibility to service units and the adequacy of its own structure (buildings, communication, personnel policy, etc.) according to the expected accessibility parameters. In 2012, the Court conducted one of the few operational accessibility audits of service units and examined the existence of sign language training in six federal public agencies (the Federal Highway Police was not included in the sample). In 2016, the Court's focus shifted to its accessibility policy (Resolution No. 283), which established an Accessibility Commission and fostered an internal understanding of the subject matter.

The Court also releases an annual report that highlights the actions taken to reduce barriers for persons with disabilities within the organization. It also monitors the physical accessibility of its secretariats in various states. Additionally, the Court conducts lectures, courses, and events to discuss the topic of accessibility. It actively participates in the Accessibility Network, collaborating with various federal agencies such as the Federal Senate, Chamber of Deputies, Supreme Federal Court, and Superior Electoral Court. For instance, in 2022, the group discussed the electoral participation of persons with disabilities in the general elections that year.

However, it appears that the topic of accessibility still lacks the cross-cutting nature that it should have in audit actions. The latest "Coordinated Operational Audit on Access to and Retention in Upper Secondary Education" (TCU, 2023), conducted by the Federal Court of Accounts and over 15 State Courts of Accounts, surprisingly does not mention anything about accessibility in schools. Furthermore, the topic is not addressed in the 2023-2025 management plan or the 2023-2028 strategic plan. On the subnational level, 32 Courts of Accounts, in partnership with the Brazilian association of the members of courts of accounts (ATRICON) and the São Paulo State Court of Accounts, conducted a national inspection that included assessing the accessibility of physical facilities for people with disabilities in public schools (TCESP, 2023). Apart from this action, it is rare to find audits conducted by Courts of Accounts that focus on and give priority to individuals with disabilities.

7 BARRIERS TO PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES EXPRESSING THEMSELVES

In a universe of nearly 22.8 thousand complaints, suggestions, and other forms of feedback received by the ombudsman, only 18 submissions were made by people with disabilities during the analyzed period. This represents a proportion of 0.08% of the total complaints, which is below the proportion of 1.36% of physically disabled licensed drivers out of the 30.7 million drivers with CNH (National Driver's License) authorized to operate automobiles in 2015, the year prior to the period under analysis.

As expected, we identified barriers in face-to-face assistance, such as a lack of prioritization in service and accessibility issues in the infrastructure, but also in digital services. In the following occurrence, a user who visited a physical service unit and subsequently accessed the digital platform to provide feedback highlighted the distance of the parking spaces designated for people with disabilities.

> *"[...] through this message, I came to make a suggestion. I was at the headquarters of the Federal Highway Police [...] and I could see that the Department's facilities are excellent and there is ample parking. However, I believe that the parking spaces designated for people with disabilities and the elderly could be closer to the entrance [...] the distance to reach the building is inadequate for those who have difficulty walking [...]. (Manifestation No. 6)".*

In the two following occurrences, a citizen speaks out in defense of an elderly person who was not prioritized for assistance and a deaf friend who did not receive sign language interpretation. It is worth noting that in these cases, the complaints were not made by the individuals themselves but rather by a third party on their behalf.

> *[...] a guy who is controlling the entrance access [...] is not even respecting the Priority Law [...] outside [...] there is an elderly woman [...]. (Manifestation No. 3)".*

> *"[...] a deaf, mute, and illiterate friend went to the Superintendence of the Federal Highway Police [...] to seek clarification and there was no qualified professional in sign language to assist him [...] it is a right guaranteed by law to train individuals to serve diverse audiences [...]. (Manifestation No. 4)".*

The lack of prior identification and differentiation in the service flow based on the user's needs introduces discretion on the part of the public servant responsible for handling the complaint, as the Fala.BR user manual (CGU, 2020) does not address this issue.

The web platform Fala.BR (the most commonly used means of registering complaints, as previously indicated) serves as an intermediary between users and the service provider, enabling users to report service failures and request solutions. However, it cannot be asserted that the same level of effectiveness applies to individuals with disabilities. The Fala.BR platform undergoes regular updates, as such, the analysis presented here is focused on the period from 2016 to 2022. The registration process only introduced the collection of gender and race data in 2023 (CGU, 2023), with no explicit regard for the user's disability status. For instance, at the onset of the interaction, the user's condition is not taken into account. Furthermore, throughout the service process, no consideration is given to whether the user has a disability or the specific type of disability. Consequently, significant challenges arise, compromising the rights guaranteed to individuals with disabilities.

