

Social change and empowerment in a Brazilian shantytown

The Union of Heliópolis' Residents' Associations and Centre (UNAS) is a grassroots movement, created in 1986 through the coming together of the main community leaders and citizen movements from one of the largest Latin American shantytowns: Heliópolis. Since the beginning of UNAS their main advocacy focus has been to guarantee housing rights and a life of dignity for the residents of the slum.

THE URBAN ISSUE IN BRAZIL:

In 1940, about 80% of the Brazilian population was rural. Sixty years later, this figure is reversed, with more than 80% of a total of 170 million inhabitants concentrated in urban areas. This rapid urbanisation was fuelled by migration from poor rural areas of the Northeast – looking for a “better life” in the southern cities. This increase in urban population has led to huge additional pressure on urban infrastructure, already overburdened and inadequate, and resulted in the mushrooming of shantytowns or *favelas*.

Housing is largely supplied by the private sector and the increase in demand has led to decent housing becoming increasingly expensive. As a result poor people can not afford to have a place to live with dignity. Currently there are an estimated 7 million poor families in Brazil without a suitable home. The slums and peripheral city areas have become their only option. In both of these provision of public services such as education, health, sanitation and transport is inadequate, or non-existent.

Brazilian cities are increasingly characterised by spatial segregation with different areas inhabited by rich

and poor. Nowadays there are around 4,000 slums spread around the country, at least 38% of them in São Paulo, Brazil's largest city.

These slums have become the main location for urban violence, due to drug trafficking and unemployment. This contributes to a disintegration of the social fabric, especially in poor communities, and inhibits traditional feelings of solidarity.

There are inadequate public policies to address these problems.

HELIÓPOLIS SHANTYTOWN

Heliópolis is São Paulo's largest shantytown area, with more than 100,000 inhabitants, mostly migrants from the Northeast of Brazil. It occupies an area of one million square metres that is owned by the São Paulo Housing Company, ironically in charge of municipal housing policy.

Significant numbers of Heliópolis residents do not have access to basic services such as sanitation, education and healthcare, and live under the constant threat of violence caused by drug gangs. Families do not have property rights to their plot of land as the whole area belongs to a government company. About half of the families have two or three generations sharing the same house. 90% of homes are self-built and the majority are precarious without connection to proper sewage systems. Household rubbish is only collected in some areas and much is left on the streets or thrown into nearby streams, adding to environmental pollution. These factors contribute to a high number of water-borne diseases as well as those carried

by insects and rodents. Employment opportunities, especially for the young, are poor due both to the current economic climate, and prejudice against shantytown dwellers. 75% of the workforce is in the informal sector. Education is also a problem, with insufficient school places available for all the school-aged children, and as a result many do not attend school. Education is of poor quality, and these factors together result in high levels of illiteracy amongst young people and adults.

THE STRUGGLE FOR HOUSING RIGHTS IN HELIÓPOLIS

The first families started to build their homes in the area in the 1960s. In 1972, the municipal government relocated a further 153 families from Vila Prudente shantytown to temporary lodgings in Heliópolis to make room for a road. This provisional relocation became permanent as the government did not provide the promised housing alternatives. Over the following years, more and more poor people moved into Heliópolis.

In the late 70s some residents started to mobilise to demand water supply, sanitation and lights for the area, but they didn't get any response from the local authorities.

In 1983, people living in the area were taken to court by the government in an attempt to evict them. At the same time armed police made several attempts to expel people. More than 1,500 families took to the streets to resist this violent action and refused to be driven away from their homes. The government was forced to withdraw. These brave actions

of the population to struggle for their rights had a number of positive repercussions: not only did they manage to stay in their homes, but the government also started to pay more attention to their voices. Just few months after the attempt at removal, around 3,500 families participated in an assembly with government representatives to demand an effective housing and urbanisation project for Heliópolis.

To keep community mobilisation alive and continue pressure, residents set up a commission to negotiate with the government and divided the area into 10 units. In each of these units, a community association was formed. This was consolidated in 1986 with the creation of UNAS, as the umbrella body of the major local associations and community leaders of the slum.

Since then negotiation of public policies with government agencies has continued with occasional confrontations with the police as violent attempts to evict residents continued until recently.

UNAS (Union of Heliópolis' Residents' Associations and Centre), is a grassroots movement, created in 1986 and led by members of the Heliópolis community.

All the leaders of UNAS are poor people who live in the shantytown, most of them since the first houses were built in the 70's. There is a strong participation of women in all spheres of the organisation.

UNAS' ADVOCACY FOCUS

UNAS lobbies public authorities for:

- Legalisation of resident's rights to stay and live in Heliópolis;
- Development of a Popular Housing Project (free for the poorest and affordable for who can pay something);
- Urbanisation of the shantytown (electricity, water and sanitation supply to all homes);
- Basic government services (education, health, safety, etc.);
- Cultural and leisure spaces for the community (especially for children and youth);
- Participatory and democratic governance of the public policies for the area.

Their advocacy is based on permanent mobilisation to strengthen collective identity and action.

One key dimension of their work has been the empowerment of the local community as the main protagonists of their own struggle for housing rights. To do this they invest great energy in: a) strengthening the local sense of community, b) promoting gender equality, c) promoting respect for cultural and ethnic diversity, d) weakening the influence of corrupt politicians and drug gangs, and e) creating synergy with other social movements engaged in similar struggles.

MAIN ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

UNAS are simultaneously acting in a number of different arenas and dealing with different social actors (government authorities, NGOs, and with the

emergent parallel governance of the drug gangs).

They are aware of connections between "housing rights" and other rights [such as education, health, women, youth, food security, etc]. Through engaging in advocacy work, UNAS have learnt to manage a complex mix of strategies, including, for example:

- Meetings to discuss and negotiate housing rights (within the community, with others CSOs, with local authorities, etc.);
- Lobbying authorities (in all areas of the government);
- Using litigation to affirm and guarantee their rights;
- Mobilising public demonstrations to be heard and create visibility for their cause;
- Occupying empty public lands and buildings to demonstrate against unequal and unjust access and control of property;
- Confronting the police;
- Communication (Community Radio, Bulletins, videos, etc.)

Currently the struggle for housing rights is being undertaken in two main areas

- The "Housing Forum", where representatives of the government and the grassroots have regular meetings to negotiate and build public policies;
- The "Heliópolis Homeless Movement", founded in 2000, which in 2003 occupied an area owned by the City Hall with more than 700 people.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR GROUP REFLECTION

1. How do you think UNAS is contributing to the empowerment of the residents of Heliópolis?

What are the main challenges to be faced?

What could be improved?

[use Section 1: Empowerment as background for your reflection]

2. What are the most important types of social change being promoted by UNAS through their struggle for housing rights?

[use Section 1: Social Change as background reading for your reflection]

3. How can we use “Gender lenses” to unpack the struggle for housing rights in Heliópolis?

What could UNAS do to improve the quality of life for women and girls in the slum?

Should UNAS change their struggle for housing rights? If so how?

[use Section 1: Women’s rights and gender equity as background reading]

ⁱ Sao Paulo is one of the biggest and most populated cities in South America