

Building Interfaces Between State and Community

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Abstract An important dimension of the research process in the case of Rio de Janeiro's *favelas* was linking the research to policy dialogues on public security. This briefing note explores some of the issues that emerged through these dialogues. These include the paucity of legitimate community representatives, the way that the government uses information, and the importance of time and timing in building policy dialogues. In order for there to be a productive dialogue with policymakers at the municipal, state, or other level, interlocutors between the *favelas* and government institutions are also key.

1 Briefing note

Because of the power structures described earlier (see Wheeler, this *IDS Bulletin*), the question of who acts as interlocutors and their legitimacy is complicated. There are struggles in the *favela* communities over who the legitimate representatives are, and it is hard for government institutions to identify representatives from the outside. The arrival of the militia has further complicated this situation. In meetings with municipal government's secretary for public safety, I was warned that our conversations could filter back to the militia leaders through leaks in the government itself.

Anyone who claims to speak for the community with external actors – including the state – must have some kind of negotiated arrangement with the dominant mediators within the *favela*, whether drug traffickers or the militia. The militia are particularly reluctant to allow others to take on this role, because they have their own specific political aspirations. Corruption within government and the structure of political parties makes this situation more problematic. There are constant scandals involving public officials and police officers receiving kickbacks from militias or drug trafficking groups.

Creating policy dialogues becomes problematic for government if there are no clear interlocutors. 'Official' community-based

organisations are weakened by violence, leading to a lack of representatives. For example, the head of the residents' association of one of the *favelas* in Quitungo and Guapore was recently jailed for his role in the burning of a city bus in 2005 in which 11 people – including a small child – died. Many of the other community leaders in Quitungo and Guapore felt that he had opted to work more closely with the drug traffickers because of threats to his family and that he had been forced into purchasing the gasoline for the fire. Whatever the truth, he had been legitimately elected into the position of president of the residents' association, and had held the post for a number of years. Since his arrest, the residents' association has practically dissolved.

An interactive research process means respecting the need for gradualism. Time is needed to build relationships and the legitimacy of the research process at the community level. It would have been a mistake to bring in representatives of the state or others outside the community at an early stage. There was not yet a strong enough basic relationship between community researchers and participants to sustain an interaction with outsiders without immediately reinforcing the patronage politics that are so pervasive. As the research progressed and the views of the participants and community researchers became more consolidated, I was able to advocate for more opportunities to

discuss these results with government officials. The research project helped to open a space for dialogue. The real dilemma is how community researchers will make use of the findings when they follow up these initial engagements with policymakers.

Given the way that government agencies work, a single space for debate is not enough; ongoing pressure on different fronts is needed. Within the government, there are many misconceptions

about *favelas* which contribute to a powerful stigma against them. This is a well-documented aspect of public policy in many poor urban areas (Palmer *et al.* 2004; Fraser 1996). Generating information and knowledge at the community level is an important first step, but it is not sufficient to bring about significant policy changes without further pressure. This requires legitimate interlocutors from the community, as well as more accountable state institutions that can engage with them.

References

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