

The growth of Brazilian *favelas*: great intentions and failed policies

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Introduction:

An integral part of the modern skyline of Brazilian cities is the background formed by the immense, dense and expanding *favelas*, the squatter neighborhoods that have over time emerged on marginal lands in the periphery of all its urban areas. Since the 1970s, Brazil experienced rapid urbanization that has resulted in more than 80% of its population living in urban areas at present (UN Habitat 2012, p20). Moreover, urbanization in Brazil has followed a decentralized pattern unlike other Latin American countries; at least seventeen of its cities boast populations of over one million people today (IBGE 2014). However, large percentages of these populations are squatters, living on marginal lands along water bodies and steep hills on the fringe of metropolitan regions.

The *favelas* have been an urban phenomenon in Brazil for almost a century, gaining momentum mostly during the massive urbanization movements after the Second World War. In the past fifty years, Brazil has addressed the presence and growth of *favelas* in its cities in a number of alternative ways and with varying degrees of success. Despite such policies, the growth of *favelas* did not cease; rather it has become part of the physical and cultural image for Brazilian cities, even attracting tourists and backpackers today. The transforming image of Brazilian *favelas* – from urban-blights in the 20th century to vibrant spaces of informal socio-economic integration in the 21st century – compels us to rethink about urban policies towards *favelas*.

Statement of Problem:

Since the early appearance of favelas in the major cities of Brazil, starting with Rio de Janeiro in the 1920s, both local/state governments and the federal government have been experimenting with a number of alternative policies intended to stop the expansion of favelas and integrate their residents into the main urban fabric. Yet, throughout the 20th century, more favelas have appeared in more Brazilian cities and more people have moved into them, while the negative image of favelas among both Brazilians and foreign visitors has changed to that of an alternative living setting. So, the question is: To what extent is the continuing growth of Brazilian favelas the result of economic woes, poorly defined and implemented policies, and/or cultural ties and loyalties?

Research Questions and Objectives:

We outline the key shifts in Brazil's federal and local policy approaches from the 1920s to the 2000s towards the presence, expansion and impacts of the favelas. We analyze the evolution of government thinking regarding the nature and social role of favelas within the fabric of Brazilian cities. The research questions we pose are:

- a. What has been the pattern of evolution of favelas in the major Brazilian cities?
- b. What kinds of policies have been devised in Brazil to deal with the issues of favelas, and how effective have they been?
- c. Why are the favelas of Brazil still growing?

Research Methodology:

We collected our data through searches, reviews and analyses of government documents, reports and statistics, as well as published journal articles and research reports. We then applied geospatial analytical techniques to trace and analyze locations and patterns of favela growth within Brazilian cities using satellite imagery. We were thus able to (a) trace the evolution of favelas within the urban fabric of major Brazilian cities; (b) assess the design and implementation of federal and local government policies and programs aimed at regulating the favelas; and (c) analyze the success and failures of these policies and programs over the past century.

Results and Contributions:

We distinguish four clearly identifiable "waves" in the evolution of favelas and the policies adopted by the government to intervene and address the issues related to

the favela growth phenomenon in Brazil. The first wave outlines the growth of the earliest favelas within the city of Rio and the piecemeal approaches adopted by the federal and local governments to eradicate these favelas and improve the urban landscape of the cities in Brazil. The second wave focuses on the abandonment of such favela eradication approaches within a democratic framework and the emerging emphasis on the improvement and upgrading approaches that aimed to provide basic infrastructure – sanitation, drainage, sewage, and road systems –to the favelas. The third wave focuses on the newer approaches of land regularization and titling initiated by municipal governments in an attempt to transform the role of low-income populations in cities from marginal communities to responsible citizens. The fourth wave defines the inefficiencies and inadequacies of the previous approaches and focuses on innovative and participatory techniques.

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