

A Food System Transformation from the Favelas

Rio de Janeiro's Sustainable Favela Network and the Value of Community-Based Solutions Amid the Pandemic

The Sustainable Favela Network (SFN)

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| Brazil |

As the new coronavirus swept across the globe, photos of empty grocery store

shelves followed in its wake. Shots of depleted stocks and crowded supermarkets went viral on social media, raising concerns over the potential of broader food shortages around the world. Indeed, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has predicted the outbreak could lead to 20-25 million more people suffering from poverty and malnutrition. And yet, reports show the agricultural sector has struggled to adapt to such sudden change: farmers around the globe have been forced to dump and destroy millions of pounds of fresh produce they can no longer sell. Amid concerns over the current model's reliability and performance, the pandemic has underscored a need to reshape and rethink the organization of our food systems.

Human rights and environmental activists have long stressed the importance of promoting sustainable and democratic alternatives to our current agricultural system. Now, amid a global crisis, these calls have gained unprecedented urgency. Rather than resorting to traditional top-down schemes, however, here in Rio de Janeiro, several small community-based initiatives are building sustainable projects to ensure fairer and healthier ways of feeding the most at-risk populations in the midst of the pandemic.

Such initiatives have arisen as a direct response to the State's inability to provide basic

services to its most vulnerable citizens — not only during the coronavirus outbreak, but for decades prior. Today, President Jair Bolsonaro’s failed Covid-19 response has revealed the crucial role played by these “invisible actors” striving to compensate for decades worth of State negligence. These local actors have proven themselves to be forces for activism, conducting a wide range of social interventions by the community and for the community, all to address the unhappy realization that, if the community itself doesn’t look out for its own residents, who will?

In 2018, Catalytic Communities (Catcomm), an empowerment, communications, and advocacy NGO introduced the Sustainable Favela Network (SFN). Developed as a solidarity network, the SFN was designed to increase visibility for community-based initiatives and develop joint support actions between them, strengthening existing environmental sustainability and social resilience in favelas across the Rio de Janeiro Metropolitan Region. As of 2019, the Network included over 150 initiatives, representing 68% of Rio de Janeiro’s administrative regions. 62% of SFN members are favela organizers.

Current network initiatives cover a wide range of topics, with seven active working groups, each dedicated to a specific element of sustainability: solid waste; gardens and reforestation; environmental education; solar energy; memory and culture; income generation; and water and sewerage.

Of these network initiatives, the Gardens and Reforestation Working Group in particular has stepped up during the Covid-19 pandemic. Born out of a need to unite ongoing initiatives promoting urban agroecology, reforestation, and community gardens throughout Rio de Janeiro’s peripheries, the group has worked to respond to the needs of low-income communities by promoting food sovereignty and security in favelas as well as strengthening residents’ access to fresh and healthy food.

According to SFN member and Cantagalo favela resident Rosana Mendes, at the beginning of the year, the group had multiple projects on its agenda. “Before the coronavirus, we had all gotten together to organize our next events. In April, we were supposed to take on a new

project in Cantagalo. We would fix up an abandoned space and use it as a community garden that would benefit community residents. We'd start by cleaning it up, then install a proper irrigation system, plant various types of seeds, make flower beds," said Mendes, a member of the Gardens and Reforestation group since 2018. "But then, with the pandemic, we had to put these projects on hold, which is a shame because this garden could have been very useful at the moment."

More than a year earlier, Mendes' children-focused social initiative in Cantagalo, *Harmonicanto*, had planned to plant its own community garden, benefitting the surrounding area. Realizing she lacked the know-how to begin, Mendes found in the SFN working group an opportunity for knowledge exchange. "I didn't have the technical knowledge, I thought being a part of the group would be really helpful. And it was. And perhaps with my experience, I'll be able to help someone else in the group."

According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), "community gardens are an effective and cost-effective way to build stronger neighborhoods." In fact, community gardens contribute to the improvement of citizens' lives not only by introducing a healthy and organic food supply, they also help foster community engagement among neighbors, who work together to care for the plot.

