

Slum upgrading and housing policies in Rio de Janeiro

Challenges for participatory processes

Mariana Simpson^a

Resumo

Uma série de programas que procuram a melhoria dos bairros precários e pobres, ou a “urbanização das favelas” têm sido implementados no Rio de Janeiro, enquanto tentativas para integrar as favelas no tecido da cidade. Nas últimas décadas, a urbanização tornou-se a principal prioridade sobre todos os outros aspectos do desenvolvimento; enquanto que a habitação, está sendo negligenciada ou está regredindo em termos de relevância, já que o Estado insiste em recorrer a métodos ineficientes e que falharam no passado. Identificada a falta de participação do cidadão como a principal razão para o fracasso, a autora argumenta que as intervenções só terão um impacto positivo se permitirem que a habitação seja um processo que acontece na cidade e se o cidadão urbano e pobre se tornar no principal ator.

Palavras-Chave

Habitação, Favelas, Participação, Rio de Janeiro

Abstract

A number of programmes pursuing slum upgrading, or the “urbanisation of favelas”, have been implemented in Rio de Janeiro in attempts to integrate favelas into the city fabric. In the last decades, urbanisation became the state’s main priority over every other aspect of development programmes whilst housing, people’s main priority, is being overlooked or looked through regressive lenses, as the state insists on resorting to inefficient methods that failed in the past. Identifying the lack of citizen participation as the main reason for failure, the author argues that interventions are only going to reach a positive impact if they allow housing to be an on-going process that happens in the city, where the urban poor is the leading actor.

Keywords

Housing, Favelas, Participation, Rio de Janeiro

Introduction

Perhaps the first step for solving “the issue of slums” is to understand that they are not an aberration, but rather a part of existing city structures that needs to be improved (Somsook, 2005). Informal settlements are part of the solution found by over one billion people living in poverty in a context of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 1973) that has made land unavailable to so many urban dwellers in the world. Slums are not disassociated parts of the city. They are city. They present a different paradigm and show that diverse urban spaces may coexist, provided inequities are overcome and adequate living standards are universalised (Silva, 2011).

A journey to solve the problems present in slums must be part of “the more difficult journey towards ‘poverty eradication’, which is essentially a journey for sustainable urban livelihoods” (UN-Habitat, 2003, p. 53). When slums are per-

ceived as a threat, struggles and strategies for guaranteeing the right to a habitat are ignored: occupations are perceived as invasions, fights for rights are translated as threats against the private property, and systems based on self-construction are defined as urban chaos. Nevertheless, this is the perspective which often guides public policies that fail in Rio de Janeiro (Simão, 2011).

The history of Brazilian housing policies and programmes mirrors approaches and methodologies set by international organisations such as the World Bank. And this history is clearly reflected in interventions that have taken place in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, the object of this article. Since the appearance of Rio de Janeiro’s first *favela* at the end of the 19th century, governmental responses have undergone several non-linear stages: negligence; centralised conventional policies with attempts to eradicate slums while mass producing housing; alterna-

^a Mestre em Desenvolvimento Urbano e Planejamento, Pesquisadora. Instituto Brasileiro de Análises Sociais e Econômicas (Ibase). Email: marianadiasimp@gmail.com

tive policies, through aided-self-help, sites-and-services and basic slum upgrading; neoliberalisation reforms; and, finally, comprehensive slum upgrading and urbanisation. All these stages have run in parallel to the constant growth of slums in every part of the city.

Since the mid-1990s, period from when this paper is going to focus on, Rio de Janeiro has been at the forefront of *in situ* slum upgrading experiences. A number of programmes pursuing the “urbanisation of favelas” have been implemented in attempts to integrate *favelas* into the city fabric. The expectation was/ is that the arrival of urban infrastructure would requalify these territories and transform them into regular neighbourhoods, leading to the spatial and social integration of *favelas* and the rest of the city.

Despite its relevance, this objective, so far, has not been accomplished. It is estimated that by 2020, the total invested in slum upgrading by the national, state and local governments and international organisations will have passed the US\$ 9 billion mark. This considerable amount of money is an indicator of the central importance of *favelas* to the city’s life as well as of the political weight attached to promises of “solving the problem of favelas”. The challenge, however, presents itself as extremely complex and despite the billions invested, projects are rarely fully delivered and promises just remain unfulfilled.

