



# Reviewing urban revitalisation strategies in Rio de Janeiro: from urban project to urban management approaches

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Received 23 October 1999; in revised form 18 October 2000

## Abstract

This paper describes key urban development strategies pursued during the last seven years by the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro, the second largest city in Brazil. It discloses internal processes, organisational restructuring of the municipality and institutional changes geared to increase effective urban management and resource mobilisation required to implement multiple sector programmes and key projects in several locations in the city like Favela Bairro and Rio Cidade Programmes, The Rio Strategic Plan, etc. It is argued that the formation of interdepartmental working groups for better horizontal articulation of policy making and implementation, the creation of the financial and accounting unit, the decentralisation of authority towards sub-municipality levels, and capacity strengthening of its personnel – among other things – have made a positive impact on the performance of local government. The paper further highlights a significant change towards policies of urban consolidation and revitalisation of declined areas of the city supported by heavy public investments and the effort towards broader civil society involvement in municipal projects. Municipal autonomy, problem-solving and result-oriented type of planning and management and organisational change are some of the lessons pinpointed by the paper for a city of that size and complexity. © 2001 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

*Keywords:* Urban revitalisation projects; Management and organisational change; Urban governance

## 1. Introduction

This paper describes key urban development strategies pursued by the Municipality of Rio de Janeiro over the last seven 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 allowed for participant 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 to 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.

The paper suggests that there have been fundamental changes in policies towards the city. It argues that these changes could not be brought about 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 building of its personnel – among other things – have resulted in noticeable improvements in local government performance. The analysis of this experience is particularly important given the fact that the population has expressed widespread approval of current urban development policies. This resulted in a remarkable outcome of the 1996 election that guaranteed the continuation of a governing political party for the first time

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in the history of the city. The paper 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 substantial 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 governments like for example Porto Alegre where an institutionalised participatory budgeting practice actually empowers public participation 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 in attitude 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 abandoned the ideas of resettlement, eviction and ‘blind tolerance’ that characterised municipal policies until the beginning of the 1990’s.

The paper describes some organisational and management settings established to make the municipal government more financially efficient. 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 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 mechanisms as well as civil society participation are further described. The successes as well as the shortcomings are assessed in the light of possible future directions and issues are identified that still need to be addressed for the development of the city.

## 2. The urban, social and political context

Rio de Janeiro is Brazil’s second largest and one of its two most important cities with São Paulo. The city is

known by its peculiar beauty and natural environment – between sea and mountain – having its geographic setting as its most important asset and an image that attract tourists from all over the world. It is also the seat of many important knowledge-based institutions and a significant industrial park especially in the petrochemical and naval sectors. It is also an important commercial and financial centre with a well established service sector especially in the financial and technological domains, offering a wide range of services in culture, leisure and tourism that gives the city an international profile. In 1960 Rio lost to Brasilia its status as capital of Brazil and seat of the national government but still retains the headquarters of many central government agencies. Without a doubt Rio is the most important cultural and tourist centre of Brazil.

In economic terms the GNP of the municipality of Rio de Janeiro is nearly US\$50 billion for a population of 6 million inhabitants. Rio’s metropolitan region has 11 million inhabitants distributed among 13 municipalities within a total area of 7.4 thousand km<sup>2</sup> (Municipality of Rio de Janeiro included) and with a GNP of nearly US\$80 billion (IPEA, 1998). Altogether, the municipalities of Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo accommodate nearly 20% of the total Brazilian population of 160 million inhabitants and their economy are responsible for more than 20% of the total GNP of the country. The Rio–São Paulo axis of 429 km is in fact the heartland of Brazil’s industrialisation and the engine of Brazil’s development.

Despite its economic potentials the metropolitan region of Rio de Janeiro is marked by sharp inequalities. The disparities between the metropolitan core and its periphery exacerbate social exclusion and poverty. It is in the peripheral municipalities where a significant proportion of low income families and an unskilled labour force find housing accommodation and have access to cheap land. This phenomenon further materialises a severe social spatial stratification at the metropolitan level. The concentration of wealth, employment, services and entertainment in the core municipality result in a sizeable and continuous commuting from the periphery to Rio de Janeiro.

In the beginning of the 1990’s Rio de Janeiro was confronted with an increasing social tensions and direct social impacts from the serious recession faced by the country as whole. Low-income settlements and more specifically the favelas had become the focal point of violence and insecurity with the ‘narcotraffic’ practically establishing a parallel power and local control to the detriment of municipal norms and the rule of law. The squatter residents’ associations that were so active during the 1980’s were under continuous strain and the local residents were subject to intimidation, fear and were often caught in the middle of gun fire from gangs and police forces.

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