In the following interaction, a visually impaired 86-year-old user informs the attendant of her condition, which was initially disregarded. The attendant then proceeded to request a task that is particularly difficult to perform under such circumstances.

> *"[...] contacted this ombudsman's office to report that there are several fines from the year [...] the ombudsman's office informed that, if they were past the statute of limitations, the correct channel to request the cancellation of the fines would be the fine appeals process [...] the complainant informed us that she is 86 years old and blind, so this process would be extremely difficult for her, and she requested that we register her complaint in the system [...]. (Manifestation No. 1)".*

In other words, the service flow is designed and implemented for a generic user, and users with disabilities must intervene and highlight any barriers that may hinder the continuity of the service. This situation is similar to previous research findings on individuals with disabilities experiencing difficulties with websites (Soares et al., 2009; Freire et al., 2009; Silva & Rue, 2015; Souza et al., 2019), as well as older adults with digital technology in general (Neves, 2018; Diniz et al., 2020; Deodoro et al., 2021).

The last complaint goes beyond the actual service provision and highlights that the communication conducted through the organization's official YouTube® channel does not comply with the current legislation on the dissemination of audiovisual materials, such as the inclusion of a window with a sign language interpreter and audio description (Law No. 13.146, 2015 and ABNT NBR 15.290).

> *"[...] I would like to propose a suggestion [...] to have news about PRF activities in video format, with a sign language interpreter. This way, the audience in this category will also have more opportunities to learn and understand [...] to communicate with Federal Highway Police, report complaints, and suggest improvements [...]. (Manifestation No. 7)."*

8 DISCUSSIONS

The inclusion of people with disabilities here is seen as the result of a political movement that gradually began in the late 1970s in Brazil and placed individuals with disabilities as protagonists (Lanna Júnior, 2010). In this historical perspective, social accountability is exercised by persons with disabilities themselves, either individually or collectively organized in associations that over time have developed their own identities, representation, and voice in the social sphere.

In this section, we focus on the barriers to social accountability or the obstacles that hinder people from collectively taking action to demand improved services for individuals with disabilities. The previously mentioned alerts in the critical disability studies literature, regarding the presence of social categories and the silencing of specific groups, inequality, discrimination, segregation, and exclusion (Goodley et al., 2019), are significantly applicable to the case at hand. The regulation and proposed public policies for inclusion have made progress in Brazil, especially in the last five years, with the mobilization of debates, decrees and laws, internal regulations within public administration bodies, and awareness programs. However, the actual implementation of these policies is still limited, as indicated by audit reports from the Courts of Accounts (TCU, 2012; TCESP, 2023).

8.1 Barriers for social accountability

A single user complaining to the service provider itself does not constitute a process of social accountability. But it does when an individual with a disability wishes to lodge a complaint regarding the difficulties, they or their family or friends face, and encounter barriers in the official channels of dialogue with the public administration and the state. Collective action prevents barriers that would affect isolated individuals, such as not having alternative means of communication to voice their concerns (Paiva, Silveira, & Oliveira Luz, 2020), or experiencing discriminatory or abusive incidents (Lima & Rocha, 2020), from going unaddressed.

This is where social accountability comes into action, arising from the collective engagement of affected groups or the general population. There must be a collective, open, and public forum in which the performance of the public agency is being debated and observed.

Isolated or persistent events of social accountability occur through collective action by groups advocating for the interests of people with disabilities. These events represent instances of social accountability in public services operating in full, whether they are isolated or persistent. The following conditions are met:

- There are complaints, compliments, or suggestions for improvement made by users or user groups regarding the service. The absence of such expressions indicates potential barriers, especially when multiple problems have already been identified but no complaints have been lodged.

- The agency providing the service justifies the issues, develops plans, and sets expectations for resolving the problem, communicating these commitments to the interested (affected) groups.

