

BRAZIL

Olympic Games preparations displace thousands in Rio de Janeiro

SPOT
LIGHT

Sports mega-events such as the Olympic Games commonly displace people, both to make way for venues, accommodation, tourism-related infrastructure and transport, and also to improve the international image of the host city by eliminating unsightly slums from areas exposed to visitors and television audiences.^{232 233}

In Rio de Janeiro, around 6,600 families were evicted or under threat of eviction in 2015 to make way for the 2016 Olympic Games.²³⁴ The vast majority of those affected were living in *favelas* or informal settlements, and were relocated from their homes in central areas of the city to distant suburbs. Given that 60 per cent of the Rio 2016 Olympic Park area will be condominium developments sold on the open market after the Games,²³⁵ return is not an option for those displaced.

The evictions process began in 2009 when the city won the bid for the Games and was intertwined with preparations for the 2014 World Cup. Residents under threat have been unable to access official information about the urbanisation projects or the process of their removal. Options offered by the city have not been publicised and residents were neither consulted on nor participated in discussions on possible alternatives to evictions. Together with two Rio universities, some residents of Vila Autódromo, one of the largest *favelas* to be demolished, presented an alternative to their eviction to the city authorities, but their proposal was rejected.²³⁶

Nor have many families received adequate notice of their eviction. There was a surge in “flash evictions” across various *favelas* in 2015, in which municipal guards arrived to demolish homes or businesses with no warning to residents and their belongings still inside.²³⁷ Residents who remained feared leaving their homes and also saw the value of their property and due compensation decrease as the demolitions progressed. Some were also left without access to water and electricity.²³⁸

The amounts paid in compensation have varied between communities, and between households within the same communities, as a result of weak

and individualised procedures.²³⁹ Some Vila Autódromo residents have received supposed market rate compensation²⁴⁰ as a result of well-organised resistance,²⁴¹ while others within and outside the *favela* struggled to secure their promised payment.²⁴² In almost all cases, the compensation does not cover the cost of an adequate home and the accompanying new expenses, leaving those affected in debt.

Many people under threat of eviction have fought to ensure their rights are respected. Resistance has led to confrontations with officials, humiliation and mistreatment, physical injuries during municipal guard assaults and death threats.²⁴³ People who resisted eviction longest came under most pressure, and some settlements had a constant municipal guard presence that residents deemed oppressive.²⁴⁴ The pressure to get Rio ready for the Olympics did not allow time for institutions and procedures to be reformed. On the contrary, it has enabled abuses to occur.

As a result, communities have been forced to relocate to low-income housing projects on the poorer outskirts of the city, where there is little or no urban infrastructure.²⁴⁵ The commute to the city centre from some relocation areas is more than two hours by public transport, demonstrating that rather than benefit from urban improvements, those displaced suffer their impacts. Despite legislation known as the *Lei Orgânica*, which prohibits moving urban dwellers more than seven kilometres from their original homes, many housing complexes are around 50 kilometres away.²⁴⁶

Surveys of the displaced in two relocation areas and anecdotal evidence shows a deterioration in their access to livelihoods. Distance is an obstacle to maintaining their current jobs, and there are no means of subsistence, few employment opportunities and little access to markets in the new areas.

Given that communities were not resettled as a whole, social networks were also broken up. Some women resettled alone, sometimes with children, because their partners did not want to



A girl watches as the Vila Autódromo neighborhood association building is demolished soon after dawn. Photo: Megan Healy / CatComm / RioOnWatch, February 2015

do so. With little or no support, their opportunities to work and socialise outside the home are limited, leading to isolation and mental health issues.²⁴⁷ Schools and health centres have also been difficult to access in some cases, either because they are remote or because provision is tied to place of residence.²⁴⁸

Access to the resettled communities is difficult because some have been overtaken by organised criminal groups, which tax residents and put families at risk of violence.²⁴⁹ Some have been forced out of their new homes as a result of intimidation and threats.²⁵⁰ Removed from communal ties, and given that many moved from areas where such groups were less active, the displaced lack the networks and strategies to protect themselves.

The urban poor have suffered the most direct impacts of the evictions.²⁵¹ The majority took place in areas with great potential for increases in land value, and as such the process has made economic and social inequalities worse by reinforcing discrimination. Already living in a precarious situation, the displaced have been pushed further into deprivation. With no monitoring of, or response to their needs resulting from their displacement, further impoverishment and marginalisation is likely to result.

Evictions in Rio go beyond the Olympic Games. The city has a long history of removing low-income communities from desirable areas.²⁵² The city government has used its hosting of a series of high profile events over the past decade to justify the relocation of the urban poor from prime locations for middle and upper class housing.²⁵³ The Olympics and others have contributed to property speculation and gentrification, a pattern seen in many cities that host mega-events.²⁵⁴

Recurring patterns of human rights abuses linked to such events can be prevented. They should be planned and staged with a more comprehensive and consistent approach to managing social risks and adverse human rights impacts.²⁵⁵ Bidding documentation should set better terms for development strategies to avoid evictions, and where that is not possible, to minimise them and ensure they are carried out in line with international standards and respect for human dignity.