In Rio’s *favelas*, “urbanisation” has become the state’s main priority over every other aspect of development, whilst housing, people’s main priority, is being overlooked or looked through regressive lenses, as the state insists on resorting to inefficient methods that failed in the past. Yet, adequate housing brings immediate and systemic benefits for its residents and, as such, should be a strategic priority also shared by the state.

Identifying the lack of citizen participation as the main reason for failure, the author argues that interventions are only going to reach a positive impact if they allow housing to be an on-going process that happens in the city, where the urban poor is the leading actor.

Slum upgrading and housing policies

1990s: Comprehensive approach to Poverty

This paper will focus on the latest slum upgrading and housing policies and programmes implemented in Brazil and Rio de Janeiro. Concerns

with the impacts of globalisation and the recognition that neoliberalisation promoted through “Structural Adjustment Programmes”¹ had adverse effects on living conditions brought poverty back into the international agenda in the 1990s (Fiori and Brandão, 2010). Studies concerned with issues of “relative poverty”, marginalisation, vulnerability and the central role of the poor in defining solutions were abundant in this period when poverty began to be understood as a multidimensional phenomenon that must be addressed comprehensively.

Respecting this understanding, a “new generation” of housing policies emerged in the mid-1990s, focusing on the issue of poverty alleviation with integrated, multisectoral, city-scale and participatory approaches (Fiori and Brandão, 2010). Acknowledging that sectoral policies cannot deliver comprehensive solutions, policies were now meant to “address the underlying causes of poverty” whilst involving “the people who live in poverty and their representative organisations.” (UN-Habitat, 2003, p. 136).

In this framework, “the enabling or integrative approach refers not only to housing delivery systems, but to urban development and management as a whole” (Fiori and Brandão, 2010, p. 29). These “‘non-conventional’ housing policies and programmes are more ambitious and part of a multisectoral attack on poverty, aiming at the integration of the poor, their housing and settlements into the city fabric, economy and social and political institutions”. (ibid)

Nevertheless, as the goal shifts from isolated projects to integrated urban policies, housing ended up losing its central role. In this “new generation” of multidimensional poverty policies that started in the 1990s, housing became so many “things” that it pretty much disappeared from poverty alleviation strategies altogether. “Housing lost its own urban portfolio in government and was subsumed into social security in many countries. Expenditure on housing also fell substantially.” (UN-Habitat, 2003, p. 123)

1994-2003: Slum Upgrading – Favela-Bairro

Rio de Janeiro’s city government’s Favela-Bairro programme was labelled a “best practice” by the World Bank and UN-Habitat and was considered “one of the most ambitious and advanced illustrations” of the “new generation of comprehensive slum upgrade policies” to date (Fiori *et al.*, 2000, p. 22). Since the project was launched in 1994, Rio de Janeiro has been in the forefront of *in situ*



Image 1 - A typical Favela-Bairro intervention: Hillside improvements and the construction of public spaces

Source: unavailable, n.d.



Image 2 - Hillside improvements implemented by Favela-Bairro in Salgueiro

Source: Jauregui, 2011

slum upgrading and urbanisation initiatives in the world.

Favela-Bairro was the largest slum upgrading programme to ever be implemented in Latin America. It took place in 178 favela and counted on the unprecedented investment of US\$ 600 million, funded by the Inter-American Development Bank and the city government. The programme was implemented by the Municipal Housing Department, and due to its comprehensive objectives, also involved other governmental departments, non-governmental organisations, the private sector and grass root leaders.

Favela-Bairro inaugurated a goal that has been the objective of every slum upgrade intervention implemented in Rio ever since: to unify a city that, for a number of reasons, has been divided into “formal” and “informal”, “slum” and “city”, “*favela*” and “*asfalto*” (“asphalt”), despite both “sides” being intrinsically dependent and connected with each other. Hoping to blur boundaries, since Favela-Bairro projects have attempted to connect the spatial differences between the two territories through the “urbanisation of *favelas*”. The ex-

pectation was/ is that the introduction of urban aspects would be able to requalify the perception of these territories so that they may be seen as a regular neighbourhood of the city (*a bairro*).

