

Community Resistance in the Urban Margins

Collaborative and Comparative Frameworks for Political Engagement



Rio de Janeiro March 2026 Workshop Report

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Project Overview

Millions of people across the Global South live under the influence of non-state armed groups while facing socio-economic marginalization and limited access to public services. Despite such vulnerability and precarity, residents and civil society within these communities have developed creative strategies to navigate such contexts and advocate for development and justice. This project asks: *How do urban communities mobilize to advocate for their well-being, dignity, rights, and justice?* By integrating insights from political science, urban studies, sociology, and legal studies with the lived experiences of civil society leaders and residents, this collaborative project tackles this question through a novel comparison of marginalized neighborhoods across three major cities in the Global South: Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), Nairobi (Kenya), and Mexico City (Mexico).

Objectives

1. **Identify** the conditions and mechanisms driving collective political and legal action in settings of violence and precarity.
 - a. Document the advocacy, negotiation, and the defense of rights strategies that residents, community organizations, and local actors employ in the face of various forms of violence, exclusion, and state negligence.
 - b. Analyze how these individual and collective forms of political and legal action emerged.
 - c. Explain how and why such actions and behaviors are sustained or transformed over time.
2. **Highlight** community-led and contextually relevant solutions
 - a. We focus our analytical and practical efforts on the most effective and innovative individual and collective actions.
 - b. This project seeks to learn from, emphasize, and further contribute to the enormous cultural and political creativity of these communities and spaces.

3. Design actionable frameworks for civic engagement

- a. Considering the participation of multiple civil society organizations and activists within this research group, we aim to create frameworks for:
 - i. practical and feasible political and legal actions that are transferable beyond the borders of the neighborhood case studies.
 - ii. collaborative approaches that promote power-sharing and value different types of knowledge.



Project collaborators hear from Redes da Maré workers about their environmental projects.

Methodology

• Case-based comparison

- Similarly situated neighborhoods in Rio de Janeiro (Maré), Nairobi (Mathare), and Mexico City (Desarrollo Urbano Quetzalcoatl, DUQ, and Ermita Zaragoza) are the primary cases of this study.
- Comparisons of mechanisms, dynamics, and solutions operate at multiple levels:
 - **Territory/community level:** What are the structural, geographic, and symbolic aspects of marginalization and resistance in these neighborhoods?
 - **Organization level:** How are civil society and community mobilization organized in each neighborhood? What are the specific activities and strategies they employ? How are these community organizations connected to state institutions and actors?

- **Individual/subjective level:** How do individuals experience and perceive marginalization and collective action within these communities?

- **Participatory meetings and workshops**

- The team meets regularly and creates a collaborative environment in which all members can participate meaningfully.
- The project has already organized one (out of three) in-person, multi-day workshops involving scholars, practitioners, and civil society leaders that facilitate the development of conceptual and empirical insights.
- The workshops employ various participatory methodologies, including territorial walks, guided brainstorming, expert interviews, small-group discussion, and collective notetaking.

- **Co-production of knowledge**

- The project team employs collaborative writing prompts and activities to incorporate the perspectives and insights of each team member. All publications are co-authored by the entire team.

- **Multi-lingual dissemination**

- All internal communications and public-facing outputs are translated between English, Spanish, and Portuguese.
- We seek to make findings accessible across diverse regions and audiences.

Outputs

- Three **workshop reports**
- One **short film** documenting the three workshops and the collaborative process underlying the research
- Three **academic papers**, one that seeks to reconceptualize the “urban margins”, two on the substantive findings regarding collective political and legal action, and another that elaborates our collaborative and participatory methodology
- A **policy brief** which outlines the primary findings and implications for international organizations and civil society

