

SUSTAINABLE FAVELAS

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Realizing Climate
Justice by Investing
in Favela Assets

COMMITMENTS

2 4 5

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RIO DE JANEIRO,
BRAZIL

Pop. 6,748,000

1,200 km²

2.13 m.a.s.l.

KEY
CONCEPTS

SUSTAINABILITY

INFORMALITY

ASSET-BASED COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Catalytic Communities¹ (CatComm) is an NGO that generates models of effective community-led and people-centered development of informal settlements through its work with the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. Its innovative approach to advocacy combines research, training, networking, communications, technology, mapping, and participatory planning to realize the potential of favelas as part of a sustainable urban future. Among its current programs is Rio's Sustainable Favela Network (SFN), comprised of hundreds of community organizers from favelas developing socio-environmental solutions on the ground.

Rio de Janeiro has a population 11 million: 6 million live in the municipality and another 5 million in the metro area. Close to 1.5 million people live in over 1000 *favela* commu-

nities that range from newer, more precarious neighborhoods to highly consolidated ones.

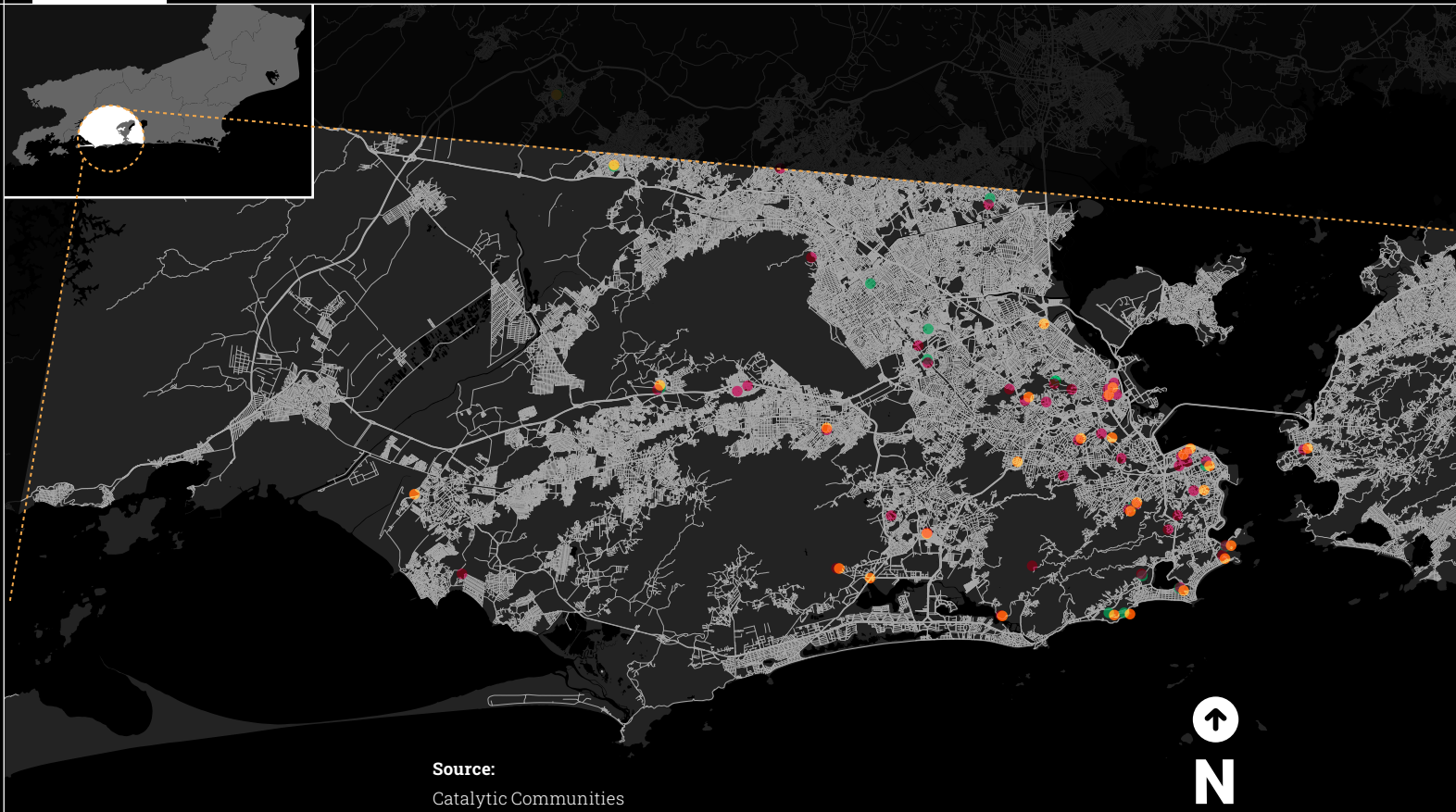
There is no problem with the term "informal settlement" because **informality** is not a bad thing. However, there is a problem with applying the term "slum" or "shantytown" to describe communities that have now been around for generations and have become consolidated, superseding the initial conditions of precarity, or squatting that characterize those terms. Informal settlements are simply the way cities developed before the building codes of the industrial age. What can you build with your own hands? What can you build with locally available materials? Most UNESCO World Heritage sites were built informally, so there's a huge double standard when we act like today's informal settlements are some sort of aberration. *Favelas* need to be seen for what they are: a solution that unfolds in the absence of good policy by people who are trying to address their basic need for shelter.

