

Reviewing Urban Revitalisation Strategies in Rio de Janeiro: from urban project to urban management approaches

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1. Introduction

This article describes key urban development strategies pursued by the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro during the last 7 years during which the local government undertook innovative actions that resulted in noticeable improvements in urban management. One of the objectives is to disclose some of the internal processes and measures taken by the local government in order to generate resources and forge effective management needed to put into motion multiple sector programmes and projects in several locations in the city. The indirect involvement of the author with the Rio-Cidade and Favela-Bairro programmes via a long-term capacity building programme allows for participant's observation and on-the-job assessment with those municipal staff who are in charge of different projects. Without any ambition to formulate a theory on urban management the author explicitly intends to present to a wider audience the peculiarities and specific characteristics of the programmes and show how some of them were managed and the results accomplished. It is an intention to recover lessons learned and an institutional memory that otherwise would be circumscribed to the municipality and to those directly involved in the programme. This gives a value-added to this article.

The article suggests that there are fundamental changes in policies towards the city. It argues that these changes could not be brought forward without supportive measures, capacity building and organisational restructuring and institutional changes needed to support new approaches to urban problems. It is argued that organisational restructuring, the formation of interdepartmental working groups for better articulation of policy making and implementation, the decentralisation of authority towards sub-municipality levels, and capacity strengthening of its personnel – among other things - have resulted in noticeable improvement in local government performance. The analysis of this experience is particularly important given the fact that the population has expressed a unanimous approval of current urban development policies. This resulted in a remarkable voting during the 1996 election that guaranteed the continuation of a governing political party for the first time in the history of the city. The article argues that this provided for continuity in staffing, policies and organisational culture which in practice sets the basis for successful urban revitalisation processes and long-term development planning.

The most notorious changes that these programmes present in relation to previous policies relate to the involvement of civil society organisations in the project preparation and implementation phases and regarding the promotion of 'urban consolidation' principles. Though the level of participation cannot be compared to what is found in more politically progressive Brazilian local

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governments like for example Porto Alegre where an institutionalised participatory budgeting practice actually empowers them in public policy definition via prioritisation of municipal investments in the city. In Rio de Janeiro, neighbourhood associations were given a more limited space to participate in project preparation allowing at times for rejection of proposals formulated by the municipality. But this represents a step forward in municipal policies in the city. There is another remarkable change towards the favelas - informal settlements. For the first time, a city-wide favela upgrading - with heavy public investments and private sector participation in project planning and implementation - recognised the social and physical exclusion and the opportunities for consolidation and integration of these settlements into the city. Through the programme called 'Favela Bairro' the municipality actually abandoned the ideas of resettlement, eviction and 'blind tolerance' that characterised municipal policies till the beginning of the 1990's.

The article describes some organisational and management settings established to make the municipal government more efficient with its finance. It also presents an analysis of different programmes and strategic interventions such as the Strategic Plan of the City, the Favela Bairro – Informal Settlement Upgrading Programme and the Rio Cidade – Urban Revitalisation Programme. These are city-wide interventions that brought forward significant changes in the urban fabric with noticeable improvements in the functioning of the city. The articulation between these programmes, the actors involved and the co-ordination mechanism as well as civic society participation are further described. The successes as well as the shortcomings are assessed in light of appointing future directions and identifying issues that need to be addressed for the development of the city.