- Based on user dissatisfaction with the justifications given for identified failures, considering the context, such as the waiting time for a solution and observed impacts, the aggrieved parties initiate collective actions, addressing the public forum through social identification and denouncement, or representation in traditional forums (such as courts, public prosecution, etc.).

Table 2 summarizes the barriers to exercising social accountability that we encountered in the services provided by the Federal Highway Police. We have grouped these five phases proposed by Joshi and Houtzager (2012) into two types of barriers that need to be overcome: (i) barriers to the dissemination of information about the service and human rights violations, including the expected standards of service, the reasons for low service quality, and the consequences of observed violations; and (ii) barriers to the expression of collective opinion and defense of rights, through collective organization, individuals, or organizations engaging in activism, advocacy, representations to the Public Prosecutor's Office, and social identification and denunciation.

Table 2.
Potential exercise of social accountability

Types of actions	Interactions between disabled users and the public agency	Current context for social accountability
Access to information		
(i) Gather or request information about the quality of public service.	Low level of information requests, few occurrences of complaints or positive feedback.	Lack of clear service standards, service charter does not specify expected performance.
(ii) Collectively monitor the quality of services delivered.	The agency does not provide this information in its reports or open data.	Lack of consolidated information about failures. Collective actions are based on individual cases.
(iii) Request justification to demand compliance with the unmet quality standard.	The agency does not respond, does not provide feedback or explanations about accessibility failures.	Lack of justification from the agency and public commitments to goals.
Expression of collective opinion and defense of rights		
(iv) File collective complaints.	NI.	Lack of consolidated information about failures, depends on a unique case with high impact.
(v) Organize protests against the low quality of services.	NI.	Lawsuits based on isolated cases, activating the Public Prosecutor's Office.

Note: NI - Not identified by the authors in searches conducted in the Public Prosecutor's Office and Courts of Accounts.

Access to information is the initial step in a forum of social accountability. Individuals with disabilities should be aware of the expected performance for the service as defined in the service charter. By doing so, they can identify stigmas and deficiencies present in the service and the charter itself. They should also be able to access information not only about isolated cases, but about various occurrences in order to form an opinion about the nature of the failures. In the case at hand, the formation of a comparative basis for service provision is difficult because the service charter lacks clarity regarding accessibility and service parameters. Furthermore, violations of rights in service provision are not disclosed in the annual reports of the Federal Highway Police. The agency itself fails to justify why it does not comply with the current legislation on accessibility for people with disabilities.

The expression of collective opinion and defense of rights is based on the information available to social actors, as well as their initiatives and shared understanding, to engage in collective actions. However, the lack of shared information from the Federal Highway Police necessitates that service users themselves, or the organizations representing them, gather information about similar cases in order to have evidence to support their demands. Based on this information, associations and groups of people with disabilities can bring together other affected parties, foster activism initiatives, and promote social movements of collective interest. It is evident that, similar to other public agencies, the Federal Highway Police does not provide consolidated information on accessibility issues. Although audits conducted by Courts of Accounts can identify problems in facilities and procedures, they generally do not focus on the service provided to users with disabilities. In certain isolated and critical cases, significant social appeals can escalate and become nationally impactful, as exemplified by the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States following the murder of George Floyd in 2020.

Finally, associations advocating for the rights of people with disabilities can demand corrective measures and sanctions through traditional forums. Civil public actions against federal or state public administration agencies, initiated by associations defending people with disabilities, can be found in the databases of the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office. For instance, the Municipal Council for Persons with Disabilities in the city of Uberlândia, MG, sought assistance from the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office when individuals with disabilities were required to take driver's license exams in the state capital, often necessitating a companion for transportation. Another example involves the Association of Parents and Friends of Autistic Individuals in Goiânia, which reported to the state's Ministry of Health the omission of the National Health Agency in specifying treatments for individuals with autism spectrum disorder (Civil Public Action 1005197-60.2019.4.01.3500/GO).

The barriers encountered within the mentioned complaint channel surpass mere communication issues, as they fail to capture the users' demands. This communication barrier, coupled with limited transparency on the part of the federal agency, gives rise to additional difficulties associated with the establishment of an accountability forum (refer to Table 2). In order for individuals with disabilities to advance in defending their rights, they must overcome barriers to enhance access to information, expression, voice, and representation. Otherwise, social accountability will remain a privilege enjoyed exclusively by those without disabilities.

