

**POLICY COMMENTARY**

# #FavelaLivesMatter: Youth from Urban Peripheries, Political Engagement and Alternatives to the War on Drugs

Movimentos/CESeC

[anaclara.telles@hotmail.com](mailto:anaclara.telles@hotmail.com)

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This article aims to share the experience of Movimentos (Movements), a collective of young activists from Brazilian *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods whose goal is to discuss alternatives to the current drug policy from the peripheral youth's standpoint. The population's role in the formulation, application, and enforcement of public safety and drug policies is rudimentary, and the opportunities available to youngsters who live in Brazilian *favelas* and the outskirts are even smaller. The purpose of Movimentos is to have youngsters from the outskirts take center stage in the debate over public safety and drug policies, because they are the war on drugs greatest victims. The collective follows a hybrid organizational model that combines collective, horizontal governance with the institutional support of an academic research center. Not only does it seek to broaden youngsters' agency around public safety and drug policies, but it also devises and experiments with methodologies to enable their active participation.

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**Keywords:** Favelas; youth; public safety; Latin America

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## Introduction

In Brazil, the war on drugs policy is mainly put into practice in the peripheral areas of large urban centers. It is nothing new that, throughout history, part of Brazilian society has seen *favelas*<sup>1</sup> as precarious, meager, deprived spaces where chaos and violence need to be controlled and repressed (Valladares 2005). In past decades, the image of the drug dealer, directly associated with that of stigmatized outskirts, came to represent the country's number-one enemy in the social imagination, emphasizing the repressive nature of the public policies enforced in these spaces (Leite 2012).

In Brazil, the State sees the *favelas* through a rifle sight. When it comes to drug policy, the local governments' main strategy has been war and confrontation (Rodrigues 2012). The tactics to fight the illegal drug market are widely known: regular police raids at the *favelas* and unrestricted use of heavy weaponry with the declared objective of dismantling criminal organizations and apprehending illegal substances. Thrown at the front line, these territories' dwellers are exposed to day-to-day violence stemmed from 'anti-drug' operations and disputes over territory for the control of the illegal market. In this context, the utmost basic rights are systematically violated and hundreds of lives (most of which are black youngsters') are lost.

Movimentos was created to discuss alternatives to the current war on drugs policy from the standpoint of those who are mostly affected by them: youngsters who live in *favelas* and peripheral areas. Showcasing a hybrid institutional model, the collective was devised by young activists, communicators, and artists from different *favelas* within Rio de Janeiro's metropolitan area and relies on the support and Open Society Foundations. The initiative seeks to contribute to the renovation of the field's narratives and to promote the debate among social groups that, despite being directly impacted by the war on drugs, are rarely invited to join the conversation.

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<sup>1</sup> We opted for keeping the term in Portuguese to localize the phenomenon within the Brazilian context, as well as to recognize its ability to identify and signify the concept globally and thus take it beyond this specific experience. In English, the term that better translates it is 'slum.'

The objective of this article is to outline the context behind Movimentos' creation and share the collective's experience in fostering new perspectives on public safety and drug policies from a peripheral standpoint. We address the principles that guide the collective's search for more just, effective policies to fight racism and the inequalities that drive the war on drugs. Finally, we share some of the group's methodologies and tools in the hopes that they can be used to foster thinking around other ways of political participation within the scope of public safety and drug policies that are different from those devised by the government and the civil society.

## War on Drugs, War on Favelas

In past years, the debate about drug policies in Brazil has gone through important (albeit modest) changes. In January 2015, the Brazilian Health Regulatory Agency (Anvisa) withdrew marijuana's active ingredient, cannabidiol, from the list of prohibited substances, which was paramount to authorizing the import of cannabis-based medications. In August of the same year, the Brazilian Supreme Court initiated discussions about the decriminalization of drug possession for personal use. Significant breakthroughs have been accomplished since then, particularly concerning medicinal marijuana, such as the grant of *habeas corpus* for 13 families to cultivate cannabis oil for therapeutic purposes and the permission to register, with Anvisa, the first cannabis-based medication. More recently, the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) announced a research plan to cultivate cannabis for medicinal purposes.

However, when it comes to the war on drugs and its impact on the poor population in the outskirts, setbacks were observed. The most recent data published by the *Brazilian Yearbook of Public Safety* shows that Brazil reached 60,000 deaths in 2016 (Fórum Brasileiro de Segurança Pública 2017). The country has the largest absolute number of homicides in the world, and the highest rate of violent deaths are observed in among those around 21 years of age (Cerqueira et al. 2017). Between 2005 and 2015, the homicide rate for youngsters between the ages of 15–29 increased 17%. In the same period, 318,000 youngsters were murdered in the country (Cerqueira et al. 2017). Although it is not possible to estimate how many of these deaths are connected to the war on drugs, we know that a great part of it was caused by the violence perpetrated by the militarized battle against drug trafficking.

