

**LOCAL EMPOWERMENT: STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES RESILIENCE AND
STRUGGLING CAPABILITIES**

Policy Brief VI.1

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policy brief

VI.1.1 Introduction

The political empowerment of communities is important to assure that the confrontation with institutional violence will be given by other ways. The question of democratic effectiveness stands out, that is, the guarantee of minimum conditions for participation in the democratic process of the local politic subject. To this end, it is considered important i) to involve collectives or support institutions (Ombudsman, ETTERN/IPPUR, Popular Commission, Architects' Union, Brazil Institute of Architects, among others); ii) the existence of spaces of participation that ensure popular control over State actions (executive and legislative), iii) the dissemination of experiences to inform other communities or groups affected.

Resistance to pressure and to constant attacks along the process of struggle, which can last for years and even decades. Organization in order to maintain internal cohesion, capable to avoid the constant attempts of community fractionation by its opponent, a recurrent tactic to divide residents and so to defeat them. Coordination with external supporters, fundamental to put the local struggle in a new coping level and take it to the public sphere, in addition to enabling mutual exchange and to become one more element of political education. Finally the construction of an alternative to the official project, proving that none other than the very group organized in the territory is capable to decide the paths for that community, as an example of self-organization and empowerment. For the alternative construction, a specialized technical support is often needed, and therefore the coordination with allies is critical.

Vila Autódromo, in Rio de Janeiro, may be an example of struggle that could resist, organize, articulate and build an alternative. Since the 90s, the community located in an area of expansion of the real estate market in Barra da Tijuca has suffered from removal attempts. The municipal government acts in representation of the interests of large landowners in the area, shopping and hotels owners, real estate developers,

bankers, media groups, among others, which have, in the existence of a low-income community in that place, a barrier for the expansion of their business. The Olympic Games have become the perfect excuse for the permanent removal of these residents.

The internal organization and the ability to articulate externally - with other affected communities, universities laboratories, cultural collectives, public defendants, progressive parliamentary mandates, among others - allowed its strengthening and the building of an alternative, such as the Popular Plan of Vila Autódromo, an urbanization project elaborated in conjunction with two federal universities (NEPHU/UFF and ETTERN/UFRJ). Its importance was acknowledged by the Urban Age Award, organized by the Deutsche Bank and the London School of Economics, accorded in 2013.

Along more than 20 years of resistance, Vila Autódromo has shown that another city project is possible. Its message is clear: everyone has the right to live in the city and its territory should not be occupied based on an income ranking, where areas with infrastructure are designated for the rich and areas of difficult access and without adequate public services are selected for the poorest families.

The articulation of different movements, entities and civil society organizations or selected state institutions (Public Defendant Office, for instance) is essential to the construction of collective alternatives to the neoliberal city project. The composition from concrete struggles and rights seems to work in a fragmentation context of the progressive camp. Thus, it is possible to constitute groups willing to support community struggles and to build collectively viable alternatives to the cities.

It is imperative for articulations to be open to new organizations and individuals, prizing its diversity and the active participation of popular groups that are uprightly suffering violations. This ensures the necessary oxygen for the collective to maintain itself active for many years. Many individuals get their political education through participation in these spaces and the exchange of experiences of different groups enhances the performance.

The Vila Autódromo and the University laboratories, for example, met in the Cup and Olympics Popular Commission, a space that in recent years has been articulating different actors in Rio de Janeiro, as human rights organizations, affected

communities, urban social movements, university laboratories, individuals, among others. From this meeting, the Vila Autódromo Popular Plan was conceived, which serves as a community struggling tool for staying on site and get its urbanization.

Stimulate the creation and occupy institutional spaces can be a strategy to support communities struggles in their territories. Participation in debates and public hearings is important as another front of action. In Rio de Janeiro, the Commission on Human Rights of ALERJ, for example, has shown in recent years the importance for progressive sectors to occupy space in the State. Its performance is at the service of popular struggles and at various times was crucial to reverse a violation frame.

Communication strategies are central to the communities struggle for rights, placing it on another level of dispute and balancing the correlation of forces, because the visibilization of cases of violations can embarrass the government and the companies and force them to do otherwise. There are several ways of exerting this pressure: via cooperation with international members of human rights organizations such as the UN and the OAS, complaints to national and international journalists and through active participation in social networks.

Thus, a key support for struggling communities is communication professionals capable to make this bridge with the appropriate media according to the established strategy, translating that struggle to the media language, and thus ensuring visibility and often security to the most vulnerable groups. The dissemination of the resistance experience also makes new ways to resist and to organize to be widespread, allowing other communities to be inspired by them. The Vila Autódromo Popular Plan inspired popular plans in São Paulo, Bahia, and other states of Brazil.

VI.1.2. Policy Recommendations:

- Local empowerment presupposes resistance, organization, articulation and alternative construction on the part of the affected communities;
- Encourage participation and the emergence of collectives, public or non-profit institutions in support of community struggles;

- Creating spaces for participation and social control in the executive and legislative;
- Dissemination of resistance experience, in order to ensure the disclosure of "popular action repertoires".