The Favela-Bairro programme did not aim to meet housing needs of individual families, but, instead, it “addressed the collective needs of favelas as a whole” (SMH, 1995 cited in Fiori and Brandão, 2010, p. 194). The head of the Municipal Housing Department defined Favela-Bairro as “a housing programme that is not about housing” (Prefeitura do Rio de Janeiro, 1996), as authorities shared the belief that residents would spontaneously improve their homes as a side effect of the upgrading process.

Together with a national governmental bank, Favela-Bairro did create a special credit line for the purchase of construction materials, but because favela residents were unable to pass the governmental bank’s risk assessment, the initiative never thrived (Magalhães, 2011). This bottleneck is one of many examples on how the programme’s comprehensive intentions were jeopardised by institutional and political fragmentation. The list is long and includes, for example, crèches without staff; public spaces without management; abandoned sewage systems as the water company refused to connect pipes.

Yet, the programme produced very positive results: physical conditions were indeed improved in 178 *favelas* and having these communities as the central object of public investments and commitment gave dwellers a sense of secure tenure (Perlman, 2010). However, the social and economic components which were part of the initial ambition to comprehensively improve the quality of life in *favelas* through a multisectoral alliance were never accomplished. Furthermore, with political changes and the lack of consistent social policies, slums (and violence) continued to expand and many of the Favela-Bairro improvements were quickly “swallowed” by the growth of *favelas*. The programme slowed down significantly in early 2000s and was officially discontinued in 2006.

Today, it is agreed that despite physical improvements, Favela-Bairro did not fulfil its strategic objective to blur boundaries between the informal and the formal city. “The stigma attached to living in a favela runs too deep to be obliterated by appearances”. (Perlman, 2010, p. 281).

Furthermore, it is important to note that, despite its positive ambitions, Favela-Bairro prioritised urbanisation over every other dimension of development. In a rich and necessary evolution,

the programme took a step forward in recognising that housing is a process and should not be treated as an object to be delivered ready by the state. Nevertheless, it culminated in the loss of a fundamental dimension: housing in itself – a concern to men and women and a strategic dimension to urban development.

“The biggest stumbling block to achieving cities without slums is, in fact, housing, because formal sector housing is well beyond the reach of most slum dwellers and without formal housing, areas are usually automatically considered to be slums” (UN-Habitat, 2003, p. 190).

2000s: A millennium development goal

When the United Nations announced its Millennium Development Goals (MDG) in 2000, development agencies aligned activities to meet these goals, bringing a certain shift to poverty reduction policies (The World Bank, 2008). Goal number seven of the MDG was to “ensure environmental sustainability”, aiming “to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers” by 2020 (UN, 2000). Through the *Cities without Slums* Action Plan, the World Bank and UN-Habitat highlighted that scaling-up slum upgrading was “central to the Bank’s poverty-reduction mission and urban development strategy”, being the “centrepiece of a global strategy for improving the living conditions of the urban poor.” (Cities Alliance, 1999, p. 12).

The Action Plan reinforced the role of *in situ* slum upgrading as the main strategy recommended for addressing infrastructure and service needs. The challenge of addressing poverty as a multidimensional phenomenon remained, as even successful slum upgrading programmes seem to have failed to support, for instance, the generation of income and employment, the provision of direct housing subsidies, the creation of social safety nets, the promotion of quality education, health, transport, and so on, together with the challenge of promoting equity and reduce exclusion for the attainment of socially just cities.

2007-present: PAC/Favelas

In 2007, the federal government announced the investment of US\$ 650 million (from national, state and city funds) in slum upgrading in Rio de Janeiro. Known as PAC/ Favelas, this investment was the social slice of the so-called “Programme

for Growth Acceleration” (*Programa de Aceleração do Crescimento – PAC*), a national strategy to reach and maintain a 5 per cent annual growth rate whilst investing in infrastructure implemented during Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva and Dilma Rousseff’s presidency mandates (Ministério das Cidades, 2009).