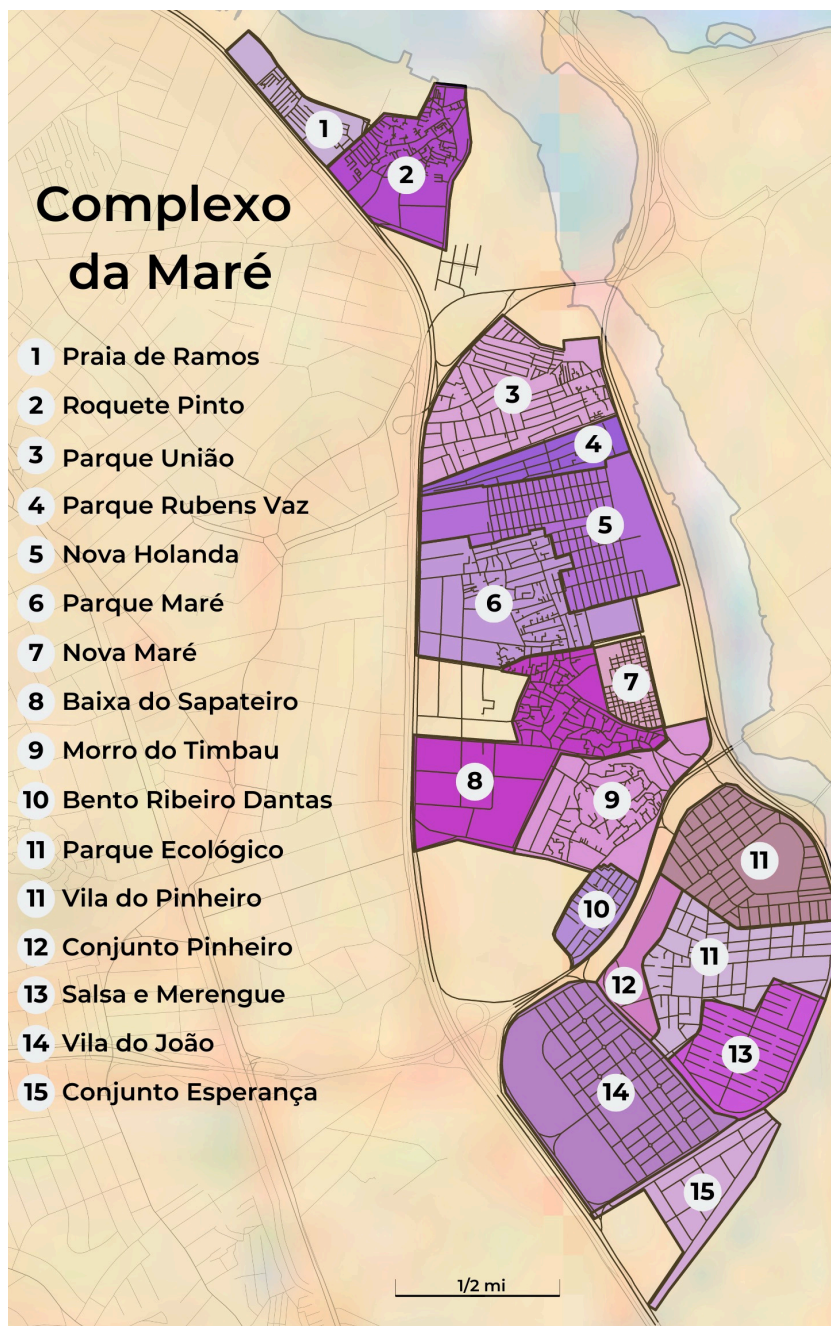


From left: Dairee Ramírez, Eduardo Moncada (standing), Katindi Sivi Njonjo, and Saúl Recinas López

Rio de Janeiro Workshop

March 17-18, 2026

Maré is a contiguous group of 15 favela and housing project neighborhoods in the northern zone of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. These majority black and brown neighborhoods first emerged in the early 20th Century along a massive tidal plain of Guanabara Bay and, since then, have grown significantly as migrants from every region of Brazil and beyond have come to call Maré home. Today, Maré has an estimated 125,000 residents (IBGE 2022), larger than 96% of Brazil's 5,500 municipalities, and occupies a central position within the city, located in close proximity to the central financial district, the international airport, and at the intersection of all three of the city's major highways. **Redes da Maré**, a local NGO, welcomed collaborators from Mexico City, Nairobi, and New York for a two-day workshop, introducing the project team to the Maré and its residents.



