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Power and Inequality Inside the Favela

by Denis Marchand

Health research demonstrates links between health and environment and the value of community and government participation.

In 1940, about 70% of the Brazilian population lived in a rural environment. Fifty years later, the situation has turned around completely. Today, few cities escape the problems caused by massive growth on their outskirts.

In 1988, a sanitary engineer conducted a research project in nine "favelas" (peri-urban shantytowns) in the city of Salvador, the old Bahia, located on the west coast of Brazil. Luis Roberto Moraes, a professor in the Hydraulics and Sanitation Department of the Federal University of Bahia, wanted to assess the incidence of diarrhoea, parasitic diseases and infant mortality in children below the age of five. He made some astounding discoveries.

Although these societies appear to be homogenous, Moraes encountered a micro-society where there is no equality among the poor, and where social distinctions and power relationships are an integral element of daily life. In short, these communities mirror larger urban structures on a small scale.

Moraes discovered that the majority of favela residents were poor and illiterate and originally came from rural areas; nevertheless, there were also those who were richer than others and who owned a number of small businesses and many houses. Since these houses were built in the best locations on cultivated slopes, they were not at risk from floods or erosion. If every house had a television antenna on its roof, those belonging to "rich families" were also protected against theft by grillwork on their doors and windows, just as is the case in more affluent residential areas. Their children attended schools, properly clad. Moraes was also surprised to come across professional people in the favelas who wanted to avoid paying too much rent downtown.

The health situation

The major objective of the research work was to compare the health situation of residents who used the available sanitation services. Moraes was able to determine that, in communities where the provision of clean water involved community participation, the residents' quality of life improved in a sustainable fashion. He concluded from this that cleaning up the environment resulted in a clear improvement in health and a real decline in the death rate and infant mortality.

The Federal University of Bahia followed up this research with an intervention project, whose purpose was to improve the health of residents in a district completely lacking in water and sewer services. This project brought together a number of stakeholders, representing the federal university, the community itself and three levels of government representing Brazil, the province of Bahia and the city. The specialists were drawn from the sectors of health, social action, water resources, health, housing and social welfare.

"Urbanizing a favela is a very complex process" says Moraes, "particularly if this initiative depends on community participation and integrating the work of many departments during all the implementation phases: identification of problems and solutions, planning and implementing the work, and management and maintenance of infrastructures. It is, however, possible!" Salvador has more than two hundred communities that have developed in a disorganized and anarchic manner on unoccupied marginal lands on its outskirts. For the most part, these favelas lack essential services such as drinking water, sewers and garbage collection.

The shanty town of Camarajipe, located on a hillside on the banks of the Rio Camarajipe, has a population of 3,500; it has 560 houses, and it has an open sewer; however, for more than a year, an action committee consisting of engineers, sociologists and nutritionists has developed a comprehensive project that involves draining the valley and constructing a sewer network and a water pipe system, building 125 new houses and improving 240 others, installing showers, toilets, wash tubs and water cisterns in 500 residences, as well as a waste collection and treatment system. Schools, daycare centres and health centres will also be built.

A new approach

The integration of three levels of government, as well as the total and complete participation of the future beneficiaries, is absolutely key to the project. "However, working together to improve the environment, as well as the health and quality of life of a community, is no easy matter in Brazil," notes Moraes.

"Cooperation is not part of our culture; it is a relatively new phenomenon. Institutions and departments are not used to working together and attitudes do not change overnight. Bringing the stakeholders together is one thing; analyzing problems in their entirety is quite another. Finding a solution acceptable to all and one which brings benefits to all requires time, energy, and high levels of strength and conviction."

After what seemed like a constant battle, progress has been made in a number of areas over the past five years. The technical component of the project has been approved, as well as a grant of \$US1.9 million by the federal Ministry of Welfare.

Although the involvement of the favela residents is the project's strong point, the quality of the relationship among the stakeholders is also of major importance. The cross-sectoral approach has encouraged information exchanges on the project's character and its technical components in the social, sanitation, financial and environmental areas. For Moraes, this cooperative process is the first step towards a transfer of technology that will allow the community itself to take on the maintenance and operation of the equipment.

To be absolutely certain that the population has completely grasped the project's objectives, as well as to measure the impacts of its commitment to the success of the work to be undertaken, the University of Bahia is offering community members a training program. For more than a year, twenty or more individuals have been attending weekly courses in community organization and education, assuming responsibility and concepts of health and hygiene. The aim of this university initiative is to develop social, environmental and political awareness, while preventing the development of any form of dependence on the charitable organizations or the State.

Unconquerable power structures

Politicians, decision-makers, university staff and public servants have all profited from these contacts with a world which was unfamiliar, or even unknown, to them. They recognize, as a result, that they must respect existing power structures that are hidden but unconquerable, and become involved in lengthy negotiations.

This is the case, for example, in the distribution of property rights on lands occupied by squatters. If the city is ready to grant one lot per family, the owners of two or three houses will claim the number of lots

that they already own. The other families will refuse to take a stand for fear of reprisals. Even when the most dynamic leaders are convinced that this concession by the city is soundly based, they will remain silent. "I have two children and I want my family to survive," one of them says. People are well aware of the threat posed by those who want to maintain their privileges.

However, Moraes concludes: "This evaluation of a cooperative process sheds useful light on the situation and will lead to a needed reconsideration of urbanization projects for favelas in the outlying areas. Offering water, sewer, housing, schools, health, and garbage collection services is a basic necessity, although it is difficult to achieve in the current economic situation. But ensuring the sustainability of the improvements and their viability remains a challenge. It is, nevertheless, both possible and desirable!"

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