Differently from Favela-Bairro’s attempts to reach city-level scale through intervening in *favelas* spread throughout the city, PAC/ Favelas focused on some of Rio’s largest “complexes of *favelas*”: Complexo do Alemão, Complexo de Manguinhos and Rocinha. Together, these *favelas* are home to approximately 500,000 people and are known for being some of the most violent areas of the city and the “headquarters” of powerful drug trafficking organisations.

The bulk of PAC/ Favelas’ investments was destined for urbanisation – this time in the form of large-scale infrastructure. Inspired by the slum upgrading model implemented in Medellín’s informal settlements in Colombia, the three enormous projects aimed to create public spaces and transport alternatives for these complexes of *favelas*: swimming pools and libraries in Rocinha; a cable car flying over Complexo do Alemão; and a public park underneath train tracks in Manguinhos; among other interventions, such as roads and mid-rise flats (for relocation). It was also expected that the presence of the state in these territories would help to regain spaces “privatised” by drug traffickers. (Dias Simpson, 2009).

It is important to highlight that, from start to end, PAC/ Favelas was imposed on people and carried out in a very top-down manner². Community leaders from all three favelas battled for years (and still do) to denounce the lack of citizen participation in PAC/ Favelas. They publicly emphasized that interventions being carried out were not at all in agreement with their community’s priorities. For instance, Manguinhos’ Social Forum published a manifesto declaring:

“We want the opportunity of an honest and less discriminatory dialogue, where people can discuss the course of their lives with the government and the various political and social movements engaged with the problems of favelas (...). Laws that could ensure the sustainability of the PAC/ Favelas investments are being ignored. The communities of Manguinhos and their social actors have not found effective means for social participation. We did not participate in the formulation of Manguinhos’ development plan, [and the plan] was not even present-

² Following federal laws, 2 to 3 per cent of slum upgrading resources were spent in “technical social work” (i.e. impact management and territorial development). This “social work”, however, had no power to influence decision-making or echo people’s demands, being usually restricted to ticking bureaucratic boxes.



Image 3 - In Rocinha, PAC's main interventions included a footbridge designed by Niemeyer and a swimming pool. Both were built in the entrance of the *favela*, where dwellings also received a coat of colourful paint for pleasing aesthetics on the "border" of the *favela* and an upper-class neighbourhood

Source: Governo do Estado, 2009; Folleto, 2010



Image 4 - Project to create a public park under rail tracks (left); Police officer "protects" construction workers from local drug traffickers (right); The area destined to become a park is known as Rio's Gaza Strip. Although millions were spent to elevate tracks, the plan of having a public park underneath them was not accomplished and the space remains occupied by violence

Source: Jauregui, 2011; O Globo, 2011



Image 5 - Cable car built in Complexo do Alemão, at an approximate cost of US\$70 million
Source: Janderson Cruz, 2012

Image 6 - "Meanwhile... Public policies in Alemão". Art created by local community leader David Amen (2017), when the cable car was officially switched off in March 2017, as it was considered to expensive to run. US\$73 million have been tracked as stolen in corruption from PAC in Complexo do Alemão alone
Source: unavailable, n.d.

ed to the public. (...) The investments made by the PAC/ Manguinhos are not at all in agreement with the communities' priorities. We have numerous needs in Manguinhos and we see the elevation of the rail tracks as a secondary element to the improvement of our quality of life, given the urgent demands for basic sanitation and housing for all." (Forum Social de Manguinhos, 2008).

As another example, in the day the president Dilma Rousseff inaugurated Complexo do Alemão's cable car, a young community leader wrote: "I wonder if, from up there [where the president was riding a cable car], the problems that affect our every-day lives are visible. On the ground, we live a reality that deserves more attention than a cable car: attention to a population that feels in their bones what living in a *favela* means and therefore knows what our real demands are. (...) I felt like screaming "hey, there are people living down here, and we still have problems". But who would hear me, when all the spotlights are turned to the embellishment of *favelas*?" (Amen, 2011).

Overall, the local populations remained distant from the process. Research carried out by an independent NGO showed that only 20 per cent of residents interviewed felt they were well informed about interventions taking place in their communities. Most actually mistakenly believed the project's main objective was to build houses (Ibase, 2009).

