

ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE RACISM IN THE FAVELAS OF RIO DE JANEIRO

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Brazil has experienced unprecedented environmental and climate challenges. Decision-makers and researchers have mostly focused their attention on rural areas, although the ecological crisis also affects Brazilian cities, with negative impacts on the economy, income, health and the well-being of urban dwellers. These dynamics do not affect everyone equally. Just as vulnerable groups are targets of the disproportionate use of force by the police, they are also the ones most impacted by climate change and the ecological crisis, mainly due to environmental and climatic racism.

Environmental racism refers to the absence of public services and programs aimed at combating socio-spatial segregation, in addition to the structural racism that underlies the formulation of urban environmental public policies and urban planning (Sayuri, 2021). Climate racism concerns the unequal distribution of resources and capacities for mitigation and adaptation to climate change along racial lines. Like the related concept of environmental racism, it exacerbates pre-existing risk situations, including in disaster contexts. According to a report by the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR), from 2000 to 2019, there were 7,348 major environmental disasters in the world, affecting 4.2 billion people (UNDRR, 2020). However, research shows that, after a disaster occurs, governments tend to allocate assistance in ways that neglect or harm black, indigenous and low-income populations (Chun, 2021).

In many contexts, the core problem is the lack of inclusiveness in decision-making processes and the criminalization of social movements and civil society organizations that address land use issues. These practices silence and render invisible, often through violence (physical and symbolic), voices that are essential for the construction of a better future for all (Cebrap, 2021; CPT, 2020). More broadly, they can be understood as a manifestation of Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics, "the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not."

Between Oct. 20 and Dec. 14, 2021, LabJaca, a favela-based think tank, and Plataforma CIPÓ, an independent research institute also based in Rio de Janeiro, carried out a research-action project in the Jacarezinho, Mangueiras, and Complexo do Lins communities, in which these issues were more deeply examined. Researchers

collected secondary data while also documenting and amplifying the voices of residents in those communities through interviews.

Three videos with interviews were made available online. In these videos, citizens narrate their experiences and perceptions of the relationship between racism, environmental degradation and the effects of climate change in Rio's favelas. Interviewees shared a common complaint about the lack of sanitation, access to water and communicable diseases due to the lack of infrastructure in their communities. They expressed concern about their children's future and dissatisfaction with the deliberate absence of public policies to address such problems.

In one of the videos, one resident recounted his lived experience:

The lack of drinking water, basic sanitation, the instability of electricity, the lack of basic healthcare during the pandemic, food insecurity, the polluted river... we see that racism makes all this normalized. Environmental racism makes it very clear that all these shortages and deficiencies are due to a well-organized system that is racist.

Ana Nascimento, 23 years old, Favela da Cachoeirinha—
Complexo do Lins.

These discussions at the intersection of race, class, gender, environment, justice and democracy bring to the surface problems at the local level. These problems result from the environmental damage in peripheral areas that is promoted by non-inclusive governance. In many of these places, since the colonial period, hygienist sanitary policies have aimed to control certain social strata, supposedly in the name of security for the general population (Nielsson & Wermuth, 2018).

According to the report "Coronavirus in the favelas: inequality and racism without masks," at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, in addition to experiencing food insecurity, many of the 763 favelas in the capital of Rio de Janeiro went without water for several days at a time. Ultimately, this insecurity contributed to the high number of people in those communities who were infected by the new coronavirus (Movimentos, 2021).



Jacarezinho has an abandoned land with a former lamp factory belonging to General Electric (GE). The surrounding air, groundwater and buildings are heavily contaminated with toxic materials such as mercury, lead and arsenic. The consequences of such dynamics for local populations can be severe. Studies show that children in Rio de Janeiro favelas have high rates of asthma, wheezing and other respiratory problems—as noted by Carolina de Jesus in her groundbreaking book *Eviction Room* (Young & Lustosa, 2003).

The intensification of climate change and urban crises are mutually reinforcing. In Rio favelas, heavy rains, winds and landslides frequently result in deaths and the destruction of property and infrastructure (Ruge, 2019).

One thing that really impressed me was the 1966 flood. Many people were injured in this river, which had a devastating flood, it killed an entire family, my friend's family. And it's not the first time this has happened. We've already lost a lot of people in this river.

Rumba Gabriel, 67 years old, Jacarezinho.

An important step for Brazil to confront environmental and climate racism would be the ratification and implementation of the Escazú Agreement, an international legal instrument aimed at promoting access to environmental justice and the participation of civil society in decision-making processes on environmental issues, in addition to seeking to contribute to ensuring the safety of defenders of land, environment and climate rights across the region (Alves, 2021).

Without awareness among the population and decision-makers about environmental and climate racism and in the absence of inclusive public policies, problems such as those faced by residents of Manguinhos and Jacarezinho will worsen. Without inclusive decision-making, climate change and environmental degradation will continue to exacerbate Brazil's sharp inequalities.

Notes

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This publication was produced at no cost to taxpayers of the state of Oklahoma. The University of Oklahoma is an equal opportunity institution. www.ou.edu/eoo.