Day 1

Collaborators travelled throughout the vast territory of Maré, visiting several Redes installations, and hearing directly from Redes staff about the organization's various projects addressing questions and dynamics of race and racism, socio-environmental rights, residents experiencing homelessness and drug addiction, as well as projects that monitor and advocate for public security reform.

Day 2

The second day began at another Redes installation, Women's House, which offers counselling, sexual and reproductive health services, and skills-based training to hundreds of Maré women. Collaborators toured the building then spent the afternoon discussing, comparing, and analyzing the similarities and differences between the three case study neighborhoods, while working to develop a common conceptual language and empirical insights.

Key Findings and Discussions

In the months preceding the workshop, project collaborators met regularly virtually to develop conceptual and theoretical interventions, a comparative methodology, as well as the participatory and collaborative ethics of the project. The Rio de Janeiro workshop was the first time the team was able to fully engage with one another over an extended period. The participatory, in-person, in-situ components of this project are fundamental. In the following sections, we summarize initial discussions and findings for this project's three guiding themes.

1. Re-conceptualizing the Urban Margins

One of this project's primary tasks is to develop a conceptual and theoretical framework for comparing the experiences across similarly marginalized urban communities. The project seeks to find patterns and commonalities while recognizing that the processes of marginalization can be quite distinct across these regions and populations, owing to the very different urban geographies, colonial histories, and political and institutional dynamics. While significant social scientific work refers to these communities and spaces as the "urban margins" or the "urban periphery", many participants found these terms pejorative and overly focused on the deficits these communities face. Given the significant cultural and political productivity of these communities, the team aims to use language that notes on these more generative aspects of these communities, while acknowledging the inequalities that constitute them. For instance, how these territories give rise to their own forms of political organization, knowledge and practices, social regulation, and the building of community legitimacy, while also recognizing the considerable challenges and hardships these communities must face on a daily basis.

In one set of discussions during the workshop, participants described the very different origins of the terms that they use to describe these neighborhoods, and the shifting connotations associated with those terms. For instance, in Rio de Janeiro, *favela* was a term used to refer to the first of the city's informal neighborhoods built on the slopes of the steep mountainsides. The term came to be applied to other such communities that emerged and grew over the course of the 20th Century, even though the location and organization of these communities differed enormously. It was often used by the broader society as a derogatory term and was eschewed by some social movements and residents of these communities to avoid stigmatization. In the last few decades, however, the *favela* term has been reappropriated to highlight ongoing forms of marginalization and inequality, as well as the citizen-driven solutions created in those territories. Moreover, although racial identification varies within these neighborhoods, the origin, evolution, and current situation of *favela* communities are inextricably linked to historical and ongoing forms of structural and institutional racism as well as exploitation within capitalist economic markets and structures.

In future workshops, the team will delve further into the concepts of *slums* and *informal settlements* in the Nairobi context and *colonias populares* or *barrios* in Mexico City. In doing so, we hope to glean insights from local vernacular and use to help us build a more general

framework for referring to these and other similarly situated communities that avoids the shortcomings of previous concepts.

2. Public security, violence, and insecurity

One key point of comparison for the collaborators centered on the topic of insecurity. Although the case study neighborhoods from each city can broadly be described as experiencing high levels of crime, violence, and state repression, the forms they take can be quite distinct. For instance, in Maré, the group was able to observe heavily armed drug-trafficking factions operating in plain sight. These groups maintain a high degree of territorial control in hundreds of the city's favelas and have been known to violently compete with one another for dominance. And yet, many residents feel safer in these neighborhoods than in most other areas of the city, contradicting many of the overriding prejudices and stereotypes that non-favela residents have about these communities. Although their governance of these neighborhoods can be highly coercive, some factions implement a mostly reliable and effective form of social order. Many factions combat crime within these neighborhoods by punishing those found stealing, fighting, or engaging in other prohibited behaviors. These groups may also provide access to forms of recreation, limited but essential forms of dispute resolution and welfare. Although such governance activities are seldom welcomed by residents and are not uniform across these neighborhoods – residents can experience wildly different forms of governance and security depending on their specific positionalities – the factions do provide a type of stability and social order within these spaces. In other communities and at other times, these groups behave more coercively and can be understood as more predatory actors. The variation in these relations and security environments deserves further interrogation and analysis.