As the numbers indicated, again, the improvement of housing conditions was in the forefront of local's expectations. This argument was also confirmed by the fact that among all groups formed by the technical social work, "housing commissions" always attracted the highest number of participants.

In fact, over 4,000 mid-rise flats were built on site by the PAC/ Favelas in the three complexes of *favelas*. Although a significant number, these units were destined to replace homes demolished to give room to PAC's large physical interventions and for the clearance of "areas of risk", curtailing the impact on the actual housing deficit. Furthermore, the high number of relocations can be seen as an indicator that the architectural approach promoted during the Favela-Bairro period, which aimed to "build upon and respect the existing layout of houses, roads and walkways" (Fiori and Brandão, 2010, p. 194), was replaced by interventions that were too big to exist in harmony with the organic layout of *favelas*. Cable cars, elevated train tracks and new roads led to

the (often forced) displacement of hundreds of families, leaving dwellers with the feeling that resources would have been spent differently if their voices were heard.

Furthermore, as it often happens when housing is seen as an object rather than a process, families relocated to the new flats quickly struggled to pay for the costs of living in a formal home. Moreover, the low quality of the constructions led to the rapid deterioration of brand new estates; regulations stopped households from part-using their residence for commercial purposes, a common practice in these communities (e.g. it is forbidden to sell products or rent out rooms in the new flats); among many other issues that come about as consequences of sudden obligations which did not correspond to the residents' needs or previous ways of living. Once again, top-down housing proved to be unsustainable and, as a result, cases of (illegal) sales and rent are abundant, especially in the wealthier parts of the city.

Responding to a legitimate demand, the housing element that was lost in Favela-Bairro reappeared with more strength in the PAC/Favelas. However, housing was brought back into the equation in its "conventional" form, ignoring the lessons learned. Amidst Rio's large scale slum upgrading initiative, we witnessed, once again, housing being delivered ready as an object to "beneficiaries" who did not participate in decision-making in any form and who were simply informed that they would need to move for reasons they did not always agree with.

With so little transparency, it is not possible to precise how many hundreds of millions more were spent in PAC/Favelas, besides the initial US\$ 650 million. The programme, though, phased out after Rousseff's impeachment in 2016 and Rio's current bankrupt situation, leaving behind incomplete constructions. This contributes to the feeling shared by so many families that they "lost their homes for nothing", as many houses were demolished to give room to new roads and public equipment that were never delivered. Tens of families are still living on "social rent" whilst waiting for a housing unit that is not likely to ever be built. This benefit/compensation is under threat of being cut, as Rio's bankrupt state declares to have no money left to pay these families. The construction companies in charge of PAC's physical interventions are currently in the public eye and have been officially charged with widespread corruption. In Complexo do Alemão alone, US\$73 million have been officially tracked as stolen in corrup-

tion schemes involving the government and construction companies.

In this way, slum upgrading and housing policies seem to have completed a full circle in Rio de Janeiro's *favelas*: until the mid-1970s, housing as an object of four walls and a roof was the only dimension taken into consideration during a period in which mass produced estates in the outskirts of the city were seen as the solution to rid Rio de Janeiro of its slums. After three decades of failure, decision-makers realised that in situ improvements are a more social, political and cost-effective approach to the "problem of *favelas*". In an important step forward, Favela-Bairro recognised that urban poverty needs to be tackled through a comprehensive approach. Focusing on the urbanisation of favelas, this optimistic experiment hoped issues related to housing would solve itself as a side-effect of environmental improvements. As a result, however, housing lost its centrality and direct investments disappeared from interventions altogether. With PAC/Favelas, housing returns to the agenda, but with regressive methods of failed policies. Minha Casa Minha Vida, presented below, and the high number of forced evictions promoted by the state in preparation to the Olympic Games in 2016 close the circle and bring housing policies back to where they started.