Catalytic Communities' programs are all grounded in the solutions *favela* organizers themselves develop. This includes recognizing local efforts around **sustainability** and pointing out how, in many ways, *favela* communities are already closer to achieving it than formal areas. Evidence for this can be seen in the highly social and cooperative environment they produce, in their pedestrian orientation, in the creative ways in which people engage in the construction of space to meet real needs. This means that *favelas* sometimes embody a more efficient use of space and a more sustainable way of life. But then, of course, there are many ways in which they're not sustainable at all—when it comes to social justice—people not having regular access to quality water or electricity and being targeted by police can hardly be called sustainable.

Favelas are the present-day territorial manifestation of Brazil's history of racial inequality. This can be clearly seen

in racial maps of the city. Projects like CatComm's Sustainable Favela Network address this inequality by producing an alternative path where *favelas* are fully integrated into the city on their own terms and building on their existing qualities. This is important for the quarter of Rio's population living in *favelas*. But it is also globally relevant: the United Nations predicts nearly a third of humanity will live in informal urban settlements by 2050, just as climate change is speeding up. So, an alternative, optimistic, community-valuing, and sustainable approach to work with informal settlements is urgently needed.

Based on this understanding, Catalytic Communities works to strengthen those initiatives. This capacity-building is done through information-exchange networks, training, and fostering strategic partnerships to help those initiatives expand. CatComm seeks to help make these communities' qualities more visible, to expand and reach their potential.



Source: Catalytic Communities

METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

The Sustainable Favela Network (SFN) was seeded in 2012 with the Rio+20 conference on the environment. We reached out to community organizers and asked, 'Who wants to be part of this?' We had about fifty responses and selected a diverse group of eight. As we filmed them, we discovered several had heard of one another, but none had met. Different from other *favela*-based organizers, those working around sustainability tended to be less networked across communities.

Five years later, in 2017, the SFN was mapped, then exchanges began between network members, with annual full-network meetups consistently gathering over 100 people. Working groups were set up, generating support networks to tackle the pandemic, influence policy on solar energy and engage local candidates in debate. In 2022, the SFN is installing infrastructure, ranging from ecological sewerage to green roofs, conducting research on energy justice and launching an app. Each initiative adapts solutions from one community to the next, training and empowering dozens of leaders along the way.

Governments everywhere deal with low-income communities in roughly the same way: offering technical

solutions to challenges deemed relevant by outsiders. At best, they look at these communities as charitable projects seeking favors.

CatComm applies a completely different approach, known as **asset-based community development**, which:

- › Identifies assets and qualities the community has developed, vows to preserve and strengthen them, and finds in those assets opportunities for change and solutions to address the many challenges that exist.
- › Recognizes that communities have rights including the right to investment. Funds allocated there are not "charitable."
- › Privileges mutual exchanges between community members and technical allies where resident knowledge is recognized as key and residents are the ones who make the decisions.

