A large number of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas, or squatter settlements, continue to be caught up in a low-intensity conflict or in violent crime distinctly related to the organized drug trade, socio-economic inequality (exclusion) and a weak state. Most violent and other types of crime take place predominantly in the favelas and peripheral suburbs in the city of Rio, demonstrating a strong correlation between deprived areas that lack basic services and infrastructure and the level of crime. The large vacuum created by an absent state is filled by powerful drug gangs or private militias, making favelas ideal locations for violence and criminal activity. In a study mapping crime in Rio, the wealthy South Zone had a homicide rate of 12.6 per 100,000 people. This is compared to rates of 56.8 and 41.6 per 100,000 people in two North Zone areas, which are full of favelas and poor suburbs.

Favela Bairro: Infrastructure improvements

Favela Bairro, a slum upgrading program, was a project meant to increase access of the state to previously impenetrable favelas, including public transit, emergency and police vehicles, via paved and widened roads. Residents enjoyed increased mobility as their pathways were better integrated with the formal city’s streets. These infrastructure investments played “a significant role in increasing the incomes of the urban poor and improving access to basic services such as health, education, housing and transportation.”

Additionally, in some areas permanent police posts were set up. Favela Bairro had two phases between 1994-1999 and 2000-2004. The first phase consisted of various infrastructure components that improved the standard of living of favela residents through unique projects for each specific favela. Specific objectives included risk reduction for geological and environmental problems such as landslides and floods, reduction in vector-borne diseases, and increases in the use of public services. By the end of the first phase of the program in 1999, Favela Bairro had been implemented in more than 90 favelas. This included the provision of electricity, sewerage, canalization of rivers, tree planting, landscaping and street lighting, paving and widening.

The provision of public plazas was also an important element for the public life of the favela as most residents spend a great amount of time outside due to crowded housing. For example, the public plaza at the entrance of Vidigal provides a vibrant area where moto-taxi drivers, police, favela residents, teens, children and a multitude of other actors mix day and night. It makes Vidigal more accessible to the outsider and everyone is welcome despite the drug trade that takes place on the hills above.

Improvements to services

Favela Bairro entered a new phase in 2000 that broadened the focus beyond strictly structural improvements to include provision of various social services, such as leisure and sports facilities, schools and community centres, and a property titling program. These measures increased the presence of the state through social means, while decreasing residents’ dependence on the drug traffickers for aid. Throughout the upgrading process of a Favela Bairro project, there was consultation with the local community members to make sure improvements satisfied their needs; however some observers have suggested that social services were not sufficiently available.

The combination of Favela Bairro with stable security provision also produced more favourable results. In Rio das Pedras, for example, the presence of the Blue Command militia – composed of off-duty or former police officers – helped to produce a safer and more vibrant community than may have otherwise been
achieved with only physical upgrades. This holds true as a result of the implementation of the Favela Bairro program in all 40 favelas controlled by militias in Rio’s West Zone, unlike favelas in the North and South Zones that are predominantly controlled by drug gangs.

Challenges

It is important to recognize the limitations of slum upgrading in resolving the challenges of crime and the presence of drug gangs. Despite increased access, it is still hard for police vehicles to enter many favelas as the drug gangs will open fire or block entrances. In some favelas, narcotraffic operations relocated to other sites and switched operations from daylight to overnight hours (as seen in the documentary, Falcão: Os meninos do trafico). In well-implemented projects like Favela Parque Royal, with a strong focus on safe public spaces, the drug gangs began operating in a more secluded manner by selling drugs in more remote areas.

The urban form of a favela is mostly unchangeable, even with slum upgrading, without tearing down huge parts of favelas. Due to the practical limitations of costs and unwillingness to displace many residents, slum upgrading usually takes the path of least resistance, which is the paving of roads and infrastructure provision along well-established rights-of-way.

Branching out

While Favela Bairro has provided tangible success, to achieve maximum impact, any subsequent phase of the program should draw lessons from the urban renewal and security plan in Medellín, Colombia. This plan resulted in a dramatic decline in homicide rates of more than 90 percent from the mid-1990s to 2009. Slum upgrading in the most conflict-ridden areas of Medellín was an important component in a strategy that included reform of government services like the police, building of social capital and provision of various socio-economic opportunities to the poor. Contrary to Rio’s focus on upgrading the largest area as possible, Medellín’s focus was on pursuing multiple security strategies as a way towards greater conflict resilience. The greatest lesson from Medellín is that physical improvement of public spaces will make a visible impact on inhabitants’ lives and help attract businesses and visitors. For example, the city, along with local and international organizations, invested in a two-kilometre gondola and constructed world-class facilities, including innovative libraries. It is an attempt to improve both the face of a city and the character of its population through extensive investments in public spaces.

From Rio’s experience with slum upgrading and the contemporary situation of favelas within that city, it is clear that the state needs to enter the favelas comprehensively, through the provision of the same economic, security and social services that are expected by the residents of the formal city. Slum upgrading thus cannot stop with one-time infrastructural improvements, as was the case with many Favela Bairro projects, and must be part of a greater security plan with multiple strategies.

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2 Musumeci (2002)

7 Soares and Soares (2005).


