

YOUTH LEADERSHIP IN CRISIS RESPONSE AND SUPPORTING RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Young people have stepped up to lead COVID-19 response in Brazil's favelas, where critics say many people living in these informal settlements had difficulty accessing government assistance. This case study provides a snapshot of recent Resilient Realities research on the pandemic's impacts on Brazil's youth organisations, giving voice to some of those who organised COVID-19 fundraising and relief work. It argues that to build resilient communities and take the realities of their experiences into account, youth organisations must be involved in decisions on economic and social recovery.

- Young people have stepped up to lead the COVID-19 response effort in many favelas, where the majority of the community faced a decline in income and had difficulty accessing government assistance.
- To support resilience building in communities, development co-operation actors and governments must engage with youth organisations and the new approaches to leadership demonstrated by young people during the pandemic.
- Involving youth and their communities in decision making for Brazil's COVID-19 recovery and other policies will enhance the public debate and provide an accurate picture of their day-to-day realities and challenges.

As of October 2020, Brazil had reported more than 5 million coronavirus cases and more than 150 000 deaths from COVID-19 (Brazil Ministry of Health, 2020_[1]). In terms of absolute numbers, Brazil has the highest number of infections and deaths in Latin America, and yet measures adopted by the government to contain the pandemic have been consistently shown to be ineffective (Ribeiro, 2020_[2]). Many people who live in informal settlements are being left behind. Not only did federal emergency aid take months to be released, but bureaucracy and digital exclusion became real challenges to its implementation for marginalised populations.¹

For people in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the fight to contain the spread of COVID-19 quickly became a fight for survival. Against this backdrop, young people have stepped up to play crucial roles in helping their communities survive. Research by the Resilient Realities project has found that in some communities, the only COVID-19 response and support efforts have been led by youth.² This leadership should be harnessed in the recovery and beyond to build a more inclusive society.

Young people led COVID-19 relief and response in Rio's favelas

According to Data Favela, 80% of families living in favelas claim to have suffered the loss of much or all of their income during the pandemic, impacting their capacity to meet their basic needs (2020_[3]). Their numbers are significant: for instance, a single favela in Rio, one of 1 413 across the state, is home to more than 2 million people (Mello, 2014_[4]). When lockdown orders were issued, there was little consideration of the fact that most people in Rio's favelas depend on informal work for their livelihoods (Phillips, 2020_[5]). They cannot work remotely and have little or no access to government support, unionisation or labour protection. Quarantine was a privilege for the few, not a choice that many residents of favela communities were in a position to make.

Young people from different backgrounds stepped up to fill some of the gaps in the pandemic response, getting together in collaborative and self-organised spaces in their communities called crisis cabinets. In Jacarézinho Favela, youth networks raised more than 120 000 reals (about USD 24 000) to buy food supplies for more than 2 000

families. In Santa Cruz, young people supported more than 3 000 families with food and other essential items. In the Cidade de Deus Favela, widely known as the City of God, a youth-led group organised more than 10 000 food basket donations for their community.

The pandemic revealed how intersecting dynamics of race, age, gender, socio-economic status and territory determined the experience and outcome for different groups of young people. Prior to the pandemic, a young black man was three times more likely to be killed than a white man, and young people accounted for more than 50% of victims of violent gun killings despite making up only 26% of the population (UNESCO, 2017_[6]). This trend escalated during the pandemic. In April 2020, there were 27.9% more police operations and 57.9% more killings by the police compared to the same period in 2019 (Conectas, 2020_[7]). In June, the Supreme Court granted an injunction banning police operations in favelas during the COVID-19 pandemic (Conectas, 2020_[7]). Research co-ordinated by the National Youth Council of Brazil has also revealed that many young Brazilians are very afraid of losing family and friends, and being infected or infecting someone in their family (Brazil National Youth Council, 2020_[8]). The mental health impacts of this pandemic on youth are becoming apparent and young people have been struggling to retain their emotional and mental well-being while at the same time leading response efforts (Allen et al., 2020_[9]).

Build up and bring in youth leadership to create inclusive, resilient communities

There can be no new realities in Rio's favelas without the supported leadership of youth organisations that are in a position to build resilience in their communities. Building resilience requires funding, collaboration and engaging the communities in decision-making processes as well as a clear vision of both the current realities and social transformation. Young people have an

“As a black young woman, it is really unusual to be perceived as a leader. It is not a place that we occupy very often. I am trying to redefine what it means to be a leader from a community perspective, in which all roles are important. Being a leader is a role of active listening and effective response to collective demands.”

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important role beyond developing actions to mitigate COVID-19. They are also key to creating a more sustainable future focused on promoting human rights, equality, economic inclusion and a change in the definition of leadership itself.

These young people and their communities leading grassroots response and recovery activities must be included in decision-making processes, as they add to the public debate and provide an accurate picture of their day-to-day realities and challenges. Economic recovery policies related to jobs, training and education, and policies on digital inclusion are some examples of matters that need youth perspectives. Only with their participation will the state be able to create inclusive and effective policies that enable us to truly build back a better, more sustainable and equal country.

Development co-operation actors need to engage with these new approaches to leadership, as modelled by young people, as

a pathway to rebuilding and renewing our societies. Resilient Realities demonstrates that for young people, real leadership means the ability to listen to people, understand problems and create collaborative solutions with communities. Power is measured by the

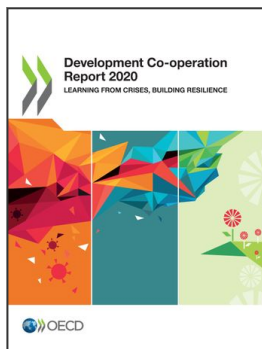
ability to mobilise peoples and resources. It is not about titles or an ability to exert brutal force. Brazilian youth want new realities where human relationships and solidarity will be valued more than relationships built from fear, dependence or exclusion.

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NOTES

1. Brazil offered monthly payments of the equivalent of USD 120-240 to people who had lost their income as a result of the pandemic. The programme has been marred by widespread allegations of fraud and reports that many eligible people had difficulty getting the money. For a description, see Andreoni (2020_[10]).
2. A Restless Development global research project, called Resilient Realities, explores how young people between the ages of 18 and 30 are organising during the COVID-19 pandemic and specifically how youth civil society is responding to the crisis. This case study is drawn from that wider body of research. More information on the project is available at: <https://restlessdevelopment.org/projects/resilient-realities>.



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