9 CONCLUSIONS AND RESEARCH AGENDA

This analyzed case is part of a historical moment in which people with disabilities, as users of public services, continue to face barriers in accessing those services and expressing their experiences. The persistent delay or resistance in incorporating accessibility measures into management plans by the Federal Highway Police, and the corresponding oversight by the superior hierarchical Ministry of Justice, is an example of the difficulty the Brazilian federal administration faces in reducing inequalities in society, 35 years after the constitutional text was enacted. Disability movements and associations, in transitioning from a charitable and paternalistic model to advocating for their human rights (Lanna Júnior, 2010), still need to engage in significant political action to achieve desired social equity.

The near absence of complaints from people with disabilities in the analyzed organization's ombudsman office (compared to a total of 22.8 thousand complaints) raises questions about the reasons behind this disproportionately low representation. This issue could be analyzed by the organization itself as part of a specialized committee's policy. When not being heard by the government and having their demands ignored, people with disabilities require forms of political action. We propose that the exercise of social accountability can serve as an auxiliary driving force in this transition. However, the same barriers will hinder the full utilization of this force.

The future research agenda on this topic is broad. Social equity is one of the central themes in public administration and accounting (McDonald et al., 2022; Stivers et al., 2023), and it can be observed in the interface of electronic government models being implemented, barriers in ombudsman channels, and social participation spaces such as public hearings, participatory budgeting, and engagement in municipal councils. In the field known as "Metrics and Indicators of Inclusivity Performance", there is a need for ways to measure accessibility performance and develop monitoring and public policy indices (e.g., Mitra et al., 2023). In the "equity in budgeting" realm, an initiative similar to the well-known "gender budgeting" could be applied to discuss budget policies for promoting equity for people with disabilities (Guzmán et al., 2022). Another stream of research considers the extent to which organizations that can play a central role in promoting inclusion and equity are unaware of the concept and policies of inclusion (e.g., Duff & Ferguson, 2007), and this concept could be applied to both Courts of Accounts and governments in Brazil.

The research results suggest the following recommendations, in addition to the already well-known demands for accessibility. The suggestions for public agencies primarily focus on the autonomy of people with disabilities, allowing them to interact fully with public services or automated systems implemented by the public administration. It is recommended that the public agency (i) publish a Citizen's Service Charter in plain language, containing parameters for service delivery, such as hours of operation, accessibility alerts, and alternative channels considering users with different types of disabilities. The charter should provide a public commitment to service performance. Naturally, the charter should be delivered using the best practices to accommodate various users.

Regarding service provision, it is suggested that (ii) user-centered design techniques be employed, particularly in the digital service flow, to reduce barriers identified by these users. The specificity of serving users with disabilities should be identified at the beginning of the process. It is worth noting that in the vast majority of services available in e-government, the same digital service is provided despite specific user's needs, with the addition of certain tools (e.g., Vlibras) activated by the user. However, barriers persist in the deeper layers of service delivery.

Regarding transparency, (iii) management reports and strategic plans should clearly indicate the agency's accessibility policy. Superficial attempts to mask reports only indicate that management does not consider the issue seriously. Therefore, plans for adapting physical facilities and digital services should be open and justified in relation to non-compliance with applicable legislation.

In terms of overseeing bodies, it is suggested that they assume a greater role in promoting social accountability, in addition to traditional control mechanisms. Coordinated operational audits show some movement beyond fiscal and budgetary legality, but they are still limited. One effective way to enhance their protagonism is to include elements that enhance social accountability, as mentioned in the article, in addition to conducting direct audits on the topic. This approach would involve assessing the transparency level of accessibility plans, the quality of their disclosure, the availability of data from service channels, and actions taken to reduce barriers in communications channels. The added value of Courts of Accounts has recently come under scrutiny in Brazil, with bills for constitutional amendments questioning the role of such organizations. Perhaps now is the time to demonstrate their added value in addressing relevant and pressing issues faced by contemporary society.

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