Project collaborators and representatives of Maré civil society participate in a workshop activity.

Meanwhile, when police enter favelas, they often do so in military-style operations, which threaten public safety as much if not more than they improve it. In fact, during our first day in Maré, our activities were interrupted by an impromptu police operation that led to a brief but violent confrontation between police and faction members. The lives of tens of thousands of residents in the surrounding neighborhoods came to a standstill until the operation was over. Moreover, all public institutions (schools and health posts) were forced to shutter. This experience was a potent reminder of how citizens of these neighborhoods must deal with the adverse effects of state intervention as well as a variety of other forms of violence and insecurity.

Such militarized operations were the subject of significant discussion over the course of the two-day workshop. In one meeting with local stakeholders, representatives of several Rio-based NGOs spoke about their own favela communities and the types of police operations that occur there. In one set of neighborhoods close to Maré, a police operation the previous year led to the killing of 117 residents allegedly connected to one of the factions, the largest police massacre in the history of Brazil. In another neighborhood, close to the wealthier districts of the city, representatives said that police operations were rare and focused mostly on removing newer areas of development within the community that were encroaching on formal neighborhoods rather than combatting the drug trade or criminalized groups. Such variation in public security practices, levels of violence, and the type of insecurity experienced and perceived by residents is manifest.

In subsequent workshops, the project team will continue to explore the intersection of illicit markets, criminalized governance, and public security practices. One of the difficulties in analyzing these intersecting phenomena is identifying the drivers of insecurity in any context. Sometimes, insecurity may refer to criminal violence, state militarization, subjective perceptions of risk, the absence of regulation, or everyday vulnerability. In subsequent workshops, our team will strive to analytically distinguish between these dynamics as they do not necessarily operate in the same way across the three contexts. Moreover, one of the most interesting initial findings is the apparent paradox between armed presence and perceptions of (in)security, especially in the case of Rio de Janeiro, where some residents may feel safer under relatively stable criminal orders than in the face of militarized state interventions. Such a finding may not be replicated in our other case studies. In this regard, one path forward is to distinguish the various relationships between armed actors and political structures in each city. While in Rio factions seem to organize around territorial illicit economies related to retail drug markets, in Nairobi there may be more direct links to political-electoral and patronage dynamics, while Mexico City presents a more fragmented and hybridized criminalized landscape. These differences could be key to developing a comparative typology of urban armed governance.



Lidiane Malanquini speaks during one of the workshop segments.

3. Resistance, Social Mobilization, and Citizen-Generated Data

Over the course of the workshop, collaborators and participants discussed the numerous ways that residents and civil society organizations, including but not solely Redes da Maré, have mobilized and advocated for change within Maré, including but not limited to strategic litigation, data production, community mobilization, institutional advocacy, transformation of public narratives, and territorial accompaniment. It is not possible to describe in detail all these strategies here, but future workshops will continue to elaborate and compare them.

One set of particularly important discussions revolved around the activities of Redes, which over its more than 20 years of existence has slowly and painstakingly developed a powerful methodology of community change. The organization itself was born out of decades of social mobilization and community organizing during the redemocratization period (1970s and 1980s) as well as local democratic institutions and associations (Resident's Association). This history of collective action laid the foundation for a strong social base on which Redes has built its network of *tecedores* (weavers), as they refer to their staff, and local stakeholders. Redes' methodology consists of four interrelated steps: 1) Systematization of data and narratives; 2) Strategic litigation in national and international forums; 3) Dialogue with public authorities; and 4) Mobilization of local actors. During the two days of the workshop, we heard from multiple different projects within Redes that generate data on education, culture, health, the environment, and public security experiences within Maré. We had lengthy discussions with Redes staff and other researchers and partnering civil society organizations about how such data can effectively be used both to shift public understanding as well as develop more effective public policy.

For instance, one project called *Breathe Maré (Respira Maré)* collects data on air quality and temperatures within Maré, something which state authorities have neglected to do. A large team of residents and staff take measurements in their homes and places of business throughout the entire territory of Maré. The data collected demonstrates how some areas of Maré have significantly worse air quality (as measured by the prevalence of NO₂) and can reach up to 5° Celsius hotter than other areas of the city. Combined, these environmental factors can cause serious health problems for local populations, including developmental issues in children. Redes then takes these data to public authorities and political parties to demand action. Although this project is in its infancy, the prospects of substantive change in the lives of residents is real.

