

A case study of Rocinha

Despite more than a decade of democracy, many residents remain suspicious of politicians – national corruption scandals have not helped. In one of the city's mayoral elections, the Brazilian Banana Party used a chimpanzee called Tião (big uncle) as their candidate. Under the slogan, 'vote monkey, get monkey', the party came third in the election, gaining more than 400,000 votes.

Instead, many people turn to citizens groups to voice their needs and concerns. In Rocinha, the independent organization, Viva Rio has set up a website for residents called 'Viva Favela'. The website helps to raise awareness amongst all cariocas about life in Rocinha and to help dispel some of the stereotypes of people that live there. Today, the website has a larger readership than many national newspapers. Set up in 1993, Viva Rio also acts as a link between the police and favela dwellers, and runs drop-in centres that offer free legal help, and counselling for victims of violence.

Today, technology is offering a way for favela dwellers to catch up with their education. The favelas, Rocinha and Mare now have their own 'telecentre' where residents can receive training in IT and access the internet cheaply.

Elsewhere in the city, smaller projects to improve living conditions run by non-government organizations are making a difference. An Action Aid project to support the work of CEACC (Research Centre for Cultural Action and Citizenship) aims to improve conditions in Cidade de Deus – sports and leisure activities for children, health education for teenagers, community radio.

A number of organisations supported by city residents are giving Rio's street children a chance of a better life. The non-government organization, Cruzada do Menor (or Crusade for Minors) has set up a shelter in Cidade de Deus that caters for 70 young children. Here, they can get food and medical care, and Cruzada workers provide help for children's families. Some support from Cruzada do Menor takes place right on the streets, where workers can give medical and dental treatment to children that have no family to go back to. Once the child builds trust with the worker, he or she is taken to one of the Cruzada shelters where they can learn to read and write, or gain other skills in workshops to improve their chances of getting a decent job in the city. One of the city soccer teams is even training some of them to become professional soccer players.