An asset-based approach, which values the unique nature of each community and puts control in the community's hands, is critical for thriving, inclusive, vibrant and green urban development. People having control over their envi-

MULTIFUNCTIONAL ADDED GREEN STRUCTURE

- Sustainable cities and communities
- Socio-environmental education
- Climate justice

DEFENSORES DO PLANETA

Having been around for 20 years, Defensores do Planeta aims for social justice and ecologically balanced development in Rio de Janeiro's West Zone. Projects address forest conservation, climate change and education.¹

PROVIDÊNCIA AGROECOLÓGICA

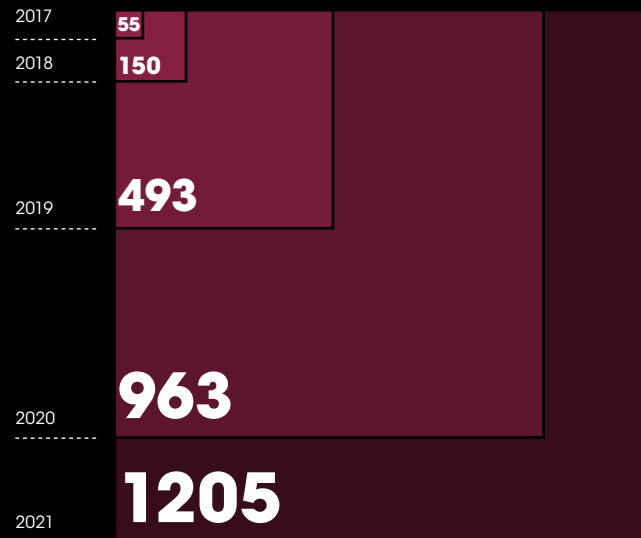
Women lead this project seeking food security, food sovereignty and human health in Brazil's first favela, Morro da Providência. The initiative promotes agroforestry and traditional knowledge linked to the medicinal and food use of plants.²

VALE ENCANTADO COOPERATIVE

Vale Encantado has built its own ecological sewerage bio-system to treat sewage from all of the 27 homes in the community and keep sewage out of the surrounding Floresta da Tijuca, the largest urban forest in the world. Cooperative members organize sustainable tourism and natural gastronomy, and the cooperative produces energy through solar power.³

ronment, being able to remain on their land, and develop a sense of belonging, are what lead them to take care of it. It is in the *favelas* that feel most empowered that we see community gardens, agroforestry, medicinal orchards, green roofs, solar installations, and other projects that help preserve the natural world—which is simply our world. And if we want to build cities, if we want to actually get to a world where the environment is protected and climate change is held back, we have to invest in recognizing that people need to have a source of meaning and purpose, and that this stems in many ways from a strong relationship to where they're from. The more processes that engage people, that aren't top down, that aren't pre-established and that allow people to have agency, the better.

FAVELAS' NETWORK GROWTH



Source: Catalytic Communities

KEY LESSONS

→ Working with *favelas* demands very close relationships with grassroots organizers. If you can stay at a local level and add depth to those relationships, you realize how different and complex communities are. If you don't have a good understanding of them, you can do more harm than good.

→ Focus on the value of trust. Listen deeply, respond to the needs they communicate and never promise what you can't deliver. This is how trust is built.

→ When you are working with any community it is critical to recognize their unique qualities and start building from there.

→ When grassroots leaders feel isolated, they may tend to give up. It's very important to build a network where they can learn from each other, share emotions and receive other kinds of support.

→ Be wary of the concept of scaling. Scaling often works against the need to recognize and build on unique local qualities. If there is something informal settlements have in common it is that due to a lack of outside-imposed regulation, every community is different from the next. They are even different from themselves with each passing week. "Scaling by example"—by publicizing inspiring and informative stories, holding immersive knowledge exchanges, and offering strategic support to partners elsewhere—is the best way to make sure grassroots solutions spread.