Another project, *Eyes on Maré (De Olho na Maré)*, has tracked organized forms of violence in Maré since 2016. Because the public security apparatus releases virtually no reliable or transparent data about violence, crime, or the behavior of police within Maré, Redes decided to collect their own data. Over ten years, they have developed a highly qualified and technical team, which accompanies all militarized police operations as they occur, then seeks out information about the consequences of these operations and the behavior of police. They also work with a team of social workers, lawyers, and other specialists to provide services and assistance to members of the community that have been victimized by police. The data is then verified and accumulated in a dataset, which is then released each year and disseminated to other

researchers, NGOs, and public officials. This project fills an enormous gap in public knowledge regarding the behavior of police within these territories and allows Redes and its partners to contest popular narratives about crime and violence in favelas. In addition, Redes has used this data to petition Brazilian courts and other State representative to change public security policy and oversight, even forcing public security officials to account for their policies and actions.

Workshop participants from Nairobi and Mexico City were impressed by these and other Redes projects, especially the organizational capacity of the NGO and its highly qualified staff to develop innovative efforts to shift public policy. Such technical capacities and expert knowledge are particularly relevant because it shifts the view of these communities from being solely recipients of violence or state neglect to communities and actors capable of producing evidence, developing assessments, and politically contesting the framing of public policy. This dimension will be developed much further as a central part of the comparison between cases. There are also questions surrounding the political and epistemological processes of knowledge co-production. For example, how does Redes and other civil society organizations navigate their relationship with state institutions when they simultaneously collaborate with them and produce information that is critical of police violence or urban inequality? How is technical legitimacy constructed from territories that have historically been marginalized? What kind of political and epistemological authority emerges from these forms of community-based knowledge?



Mario Sebastián López speaking during one of the workshop discussions.

Next Steps

- The next workshop in Nairobi is scheduled for September 28–30. In the intervening months, the project team has scheduled monthly meetings that will focus on the three themes outlined in this report. These thematic discussions will be foundational to our continuing research and collaboration.
 - Several project team members recently participated in the Latin American Studies Association (LASA) Congress in Paris, France, where they organized a roundtable, **Community Resilience in the Urban Margins: Collaborative and Comparative Frameworks for Political Engagement**. The project team has collectively discussed the insights from this panel and begun to organize a similar roundtable for another conference to take place in Mexico City, where the insights from this project can be further disseminated.
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Project Team

Rio de Janeiro

- **Redes da Maré** — Civil society organization with extensive experience in research, advocacy, and policy engagement on political, social, and economic issues affecting the Maré favelas
- **Lidiane Malanquini** — Strategic Advocacy Coordinator, Redes da Maré
- **Moniza Rizzini Ansari** — Political Advocacy, Redes da Maré
- **Tainá Alvarenga** — Public Security Axis Coordinator, Redes da Maré

Nairobi

- **Katindi Sivi Njonjo** — Director, LongView Consult
- **Patrick Mutahi** — Director, Centre for Human Rights and Policy Studies (CHRIPS)

Mexico City

- **Proyecto DUQ** — Civil society organization that works with children and adolescents in vulnerable situations to ensure their access to education, culture, and recreation.
- **Karina Adame** — Director, Proyecto DUQ; Community Resident, DUQ
- **Dairee Ramírez** — Researcher, El Colegio de México
- **Mario Sebastián López** — MA Student, Universidad Autónoma de la Ciudad de México; Community Resident, Ermita Zaragoza
- **Saúl Recinas López** — Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM)

New York

- **Nicholas Barnes** — Senior Lecturer, School of International Relations, University of St Andrews; Visiting Scholar, Institute of Latin American Studies, Columbia University
 - **Luna Borges** — Lecturer in Law and Supervising Attorney, Smith Family Human Rights Clinic, Columbia Law School
 - **Eduardo Moncada** — Director, Institute of Latin American Studies, Columbia University; Claire Tow Associate Professor of Political Science, Barnard College
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