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On social impact and its appraisal in favela-based organisations



It is not enough to have good intentions when deploying social interventions in favela territories. In this post, Daniel S. Lacerda discusses the importance of assessing social impact in context, explaining why favela-based NGOs must ensure their actions and objectives respond to the material space where they operate.
(Versão em português aqui)

Nonprofit organisations constantly face the question of what their impact is, i.e. what are they adding to the society by means of their existence. In the case of organisations from favelas, this is no different. In times when the market constantly overreaches its boundaries, organisations are often expected to quantitatively measure their results, or to assess their success using the parameters that market values (such as reputation or operational efficiency). For the ones who do not believe in this, the typical alternative is to invoke humanism, according to which individual emancipation is beyond the possibilities of measurement, control and prescription of modern organisations. But this dichotomy (market vs. humanism) does not represent the only possible ways of impact appraisal. Organisations should be accountable for their resources, but accountable to whom? I will present below spatial considerations for impact appraisal and their implications for the analysis of local settings.

Assessing social impact in context

One could argue that private organisations should not be accountable to anyone else other than their owners. However, each organisation consumes resources, and in the case of organisations that do not collect revenues, these resources come from “public” funds. Government grants are the most direct way, but also tax exemptions (credits) are claimed by whoever contributes with private donations, and even corporate funds inextricably compose the prices we pay later for products and services. Thus, if organisations consume resources and these resources often come from public funds, they should be accountable for the use they make of such resources.

In nonprofit organisations based in favelas this is also, and perhaps even more, true. This is because any organisation in a favela uses a very rare resource: physical space. Many times the space is granted by the State (e.g. using rights for public spaces) and occasionally it is privately rented, pulling off from the internal market a spacious room/building. In either case, the



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 in favelas, **which are territories characterised by dense occupation and lack of free public spaces**. On that account, even if an organisation were completely supported with private funds, in a slum its existence would bring a collective cost for its dwellers.

Occupying space with a public service is often a claim for legitimacy as occupier of the role of the State (a gap that would probably remain open otherwise). In developed democracies, nonprofit organisations are supposed to team-up with governmental institutions and the private sector to produce social change, rather than supplanting a role that the State has. However, in the reality of favelas, they either supplant an existing role of the State or they are probably “missing the point” about the real needs in the favela territory. In Brazil, **constitutional social rights include education, healthcare and work**. All these comprise State obligations but are often precarious in favela territories.

The implications of social impact in the reality of favelas

This is, thus, the importance of social impact appraisal for nonprofit organisations in favelas: to be accountable for the use of resources and responsible for its outcomes. Organisations cannot be alienated from the social space where they are located (in the discussed case, favelas), and with this in mind impact should be assessed.

It is not difficult to find real examples to illustrate this idea. Think about the impact of an organisation that promotes activities involving ballet dancing or classical music in a favela where the majority of young people prefer funk music or samba. What about an organisation that enjoys high projection with campaigns on a national scale but holds loose links with the local community? What is the social impact for the favela of an organisation that aims at identifying new celebrities (artists or sports) so that they are able to leave the favela as professionals? These examples probably refer to good intentions and legitimate results, but their emergence might mean a segregating force for the territory.

Let us compare these cases with nonprofit organisations that provide comprehensive educational support to children and youth from the favela. Or with organisations that provide not only classes, but also promote political awareness among members of their local reality. Consider also organisations that offer universal training and professional tools for the community in general. Such examples are aligned with the demands and requirements of the people in such spaces, i.e. they “respond to” such requirements. This is what “social responsibility” should be about: these organisations are taking into account the social space in which they are inserted.

The question of impact could be (and often is) framed in terms of a critical challenge to its very core: “what is impact”? This challenge can be used to justify virtually any action that is voluntarily promoted. But when we locate impact in the spatial context of the assessed organisation, we see that the question of impact cannot be alienated from the specific community where the organisation operates. In the case of favelas, social impact is linked to the materiality of the precarious conditions that affect these territories.

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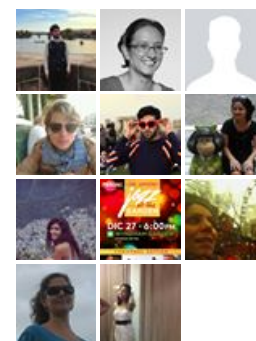
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