However, not all youth is impacted the same way—nowadays, black youngsters are more likely to be killed than non-black ones. For every 100 people who are murdered in Brazil, 71 are black (Cerqueira et al. 2017). Data shows that, instead of improving, the situation has been aggravated; in the past decade, the homicide rate among the black population increased 18%, whereas it decreased 12% among other races and ethnic groups (Cerqueira et al. 2017). The price of the war on drugs is primarily paid by black, male youngsters.

With regards to incarceration rates, the scenario of violence and inequality remains equally grave. Brazil has the third biggest prison population in the world—drug trafficking is the country's main cause of incarceration. Since the new drug laws (Act 11,343) came into force in 2006, the number of individuals arrested on traffic charges increased 339%.<sup>2</sup> As it happens with homicides, black people are more severely impacted than the rest of the population. While black people represent a little over 53% of the Brazilian population, 64% of prisoners are black (Departamento Penitenciário Nacional 2017).

Where does the war on drugs take place? Drugs circulate across the entire cities, but the violent impact of the fight against them is only felt at *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods. Recent data published by the Public Defender's Office of Rio de Janeiro show that most *in flagrante* arrests for drug trafficking happen in the metropolitan area's outskirts (Haber 2018). At Complexo da Maré, a conglomerate of *favelas* in the north side of Rio de Janeiro, the police carried out 41 operations in 2017, an average of one operation every nine days (Redes da Maré 2017). Still in 2017, armed confrontation killed 42 people and injured other 57 in the same area. Health centers were shut down for 45 days; classes were called off at local schools for 35 days. This was not an exception to the rule—quite the opposite: the area of Complexo do Alemão (also city's North side) showed similar data, according to the organization Coletivo Papo Reto.<sup>3</sup> Not surprisingly, the hashtag *#VidaNasFavelasImportam* (*#LivesfromtheFavelasMatter*) grew very popular in social media in recent years, aiming to expose the violations brought about by the militarization of day-to-day life in the outskirts in the name of 'fighting drugs.'

All of this shows that the war on drugs has a selective, disproportional impact on different societal groups. In spite of drugs being illegal for everyone, the choice is arresting and killing black youngsters and *favela's*

<sup>2</sup> See the article on G1 website, 'Com Lei de Drogas, presos por tráfico passam de 31 mil para 138 mil no país,' published on June 24, 2015. Available at <https://glo.bo/1J4lz7s> [Last accessed 10 October 2018].

<sup>3</sup> Refer to the Collective's institutional website, <https://100ko.wordpress.com>.

dwellers in the cities' outskirts. The root of this problem lies within the way we devise drug policies—whose aim is to address substance abuse by suppressing drug trade at the retail level and violently targeting the poor, black, peripheral population. Even though the policies directly impact the lives in *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods, they are devised, planned, executed, and supervised by anyone other than the citizens who are directly affected by them.

It is paramount to further the debate about the consequences of war on drugs in these spaces, but even more important to open space for those who are most impacted by the war on drugs to lead the debate and the changes in drug policies. For this reason, the goal of Movimentos is to ensure the protagonism of the *favela's* dwellers on the debate about public safety and drug policy. In order to reach that goal, the group devised two strategies: (1) to promote the debate about drug policy within *favelas* and the peripheral neighborhoods; and (2) to occupy the spaces where these policies are discussed and devised. Both strategies aim to give the stage to the subjects who are most impacted by these policies, creating spaces where they can think, discuss, and come up with alternatives to current approaches.

### **From #LivesfromtheFavelasMatter to #UsforUs**

Movimentos was founded in May 2016, when CESeC gathered 10 youngsters from *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro, São Paulo, and Salvador at a three-day workshop about drug policies in Rio de Janeiro. Since then, the group gathers regularly to build tools and reflect upon drug *políticas* from the perspective of *favelas* and the peripheral areas. In its first two years, the collective attended debates, seminars, and TV and radio shows; taught classes and workshops about the topic in public and private schools, community prep courses<sup>4</sup> and social projects; promoted educational and cultural events with other collectives and groups at *favelas*; carried out qualitative research with 30 leaders from *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro to learn their opinions on the matter; and carried out a summit with youngsters from *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods of the entire country to devise a national agenda focused on drug policies. In addition, the group also created a booklet called 'Movimentos: Drogas, juventude e favela,' an easy-to-read compilation of important information regarding drug policies whose aim is to introduce the debate inside and outside the *favelas*.

Movimentos' first two years of existence made clear that, once the leaders in the debate change, so do the priorities. One of the first lessons learned was that speaking about drug policies with the *favelas* and from their standpoint means addressing wider, more complex themes, including the difficulty faced by drug addicts to have access to good public services; the absence of public policies for the youth in peripheral neighborhoods; the challenges in communicating the need for change in drug policies when media is controlled by very few (yet overly influential) outlets; and the need to rethink the police's role in the Brazilian society and their actions in *favelas* and the outskirts.

