



Cities in Crisis, Communities on the Move

By Cecilia Santos, for ROOTS.

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Countries in the Global South, which include a range of developing countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, face similar, complex, and multifaceted urban challenges involving a combination of social, economic, environmental, and political factors. Social and popular mobilizations are increasingly focusing on forms of cooperation outside of state control, reclaiming urban resources and the city as a common good. Furthermore, spaces and practices considered backward and informal, such as those in peripheries, favelas, and other popular territories, are beginning to be recognized for their capacity to promote communion, sharing, and cooperation [1].

The growth of cities has been exponential in recent decades. In 1950, approximately 30% of the world's population lived in urban areas, a figure that reached about 56% in 2020,



with projections to reach 68% by 2050 [2]. In Latin America and the Caribbean, urbanization jumped from 41.3% in 1950 to 81.2% in 2020 [3]. In Brazil, this growth was even faster: the urban population rose from 36% in 1950 to more than 87% in 2022 [4].

Historically, urbanization has been linked to rising poverty amid modernization and industrialization. Today, in major Global South cities like New Delhi, São Paulo, and Mexico City, low-income residents outnumber the wealthy, reshaping the socioeconomic profile of urban centers once dominated by elite interests. Affluent populations increasingly isolate themselves in high-end enclaves or distant suburbs, seeking security and exclusivity—a dynamic often termed “*social apartheid*” [5]. For instance, approximately 30% of Mexico City’s population lives below the poverty line. In São Paulo, at least 1.7 million people (15% of the city’s population) reside in favelas [6]. In India, an estimated 38% of urban dwellers occupy informal settlements lacking basic infrastructure [7]. These disparities underscore profound urban inequalities.



In São Paulo, Brazil, the Paraisópolis favela is the second largest favela in the municipality, where the average life expectancy is 10 years lower than in the wealthy neighboring neighborhood of Morumbi [8]. Photo: Tuca Vieira.

Among the main urban problems are housing shortages, high rents, precarious mobility, and a shortage of public services (such as sanitation and waste management). Mobility is directly linked to the right to the city, which guarantees access to public spaces and facilities for leisure and work. Housing, although essential, has become an expensive and inaccessible commodity for a large portion of the population, who, without financial



resources or inheritance, must resort to bank loans with exorbitant interest rates. For the working class, housing is a basic necessity, while for capitalists, it is a source of profit, whether through construction, bank interest, or rent. Lack of access to adequate housing and exclusion from the housing market force the population to live in the outskirts or favelas, where infrastructure and public services are deficient, and the right to the city is denied [9].

The fight for a more just city requires organization in urban areas and the effective enforcement of existing laws and statutes, which still fail to guarantee the social function of property and the inclusion of all in the right to the city [9]. The mobilization of peripheral communities, favela residents, and the working class in cities has been a form of resilience and reinvention in the face of the adversities imposed by inequalities. These communities, which often live on the margins of urban centers and economic opportunities, have developed practices of struggle and resistance to resignify and claim their spaces within the city.

These practices include community gardens, urban occupations organized by housing movements, collectives building self-managed daycare centers and cultural centers, popular health networks, community libraries, and peripheral cultural collectives. In São Paulo, initiatives such as Quebrada Alimentada (Food Breakdown), peripheral fashion projects such as Periferia Inventando Moda (Inventing Fashion Periphery), and popular preparatory courses offered by UNEafro and Educafro, which benefit thousands of students, stand out. In Mexico, it is estimated that nearly 30 million people live in inadequate areas, where community movements collectively build urban life practices and dispute land rights [10].

In addition to these sensitive social issues, cities are also responsible for a large portion of global greenhouse gas emissions. At the same time, they are exposed to the environmental impacts of uncontrolled pollution, such as intense heat waves, floods, and storms. Climate change exacerbates existing inequalities, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities. Despite the need for annual global investments of between US\$4.5 and 5.4 trillion for resilient urban infrastructure, current funding amounts to only US\$831 billion [11].

With uncontrolled urban expansion, many cities are developing in high-risk areas, such as coastal areas and landslide-prone regions, increasing their vulnerability to natural disasters. It is estimated that by 2040, more than 2 billion people in urban areas could face an additional temperature rise of at least 0.5°C, exacerbating challenges related to public health and urban infrastructure [11].

Despite this, cities can be part of the solution to social and environmental issues by promoting low-carbon solutions through appropriate and responsible planning. A



people-centered approach, with nature-based solutions and community participation, integrated with climate policies and urban development objectives, is a viable solution to reverse the situation. With political commitment and adequate funding, cities can lead a just and effective social and climate transformation [11].

Urban peripheries are vibrant spaces of cultural, economic, and political creation, mobilized through solidarity, involving a reinvention of identity and urban space. Faced with the absence of public power, communities organize themselves into informal networks of mutual support through collective initiatives, creating alternatives for accessing basic rights such as health, education, and security. Reimagining urban development, emphasizing the importance of strengthening civil society, can promote radical democracy and integrate environmental sustainability into the daily concerns of marginalized populations. We need to recognize and value informal urban practices as legitimate forms of resistance and social innovation [12].

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