2009-present: Minha Casa Minha Vida

Closing the full circle, the programme "My House, My Life" (Minha Casa, Minha Vida – MCMV) brings Brazil fully back into the failed conventional housing policies implemented



Image 7 - Mid-rise flats built for relocation in Complexo do Alemão

Source: Governo do Estado RJ, 2012

Image 8 - Houses demolished during PAC/ Favelas and houses earmarked by the city government for demolition

Source: Ratião Diniz, 2015

³ When launching Minha Casa Minha Vida, Lula promised to deliver 1 million housing units. After its initial "success", the federal government launched MCMV 2 and 3, raising the goal to 3 million units.



Image 9 - Houses in non-cities
Source: Archdaily, n.d.

in the past. Announced in a period of global financial crisis, the programme aimed to deliver 3 million ready-to-occupy units³ for middle and low-income households throughout the country whilst fuelling economic growth through the construction industry. It is, thus, an anti-cyclical financial strategy dubbed as a housing policy.

The programme targets three different ranges of income: households who earn up to US\$1,000; up to US\$2,250; and up to US\$3,060. In five years, between its launch in 2009 and 2014 (when the latest official numbers were publicised), MCMV invested nearly US\$80 billion in subsidies; contracted 3.7 million housing units; and delivered 1.87 million housing units, from which one-third were delivered to families earning up to US\$540.

With MCMV, authorities rewinded a film of failed policies whilst ignoring lessons that should have been learned. MCMV is based on strategies to enable the construction sector (through subsidies, tax exemption, etc.) and augment the supply of housing and access to credit, “without any connection with urban or land strategies, confusing housing policies and income generation policies” (Nakano and Rolnik, 2009, p. 4). Many have pointed out that the construction companies – the same ones that are currently in the heart of corruption scandals – were the main beneficiaries of the programme.

Units are typically located in “non-cities” where land is cheap, but far from education, work, health and cultural opportunities, deepening socio-spatial segregation, increasing public expenditure on infrastructure and individual expenditure on mobility. “Building houses is producing cities. It is essential to discuss the impact of real estate in the living conditions, in the institution or removal of social rights, in land use and functioning of cities. Let's not fall into the trap of seductive numbers: 1 million homes? Yes, but where, how and for whom?” (Nakano and Rolnik, 2009, p. 4).

As Brazil currently lives a political turmoil and economic recession, the delivery of housing units has significantly slowed down. Public equipments that were supposed to come with these communities were never built. Poor construction standards and the lack of funds for general maintenance are leading to the rapid deterioration of these states. Now, many of the MCMV condominiums have become crime ridden neighbourhoods controlled by drug traffickers and militia groups. Overnight, thousands of non-cities with the population of mid-sized cities were created as private, gated communities throughout the country. Through the programme, families are reaching their dream of owning a home, but for so many, the dream has become an individual and collective bitter-sweet nightmare.

Conclusion

The cases presented in this article show that housing policies and initiatives where residents are not allowed to play the leading role of their own development are doomed to fail. As such, at the core of Rio de Janeiro's programmes' problems lie the lack of citizen participation. Amidst mega slum upgrading projects, people's on-going demands for public security, education, health and income earning opportunities and continue to be overlooked.

To change that, for once and for all, a paradigm that insists on the delivery of ready, unsustainable housing for the poor must be broken. Housing is a verb (Turner and Fichter, 1972). Especially for the urban poor, housing is a long, incremental, personal yet community-building process. And participation – or even better, “people's protagonism” – are intrinsically linked to institutional and political reforms.

In this, however, lies a conflicting political issue that must be overcome: the “problem” with sustainable housing processes is that it takes time and cannot be squeezed into a four-year political mandate. Neither can it be massively delivered by powerful construction companies that gain multi-million contracts after generously sponsoring political campaigns⁴. “Processes” do not bring the immediate political benefit that comes with the public handing over of a key to a poor family by a populist politician. Processes do not win immediate votes.

Nevertheless, history has shown too many times that the belief that informality can be replaced by formal housing delivered by govern-

⁴ A background story on one of such construction companies and their on going corruption scandals can be read on “Brazil's Odebrecht corruption scandal” at <http://www.bbc.com/news/business-39194395>.

ments is unattainable, expensive and inefficient.

Housing must be a people-led process that happens in the city to be sustainable, as it' is one of the most important factors in making just cities.

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