Though the pandemic interrupted the group's schedule, ceasing activities for the rest of the year wasn't an option. The group instead worked tirelessly to reevaluate their agenda and adapt to the new scenario. "The work we do requires a lot of mobility, a lot of contact with one another. That's why we had to adapt. We needed to think of new ways to reach out to those vulnerable communities, to stay involved without putting anyone at risk of getting ill," said Mendes.

"The network stays active, we still have the same goals: food sovereignty, security, and autonomy," she said. "Except that now, we have to find different paths to ensure these objectives are met."

The group's bi-monthly Zoom meetings, which began at the quarantine's onset in mid-March, quickly paid off. By April, the group was able to launch #TerçaComAutonomia — Tuesday with autonomy — a social media campaign where group members create and publish home videos promoting agroforestry, food sovereignty and security, and invite their viewers to participate. They also offer easy to follow at-home gardening and cooking tutorials that encourage autonomy practices during the isolation period.

The idea is for their viewers to acknowledge the importance of self-reliance, especially in a context of reduced mobility and income. "We realized that this was the moment our help was most needed," said Mendes. "With a viral infection, it's important to strengthen our immune systems. We thought we could support these families by introducing natural organic foods into their diets and promote a healthy and cheap feeding alternative, because if we had the community garden working properly as planned, they would have access to all kinds of foods by now. So we had to look for creative alternatives to meet their needs."

The group agreed that growing food in your own backyard has many benefits; not only is the practice finance-friendly, it also provides a toxin-free diet, and promotes social isolation by reducing visits to the grocery store. Veronica Parente, a biologist working as an environmental educator at a municipal school in Cidade Alta, explains why the group's social media presence is fundamental. "I wasn't able to assist the students as much as I'd hoped to during these tough times because I live outside of Cidade Alta. That means I couldn't distribute food baskets, or soap, or other first-hand necessities," said Parente. "But then I saw in these home videos an opportunity to continue spreading the project's knowledge. The videos also helped us gain visibility and reach a wider public."

Parente doesn't hide the fact that it is still very difficult to compensate for the lack of physical contact, especially with younger children. However, using social media as a platform to address the community has enabled the project to attract a bigger audience. Participants that had previously been unable to attend in-person meetings due to conflicting schedules or long distances are now joining in on the group's virtual meetings.

Apart from the social media campaign, the group has also been working with local small-scale farms in the nearby region. At a time where many people are losing their sources of

income and relying on donations to put food on their tables, demand for “basic goods baskets” have skyrocketed. Community mobilizers distributing these baskets now face a decrease in the supply of outside donations, which generally include food and hygiene products. In parallel, local farmers in the Rio de Janeiro metropolitan area are dumping their crops because of diminishing commercial demand.

The Gardens and Reforestation group is filling this gap by using its networking capacities to connect mobilizers in search of fresh produce to farmers with excess stock. Forging such connections not only generates income for small-scale local farms suffering from the outbreak’s economic fallout, but also limits food waste by correcting imbalances between the production, distribution, and consumption sides of the food system.

The extensive and networked model creates bridges between a wide range of social actors invested in food security, mitigating fallout from Covid-19 by supplying those in need with basic food baskets, generating income for local farmers who would have otherwise lost their crops, and promoting the inclusion of fresh produce in residents’ diets. In relying on the communication skills and solidarity already present in Rio favelas, the model allows a multitude of actors from various sectors and backgrounds to contribute democratically to food security for the most vulnerable.

Long before the outbreak, human rights and environmental activists had stressed the importance of promoting sustainable and democratic alternatives to our current agricultural system. The current crisis has created an opportunity for substantive change.

Multiple reports have shown that a host of modern factors — including increased global travel, changes in land use, urbanization, exploitation of the natural environment, and industrial livestock production — now put us at great risk of recurrent global health crises

in the coming years. Now is the time to reevaluate our food system's reliability.

Community-led initiatives hold the key to providing sustainable and democratic alternatives, offering durable modules for a system that has thus far prioritized profit over human rights. "There is no way for us to get out of this situation the same way we entered. That would be a shame," said Mendes.