Furthermore, we also understand that it is not possible to discuss drug policy without discussing the pivotal role of racism, criminalization of poverty, and inequality, as they go side by side with the war on drugs in Brazil, at the same time driving it and reinforcing it. Even though social movements have always been paramount to the development of Brazilian anti-prohibitionist initiatives, a growing number of projects focused on drug policy's relationship with race and gender have been brought to life. Movimentos' creation and consolidation processes happened at a time when collectives and organizations increased their participation in the drug policy debate from an intersectional standpoint, built upon the notion that the discussion over multiple inequalities is critical to the development of new policies.

Lastly, Movimentos believes that, if changes in drug policy are to positively impact the lives of those who live in the outskirts and at the *favelas*, they must go beyond the discussion about decriminalization and regulation. It is paramount to think of alternative models to ensure the inclusion and participation of historically marginalized groups directly impacted by the war on drugs; to improve services and public policies in peripheral areas; to give opportunity and perspective to youngsters at *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods; and to repair material, physical, and psychological damage caused by decades of failed policies. For the changes in drug policies to have actual impact at *favelas* and the peripheral neighborhoods, there must be conscious, assertive efforts to build models focused on addressing inequality directly—international experiences have pointed in this direction, such as the ones observed in the state of California in the USA. As Movimentos' members, we believe that *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods must take center stage and become protagonists in the debate.

<sup>4</sup> Prep courses are educational courses whose aim is to prepare students for university entrance tests, called *Vestibular*. Students attend this course after they finish High School to ensure better possibilities to pass the test.

## New Protagonists, New Approaches

Movimentos' creation process also made clear that shifting the drug policy debate towards the youth in the outskirts is only possible with the deployment of new participation strategies. Pressing matters, such as structural racism and sexism, police violence, lack of basic rights, and income and opportunity inequality often shape the way youth in peripheral areas and *favelas* circulate and access the city in which they live. As a third-sector initiative supported by private funding—and thus free from governmental bureaucracy—Movimentos was able to experiment with different approaches to mitigate these outcomes and strengthen active, collaborative participation from all its members.

The project's first innovation was its hybrid nature, combining collective political construction with institutional support. Collectively managed by young activists from *favelas* within a university research center, Movimentos brought together two types of governance, something seemingly impossible to be done. The challenge was ensuring a horizontal, collaborative approach to developments and decisions within the third sector, originally structured as a traditional organization. Everyday practices showed the way to overcome it: While CESec provided the group with financial resources, contacts, overall guidance, and a physical space, it also gave Movimentos freedom to manage their own governance channels, decide their own strategies, and allocate available resources at their discretion.

As the leader in charge of these processes, the collective was able to develop new methodologies to foster its members' full participation, the most important of them being ensuring minimal financial conditions for them to attend the activities. That was accomplished by transferring funds to cover members' expenses for meals and transportation, as well as a compensation for their time while working on the group's behalf. This was paramount to building trust between the group and the institution and represented a great disruption in the ways the relationships are built between the third sector and activists from *favelas* and peripheral areas—traditionally seen as the third sector's beneficiaries, rather than partners, they are rarely compensated for their time and the resources spent on their day-to-day militancy.

In addition, from the onset, Movimentos' work was guided by the will to value different talents within the group instead of trying to fit them into old patterns of activism. The group is currently formed by actors, journalists, poets, MCs, audiovisual producers, designers, teachers, composers, harm reduction specialists, educators, and internationalists who are willing to build alternative narratives about drug policies based on their own professional, human abilities. The valorization of distinct talents within the group allowed for the development of communication, mobilization, and awareness-raising tools focused on public safety and drug policy that go beyond the traditional models created by governmental agencies and even the third sector. Most importantly, we use arts and culture to expand this debate to *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods, where it rarely takes place. We believe that raising awareness is critical to discussing complex matters such as the day-to-day impact of the war on drugs and the lives of youngsters in peripheral areas.

## Conclusion

Movimentos believes that the *favelas* are at the center of things, not at the margins. Many solutions are created there, and they keep the cities lively and operational. Amidst inequality, racism, and violence, survival in *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods is only possible due to their population's innovative, creative, intelligent minds. Every day new tools are created and new solutions are devised to make up for the constant violence perpetrated by the State and the complete lack of public policies. For this reason, *favelas* must be at the center of the debate regarding improvements and change. If we want to see drug policies that disrupt historical social relations built on racism, inequality, and violence, we must give room for the *favelas* and peripheral areas to lead the discussion.

The peripheral youth is engaged, connected, well informed, and everywhere in the city. Investing in young leaders from *favelas* and peripheral neighborhoods is our best strategy to develop alternatives to current drug policies that can actually have a positive impact over those who suffer the most with the war on drugs. The objective of this article was precisely to show that the youth in *favelas* and peripheral areas is organized and ready to take center stage at this debate. It is a pleasure to see that Movimentos is only one among many other initiatives promoted by youngsters in Brazilian *favelas* and outskirts with the aim to foster actual change.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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